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A CRITICAL ACCOUNT OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPOKEN WORD EVENTS AND SETTINGS IN WALES IN COLLABORATION WITH PARTNERS IN SWEDEN AND IRELAND

Mel Perry and Dominic Williams

Introduction

Carly Holmes, Welsh writer, sums up what we have developed across the spoken word and open mic communities in south west Wales in recent years:

baggy enough at the edges to be an informal yet well-structured event.

We are *write4word* (*W4W*) and this chapter charts our experience of the rejuvenation of spoken word events in our region. We will share with you something of ourselves, the mainly rural area in which we live and whose culture is a foundation for our work. Our stories thread some of the key topics in this book, the influences of our heritage, the relationships between our audiences and performers, our international connections, performance styles and techniques, and publications that have arisen through personal and professional development. The projects and circumstances we include are viewed from our perspective with insights from many readers, audience members and spoken word enthusiasts with whom we are connected.

write4word and south west Wales

W4W is a community interest company which believes in the power of the language arts – words written, spoken, performed or manifested in any medium. Our mission is:

To engage communities with their social and cultural responsibilities through the medium of the language arts to educate, inform, entertain and perform.

In addition to our spoken word activities we run creative writing workshops, contribute to degree programmes, and manage and support literary events and festivals in west Wales. Working primarily in west Wales and with international connections we also have strong associations with micro publishing companies.

We are based in Ferryside, a small estuary village in Carmarthenshire at the mouth of the Tywi River approximately eight miles from our county town of Carmarthen. Carmarthenshire is a large, mostly rural, county reaching from the Loughor River between Swansea and Llanelli, west to the border with Pembrokeshire, north to the Teifi River and east to the Black Mountains and the Brecon Beacons National Park.

People live predominantly in small dispersed towns, villages, and hamlets with some urban and industrial areas in Ammanford and Llanelli. Public transport is poor apart from trains to the east with evening and weekend buses being almost non-existent. To pursue our interests across Carmarthenshire and into the neighbouring counties of Pembrokeshire, Ceredigion, Swansea and Neath Port Talbot we rely upon private transport. We have thought nothing of a 60-mile round trip through winter storms to support a spoken word event. We make big commitments in time and fuel to keep our connections active, and this concerted effort embeds spoken word in our lives, keeps it vibrant.

Historic context

Of the language arts poetry has a long and ancient history in Wales. It is a form that is primarily one of spoken word even when heard in our mind's ear as we read it on the page. For a brief period in its history it was committed to the written page. In our area of south west Wales there is a great oral tradition.

In 1250, the *Black Book of Carmarthen* was the first documented manuscript of Welsh literature, setting down poems that were already 300 years old. Those poems included conversations between Merlin and Taliesin and a poem about Merlin, mad in the forest talking to an apple tree and a pig. These poems date back to the ninth century.

In the notes to his 1906 reproduction of the *Black Book of Carmarthen*, J. G. Evans writes of the significant role and power of a Welsh sermon, built upon dramatic structure, to captivate a congregation, an audience. Combining this power with concrete images of the familiar lends a:

witchery over words and ideas which charms the mind, kindles the emotion, ennobles the motive, and gives eyes to see and understand what was never realized before.

(Evans, p. xxxix)

This alchemy continues to glow in the spirit of 21st century spoken word events in Wales.

Six hundred years on from the production of *The Black Book* and there were more threads strengthening ties with the long ancient oral tradition. In 1819 the

The modern National Eisteddfod, which incorporated many elements created by Iwan Morgannwg, took place in Carmarthen and the first meeting of the Gorsedd of the Bards was held at the 1819 Eisteddfod in the Ivy Bush Hotel in Carmarthen.

In the late 18th century John Spurrell, an auctioneer from Bath, settled in Carmarthen. He was the grandson of Robert Spurrell, a Bath schoolmaster, who printed the first book, *The Elements of Chronology*, in the city in 1730. In 1840 William Spurrell (1813–1889) set up a printing press in Carmarthen. He also wrote a history of the town and compiled and published a Welsh–English dictionary (first published 1848) and an English–Welsh dictionary (first published 1850). Today's Collins Welsh dictionary is known as the 'Collins Spurrell'. A local authority housing street in Carmarthen, Heol Spurrell, bears the name in the family's honour.

The Queens Hotel, in which we hold our regular spoken word event, is a public house, rebuilt in 1865 but possibly including earlier work, as Queen Street is shown rebuilt up on 1834 map. The present building was re-modelled in 1865 to incorporate the adjoining Lamb & Flag inn, since demolished to widen the street, with a new frontage built across both properties. The present No 11 and the houses beyond are still to the old street line, only No 10 and the Cloth Hall to left are set back. These buildings of Carmarthen remain. There is a special echo, the voices of past literary and cultural activists breathing from pavement to parapet along the streets of this old town.

Fast forward 200 years to the beginning of the 21st century and there were spoken word events happening regularly in south west Wales in the Cellar Bar in Cardiff. Jim Harwood and Sue Hamlyn had started the event called *Word Up* and this was taken over in 2007 by Simone Mansell-Broome and survived very successfully until around 2010.

The Crunch, Swansea was founded by Adam Sillman, an open mic night that ran from 2008 to 2012. The longest running local event that started towards the end of the 20th century was *Poems and Pints at the Kings* in the small village of Llansaint run by Laurence James along with David Kilvington. This event had always been spoken word, specifically poetry, and a significant amount, if not greater volume, of folk music. *Poems and Pints at the Kings* ran for 20 years before Laurence suffered ill health which caused him to step back. Kilvington took over the reins of the event renamed *Cwrdd* which means *Meet*. They transferred to a new venue in Caffi Iechyd in Carmarthen and became a far more general open mic night including music and storytelling; the latter returning as an increasingly significant feature of spoken word events.

Literary impetus

Notable in the late 20th and early 21st centuries in west Wales was the impetus gained from the master's degree in creative writing at what was then Trinity College Carmarthen, and latterly University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD). From 2004 to 2009 Dominic Williams, as Marketing Director of Parthian Books, was

closely involved in lecturing on the MA course as he mentored many students through the publishing process. These included elements of marketing and particularly performance of their work at promotional events.

The master's programme in Trinity was specifically designed as a platform to develop a community of writers and the wider engagement of that community with other local groups became central to opportunities for individual students and the success of the MA. A key component of local groups in the community were open mic nights and similar developments were very much part of the movement in the spoken word in south west Wales. The lecturers on the programme – Nigel Jenkins, Menna Elfyn, and Jeni Williams; associate writer-lecturers such as Robert Nisbet and Helen Carey; and students all became part of a community as did the alumni of various years of the MA programme. Under the aegis of the MA, spoken word events for students and graduates were organised at the International Hay Festival, the Dylan Thomas Centre, Swansea and Dylan Thomas' Boathouse in Laugharne. So, the spoken word community established itself as inviting that community to performances became a regular practice.

The regrettable shift of the MA and BA in creative writing from the Carmarthen campus to the more rural and less physically accessible Lampeter in 2013 also coincided with the depletion of international students too. This resulted in a loss of key voices and aspects of diversity in our open mic nights.

The 2010 MA programme included a particularly proactive cohort of students in Clare Scott, Annie Bell-Davies and Anthony Jones who lead the production team for their annual publication *Shadow Plays* (Scott PowerJones) Together with Dominic Williams they formed *W4W* originally to deliver creative writing workshops at arts festivals in Pembrokeshire as well as on behalf of European funded projects such as i-Creu. The first *Poems and Pints at the Queens (P&P@theQ)* was named by Anthony Jones after Ryan and Ronnie's popular BBC Wales television programme from the 1970s. Ryan Davies coincidentally was one of Clare Scott's English teachers when she was in school. The first event was itself just a fundraiser for further public reading events as a marketing strategy for the collection *Shadow Plays*. A series of readings was the established format for the MA creative writing group to promote their artistic output.

P&P@theQ was born in 2010 and celebrated its 10th birthday in 2020. It continues as the most established regular spoken word event in south west Wales and has given rise to or contributed to the re-birth of many similar events across the region.

Format of *P&P@theQ*

Our format for success is distinctive, local and inclusive:

It is a genuine grassroots group which is run by and encourages writers of all ages and walks of life.

(Dr Jeni Williams, Welsh poet and lecturer)

Our Master of Ceremonies, usually Dominic, does not read. Too many events that we have witnessed are supposedly open-mic-community based, but all too easily become platforms for the MC to strut their own stuff and promote themselves. Our focus is on the reader's performance and not the literary content of their piece. We welcome people reading work other than their own, and in fact we have found this to be a useful introduction for those new to spoken word and our community. For more established writer-performers reading opportunities create a space that can be useful for testing and editing pieces. We know that *P&P@theQ* regulars have improved their writing, and we can certainly take credit for improving the quality of their performance:

When I was starting out, Poems and Pints was the only poetry night I could find near me, it introduced me to the writing community and they began 'I Slam Therefore I am', which forced the performance to be as strong as the writing, it was there I met others that saw that this could be a career rather than just a hobby.

(Frank Thomas, poet and performer with National Theatre Wales)

it helped me hone my style, gave me a platform and the confidence to take things to the next stage. I credit write4word and *P&P@theQ* as the waterers of the seeds that made me who I currently am.

(Clare Ferguson-Walker, artist and performer)

All attendees are participants whether by reading or showing their appreciation from their seat in the audience. The forms of spoken word are diverse – poetry, monologue, flash fiction, short story or novel extracts, and stand-up. The emphasis is on the spoken word and we do not include music. That said there is much of the chapel service at our events. Dominic roars his dragon's breath, the grate in the once open-hearth bar fire quivers, pint glasses sit quiet on tables, our blood simmers and one of our regulars, John Lewis, sings a Welsh hymn.

Some, but by no means all, *P&P@theQ* open mic nights include a guest reader who is afforded special treatment of a £100 fee, a pre-performance meal and accommodation for the night if necessary. We are grateful to support from Literature Wales who can contribute to guest fees through their *Writers on Tour* funding scheme. This is one of the UK's foremost and unique funding schemes for literature events, offering financial support of up to 50% towards writers' fees of appropriate events. The availability of this funding has meant that the wide-ranging needs, interests and cultures of localities and communities in growing spoken word circles across Wales can be met.

The guest becomes fully engaged with our approach. Like all readers at our open mic evenings the guest pays a £3 entry which includes the all-important raffle. The guest has four × 3–5 minutes reading slots as they open and close each half of the evening. This format helps to build and sustain energy through the evening, it keeps the audience involved and attentive throughout. Moreover, it threads the guest into our community as they enjoy hearing local readers, familiarising themselves with

our particular interests, performance styles, life events and moods. I have witnessed guest readers rapidly change their set list and choose different pieces to read so that they can respond to our locale.

Even with a guest reader:

there are no 'stars' here, just poets who enjoy sharing their work.

(Kathy Miles, poet)

There is a close, lively bantering relationship between readers and the audience, and some are keenly anticipated month by month as we look forward to new exchanges with familiar friends. A favourite of ours in Carmarthen is Laurence James; he has poems hand-written, or typed and glued, into the pages of an old desk diary. He invites us as audience to call out dates and our juke box selection of his poetry is read out. It is a unique blend of singular performance, audience interaction, eager anticipation and loving comedy.

The performance space at The Queens is not the easiest in which to work. A low temporary rostrum raises the reader a few inches off the floor into a space at the mic with barely room to swing a cat. Opposite the stage, an arm's length away, is the bar, dividing rooms that may once have been a front room and back parlour. The MC sits straight ahead of the reader who must consciously engage to the right, to the left as they address their audience on both sides of the bar. We need to ensure that our voice remains on mic and does not drop to the sticky bar floor as we snatch fleeting glances to the scattered audience. This environment has ensured that performer skills are honed, and the audience-performer relationship strengthened.

As writers we often wonder who are audiences might be, for whom are we writing? Audiences are the life blood of spoken word events and as performers we spend most of our time as audience too. We create, carry and cleanse the emotional undergarments and overcoats of a spoken word evening. At modern spoken word events there is no doubt that we have vibrant, enthusiastic audiences, and in some cases there maybe people in an audience who never take the stage to perform. A particularly loyal audience participant who has never read in The Queens is Natalie Rooms who found her friendship circle through Poems and Pints when she first moved to Carmarthen not knowing a soul. Listening to us each month has motivated her writing and kept her in touch with the wider poetry scene.

It is Dominic's generous and positive comments about each performance, based upon his attuned, perceptive observation that hears and notices; identifies connections of theme, subject and style across readers. The always-supportive atmosphere that continues to draw its regular and new readers and has made *PEP@theQ* the leading spoken word event in south west Wales:

he was a creative support to other artists, inspiring them to experiment within their genre.

(Cheryl Beer, Mantra artist)

I was really scared for the microphone but you guys helped me forward and now I'm not scared anymore. I have real fun when I'm reading my poems on stage.

(Joakim Becker, Swedish poet)

I first read at P&P@theQ in 2012, encouraged to attend by co-founder and poet Anthony Jones. I was very surprised by the extent of my nerves during my performance. But the warm support buoyed me up to write my poem, *Losing it the Mic*:

I will have proper grown-up
dazzle in the dark,
hover in the town's night sky,
and let that moment at the mic
be no one-night stand.

(Perry, p. 12)

and read again. I have not looked back.

While Dominic never reads his own work at our events, he too has been roused by performances to write. His poem *Virginties* is stirred by the occasion when Suzanne Power from Co. Wexford was our guest in 2012.

Just above this line
An Irish tigress
roared from the corner of her eye.
Another gave him the perfection of solitude.
The fairground flirting is
fear of the fling
a raffle prize.

(Williams, p. 20)

P&P@theQ has an ethos of a supportive community encouraging engagement for readers and audiences alike. Our format and community-engendering spirit are unique and many of our regular readers and guests remark on the welcoming, open minded and even loving atmosphere. Whatever experience of writing or performing people have, we welcome them all. Becky Lewis-Jones was a nervous newcomer who went on the host her own open mics. Our events have helped to dispel self-doubt in readers we have welcomed from across the globe.

There is a place for generosity and community spirit in the all too often quite competitive sphere of spoken word and performed poetry. A well-handled mix of professional and amateur poets at a reading night can give that event an energetic urgency and sheer joy that easily gets lost in a more 'professional' environment. Pints and poetry belong together! Poetry and a stiff, well-educated audience in upholstered chairs less so.

(Jonas Elleström, Swedish poet and publisher)

One of our values has always been 'the more the merrier'. The more open mic events that we can engage with, the more events that we can support. In what sometimes might feel like a busy schedule of open mics in the region we eschew competition, preferring to encourage people to attend other events and set up their own. It was and continues to be important for us develop and engage with other groups to widen the community and extend a network of spoken word events in west Wales. In 2012 Charlotte Penny and Becky Lewis-Jones created *The Cellar Bards* in Cardigan to replenish the gap previously filled by *Word Up*. We feel that *Cellar Bards* is very much a sister event to *P&P@theQ* and her baton has been successfully transferred to Carly Holmes and most recently to Jackie Biggs and Dave Urwin.

the Poems and Pints gang, were the inspiration for how I wanted the *Cellar Bards* nights to run. Going along to P&P, I always took away a sense of being part of a writing community, and one with real heart and comraderie.

(Carly Holmes, Welsh writer)

... which is still going strong after eight years and continues to encourage writers to perform their work and write new material.

(Jackie Biggs, Welsh poet)

During the early years of *P&P@theQ* Dominic Williams was also the co-ordinator of a European funded project called *Coracle* the purpose of which was to promote business development for creative arts practitioners. As part of *Coracle* *P&P@theQ* was partnered up with another performance event, *Caca Milis Cabaret* in Co. Wexford, Ireland. Short and intensive mentorships were developed between established and emerging writers. These mentorships took the form of four-day residencies focused around public performance and personal engagement between artist and mentor. Matthew Andrews, who went on to study an MA in creative writing at UEA, was mentored by Niall Griffiths.

Ireland

Another development of the communities in rural south west Wales and their connections internationally was the advance in 2013 of the Wales Ireland Spoken Word and Poetry Alliance (WISPA). This is a network of regular spoken word and open mic events that takes place in south west Wales including those in Cardigan, Aberystwyth, Swansea, Neath, Pontadawe and Lampeter in addition to Carmarthen. Gathering those communities together at which *P&P@theQ* and *W4W* were very much the heart, then connecting that network with similar in Ireland very much in the spirit of DIY events.

The WISPA partnership was sealed with a poetry slam in Wexford. Welsh representatives at that slam included Clare Ferguson Walker representing *P&P@theQ* Dave Urwin for *Cellar Bards*, Glyn Roberts representing Poetry at the

Penardawe Arts Centre, Natalie Holborow representing *Howl*, an event in Swansea, Sue Moules from the *Lampeter Writers Workshop* and performance group *Red Heron* and Owain Banfield of *Wordsmithery* in Aberystwyth. Before the slam Welsh visitors were joined by the Irish – Denis Collins, Deirdre Wadding, Kevin Connelly, Joe Seal, Grace Wells, Lani O' Hanlon and Alex Caulfield in a meeting to discuss WISPA's aims and ethos.

WISPA has been described as a sofa surfing poetry tour. It is self-sustaining, not dependent upon external funding as money is raised by the local spoken word communities to pay for one of their members to travel. The travelling poet is hosted by members of groups in the receiving country and readings and performances take place at regular open mic events, so reducing the need for additional marketing. Irish groups that have welcomed Welsh poets include *Fusion* in Wexford, *Carlow Writers Cooperative*, *Caca Milis Cabaret* in Wexford and Kevin Connolly's group in *Dungarvan*. As the first Welsh poet to travel under the WISPA flag in 2014 my performance style developed. I came back with new material and, most importantly for our story, the cementing of international friendships and relationships which reached to other countries.

Carly Holmes has also visited Ireland, and to Wales we have welcomed Kevin Connelly, Clifton Redmond, Lucy Caldwell, Jackie Hayden, Peter Murphy, Denis Collins, Derek Coyle and Helena Mulkerns. With my spirit of documenting our events Peter Murphy's performance at *P&P@theQ* prompted my poem *New Star Attraction*.

Other Welsh initiatives

Wherever there were writers or spoken word poets in south west Wales, we were keen to support them in setting up open mic events. We did not consider the creation of a group 15 miles from *P&P@theQ* to be in competition to ours. As we noted earlier, we were keen to see each local community grow their own groups. Undoubtedly it is hard to sustain activities of this nature but we believe that the strength of those that have survived has come from their enduring commitment to an ethos that supports communities of writers and performers rather than any one single genre, style, event or individual.

Groups that developed in the wake of support from *W4W* and the model we use at *P&P@theQ* have been *Cellar Bards* in Cardigan; *Wordsmithery* in Aberystwyth; *Poetry at the Queens Hall*, Narberth; *Red Heron*, Lampeter; *Tin Plate Poets*, Crosshands; *Poems and Pints at Browns Hotel*, Laugharne; *Verses in Vino*, Llanelli; *Talisman*, Swansea; *Poems and Pints at the Yacht Club*, Ferryside and *Spoken Word Saturday*, Llanelli. Writers and readers from many of these local open mic communities have also been instrumental in establishing writing groups and *Stanza* that meets in Carmarthen is a great example of this.

Dominic in his role with the Coracle Project was a partner in the delivery of the inaugural Dinefwr Literature Festival in June 2012 along with Literature Wales and the National Trust. There was a strong Irish flavour to the festival with performers

such as Deirdre Wadding, Martina Keane, and Kate McKenna-Costello joining Welsh artists (such as Trwbador, John Bilsborough and Clare Ferguson-Walker). The biggest single event on the programme of this festival in terms of community input was a performance open mic style evening with many of the groups in the WISPA community participating.

W4W curated the literary program at the Pili Pala festival in Swansea for the Welsh Centre for Action on Drug Dependency (WCADA) in 2013. A poetry slam enabled the west Wales rural community to engage more closely with many of the writing groups in the city of Swansea and surrounding areas in the valleys such as Neath and Pontardawe.

In 2012 *W4W* created the Coracle Street Festival in Carmarthen and for three years we were active in supporting the *Old Town* festival which took place in Carmarthen in 2012, 2013 and 2015. Centred around historic King Street where those echoes from the *Black Book of Carmarthen* still reverberate *Old Town* was a collaboration amongst small traders and businesses in the town, and an opportunity to put small local retailers at the centre of cultural and alternative activity instead of modern high street brands.

The *Old Town* festivals were also opportunities to hold our own version of an annual general meeting of the Welsh-based WISPA network at Time Coffee Bar which was an all-day programme of spoken word activities.

In 2013 *Old Town* was extended from one to two days and the Sunday was an all-day literary promenade programme visiting bars and coffee shops throughout the town with readings by Jon Gower, Menna Elfyn, Chris Ozzard, Rhian Edwards and Clare Scott. It culminated in *The Parrot Bar* with a performance by spoken word group *Mother Bear* community theatre group led by Andy Edwards.

The Parrot Bar, King Street, Carmarthen hosted many slams in conjunction with us. As a key community music promoter *Parrot's* Matt Davies was an enthusiastic supporter of poetry slams. Continuing our view of the importance of the audience at open mic events of all kinds, Dominic says:

it's about participation in language arts. When I organise a slam what is most important is the enhancement of the relationship between audience and performer in a way that creates a more direct interaction than that of a poetry reading or other open mic event

(Dominic Williams, Welsh poet and publisher)

Sweden

Summer 2014 saw Dominic Williams hosting the first Coracle Europe International Literary Residency in Tranås, Sweden in association with the Swedish cultural organisation Kultivera. Alongside that residency and each subsequent one Kultivera has organised *At The Fringe*, which has become a full-fledged international arts festival including literature, dance, and film. The original festival had a literary programme only and key spoken word events in that 2014 festival were a poetry slam

and two book-ending open mic events that opened and closed the festival modelled on the format of *P&P@theQ*. Dominic hosted these events and they were named by the Director of Kultivera, Colm Ó Ciarnáin 'Pilsnerpoesi' in Swedish. *Pilsnerpoesi* takes place in Ban Thai restaurant run by a local secondary school art teacher. Lars-Erik Strand had always wanted the restaurant to be a place where artists and Bohemians met and talked about creativity and art; that now happens. Thanks to the early vision of *W4W*, the strength of *P&P@theQ*, the infrastructure from *At The Fringe*, a community of writers and readers in Tranås have their own growing networks of open mic and spoken word poetry events. Swedish poet, Camilla Linusson who *lost her virginity at Pilsnerpoesi*, has gone on to develop her own spoken word events in her small community of Hästhölm on the shore of Lake Vättern. In May 2019 she arranged a rainbow festival which was firmly rooted in our model.

From *W4W* we hosted the Coracle Europe Autumn festivals in 2018 and 2019 at which writers from Wales, Ireland and Sweden met in Carmarthen for initially a three-day festival growing to six days in its second year and featuring art exhibitions, storytelling, stand-up comedy, music and poetry collaborations, book launches. An innovative book launch was that of the illustrated Swedish poetry collection, *when the barbed wire slipped in* (Becker et al.) on the Carmarthen Bay Ferry out in the throat of the three local rivers Tywi, Taf and Gwendraeth. It was a pleasure to welcome our friends from Sweden to *P&P@theQ* and for them to witness the birthplace of their *Pilsnerpoesi* and to partner with *Cellar Bards*, *Cardigan Spoken Word Saturday*, *Llanelli* and *Talisman* in Swansea.

Alumni

At *P&P@theQ* we take joy that we have welcomed established poets as guests in Owen Sheers, Adam Horovitz and Ifor ap Glyn, National Poet of Wales to take the mic and share the stage with our local spoken word poetry community. We have been excited and shaken to our boots by the energy of Bengt O Björklund, Peter Murphy and Christer Boberg. However, our greatest pleasure is that from our audiences and readers we have seen new stars rise and develop successful careers. Frank Thomas of the National Theatre of Wales, Clare Ferguson-Walker stand up artist, poetry performer and support act with John Cooper Clarke; singer-songwriter Alex Emmo, TV presenter, cartoonist and poet Sion Tomos Owen, and award winning poet and novelist Natalie Holborrow all attribute their early success to *P&P@theQ*. We helped to water the seeds that make them who they are and grow passions for international connections with writers.

Post March 2020

The week when pubs, clubs and theatres went dark in the UK should have been *P&P@theQ*'s 10th anniversary. We were due to welcome Sarah McCreadie as guest poet and to share birthday cake. Undaunted we shifted our events to

Poems and Pints in The Cloud. Our first event attracted 18 participants and what had become a cosy monthly event in a Carmarthen bar with very familiar faces from no further than Swansea or Cardigan has blossomed into an international affair. We have partnered with our Swedish equivalent *Pilsnerpoesi* and we meet every two weeks with people joining us from Wales, Ireland, Sweden, England, United States, Canada, New Zealand and Assam. Our numbers have swelled to greater than 30 participants. We have been able to welcome back friends not seen for some years and more importantly we have been able to include new voices and people who would otherwise find it difficult to access our regular event. A group of BA creative writing students from UWTSU read at the online events as part of their *Attic to Audience* module focusing on writers and community participation.

We tend not to have themes for our spoken word events and at one of our lockdown sessions the unplanned, yet inevitable theme emerged. It was Monday 8th June, 14 days after the killing of George Floyd. Nine poems from across the world addressed the themes linked with his death. We were fortunate to record the event and capture the solemn solidarity of the spoken word performers' responses to this shattering event. The new international breadth of our group has brought wider poetic responses to significant issues and spoken word poetry in Swedish, Welsh, Irish, Cuban Spanish, Assamese and Native American languages.

None of our participants would wish to replace a live face-to-face event with video calls; they miss the palpable energy in the room:

Poems and Pints at the Queens on Zoom
doesn't make my heart go 'Vroom'!

(Dave Urwin, poet)

However, the experience of performing to the invisible camera and unseen mic from the comfort of people's homes has brought new readers to our community, given them confidence to share and test out their voice. Established writers and readers are welcoming the chance to try new styles of material and performance, to infuse new life into existing work by performing 'off book'. While we do miss many of our regular readers it is a pleasure to hear colleagues from other live literature events in the region. We know that many, for whom life pressures, geography or disability prevented them attending the Queens, and now exacerbated by racial, social and Covid 19 isolation, appreciate the warm, inclusive and friendly world of our open mic. *P&P@theQInTheCloud* has brought our world closer and opened the doors to spoken word more widely.

Summary

P&P@theQ has always been about community-constant yet vibrant; proud of our roots, ethos and approach yet happy to share with others, encouraging others to try

the model. While *W4W* is the engine for *P&P@theQ* it is the readers and audiences that meet each month that are our fuel and have supported us in sharing spoken word locally and internationally.

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