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Migrant Voices in the Plurilingual Poetry and Creative Practice of Fióna Bolger

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the responses of Irish contemporary poetry to transnational migration and the attempts of poets to build empathetic connections with migrants and refugees, who face increasing violence across the European continent and beyond. More specifically, the article examines the centrality of this theme in the work of Fióna Bolger (b. 1972), whose plurilingual poetry and work in the field of creative facilitation demonstrate efforts to connect different cultures, languages and marginalized communities. Bolger's anti-racism and trauma informed creative practice, discussed in detail in the article, speaks to the power of poetry to create solidarity across various communities and as such may provide a valuable model for arts-based participation in other contexts. The article argues that her work exemplifies decolonial sensibilities (Phipps 2019) that resist the homogenizing views of national literatures as bound by one nation and language, thus escaping narrow understandings of what constitutes Irish and European writing.

Keywords: migration, plurilingual poetry, decolonial writing practice, national literature, anti-racism, trauma

Migrantski glasovi v raznojezični poeziji in ustvarjalnem pristopu Fióne Bolger

IZVLEČEK

Članek preučuje odzive sodobne irske poezije na transnacionalne migracije in poskuse pesnikov, da bi se empatično povezali z migranti in begunci, ki se po vsej evropski celini in tudi drugod soočajo z naraščajočim nasiljem. Besedilo raziskuje predvsem osrednjo vlogo omenjene tematike v delih Fióne Bolger (roj. 1972), ki skozi kombinacijo svoje raznojezične poezije in kreativnega vodenja drugih izraža prizadevanja za povezovanje različnih kultur, jezikov in marginaliziranih skupnosti. Avtoričina protirasistična in za travmo občutljiva ustvarjalna praksa, ki je podrobno obravnavana v članku, priča o moči poezije, da ustvari solidarnost med različnimi skupnostmi, zaradi česar je lahko dragocen model za umetniško sodelovanje tudi v drugih kontekstih. Članek predpostavi, da je njeno delo primer dekolonialne občutljivosti (Phipps 2019), ki se upira homogenizirajočim pogledom na nacionalne književnosti kot vezane na zgolj en narod in jezik, ter se tako oddalji od ozkih razumevanj tega, kaj naj bi irska oz. evropska književnost bila.

Ključne besede: migracija, raznojezična poezija, dekolonizacijski pisateljski pristop, narodna književnost, protirasizem, travma

1 Introduction

Seeking asylum is a basic human right available to people arriving in Ireland, and elsewhere across the globe, as codified in *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948). However, a growing number of international studies points to the increasingly violent nature of European, and the Global North's, national refugee and asylum policies. Despite obligations under human rights law to care for migrants arriving in a country, it is increasingly noticeable that not only is there a departure from the core values enshrined in the Geneva Convention but, more importantly, there is a shortage of empathy and a general desensitization towards the plight of refugees. As a result, what has emerged is a system that is "increasingly restrictive, dehumanising and designed to deter applications for asylum" (Walsh and Ferazolli 2023). It employs methods including extreme forms of border violence and necropolitics, first theorized by Achille Mbembe (2019), which is manifested, for example, in the growing acceptance of refugee deaths at borders or at sea (Mayblin, Wake, and Kazemi 2020). As Mbembe (2019, 4) writes, "the brutality of borders is now a fundamental given of our time. Borders are no longer sites to be crossed but lines that separate". After arriving in their country of destination, migrants and asylum seekers are met with more separating walls, such as language barriers, bureaucratic procedures that verge on harassment, and the sense of the incommensurability of their skills and cultural knowledge, including languages, in a new reality. In this context, demonstrations of solidarity with refugees and migrants are a powerful way of countering the violence they experience. They may also suggest growing decolonial sensibilities, if we understand decolonization as a part of a postcolonial legacy that emerged "in resistance to the homogenising cultural effects of globalisation" (Phipps 2019, 2).

This section provides a brief introduction to how Ireland-based poets have responded to the changing ethnic and cultural landscape of Irish society brought about by various migratory movements and refugee crises. Arguably, due to its capacious form, it is within the medium of poetry that we observe the most poignant articulation of what Villar-Argáiz described as the "attempt to achieve an empathetic identification with the migrant Other" (2016, 222). Noting this new aesthetics in the poetry of Eavan Boland, Mary O'Malley, Paula Meehan, and Michael O'Loughlin, she argued that these writers advocate a "rethinking of other, less restrictive understandings of Irish belonging and citizenship by challenging the rigid separation of cultures and/or drawing our attention towards the colonial power relations that attempt to maintain this separation" (Villar-Argáiz 2016, 222).

Such an approach can be seen as a part of a larger decolonial shift in literary studies in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Amongst other things, this finds expression in the contestation of the Eurocentric notion of European literatures as "single-language, nation-bound" entities, and in the recognition not just of "ancestral and regional enclaves within nation states", but also of how migration within, between and from beyond Europe, is central rather than marginal to society, and this has given rise to minority cultures and emerging communities across the continent (Averis, Littler, and Weiss-Sussex 2023, 1). Reflecting on globalization's impact on literary studies in *Global Matters: The Translational Turn in Literary Studies*, Paul Jay (2010, 73) advocated reading texts in a transnational context as a way of supplementing, complicating and challenging the "national models" of studying literature,

arguing that location and place are no longer fixed spaces “but are instead fluid, ambiguous and contested”.

Transnational, migration and minority culture perspectives problematize the notion of the “Irish writer” in various ways. The changing sensibilities of writers exposed to other cultures and languages is explored in the essay “Baggage Reclaim” by Justin Quinn (2009, 159), a Prague-based Irish poet, who, like other writers such as Polina Cosgrove, Nithy Kasa and Rafael Mendes, belongs to one of the new “hyphenated” categories of transnational writers. As Katarzyna Poloczec notes, these new sensibilities are present in the poems of Sinéad Morrissey, Leonita Flynn, Mary O’Malley, and Michael Hayes, whose empathy towards the “immigrant Other” has been shaped by their own experiences of migration (Poloczec 2014, 135). Their works consider different migratory movements, such as migrant workers from Poland in Flynn’s 2011 volume, *Profit and Loss*, or African asylum seekers in Michael Hayes’ work, which also incorporates the voices of nomadic groups, such as Irish Travellers and Roma in Ireland. They also often question the insider/outsider, foreign/local inhabitant dichotomies that are at the heart of the national discourse about belonging and the boundaries of Irish culture. In a number of cases, what has also emerged from this questioning is an encounter in which poets confront their own difference, and they articulate “the notion of the stranger within” as Lucy Collins put it (2015, 5). Sinéad Morrissey’s collection, *Between Here and There* (2002, 9), for instance, captures this sense of looking at one’s native country through different subjectivities, with a “flexible throat full of a foreign language” inhabiting many of the poems.

Postcolonial renderings of other cultures must resist the “commodification of ethnicity as ‘enrichment’ of major culture” (Averis, Littler, and Weiss-Sussex 2023, 8) or use it simply as a mode of literary innovation (Compton 2024, 8). Alison Phipps (2019, 4–6) powerfully argued that a decolonial practice involves acknowledging the voices of refugees, minority cultures and emergent communities, including their languages, within one’s work. Citing the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Phipps calls for a recognition of the position of English as a language of the colonizer, and of how the imposition of colonial languages “inhibited communication and the carriage of culture for those whose languages were sliced up by the lines drawn by the colonisers”. Engaging with non-dominant languages that were not “part of the colonial project” can play a role in the process of decolonization. Coming from the background of language teaching, Phipps’s *Manifesto for Decolonising Multilingualism* offers broad insights into how to “break with colonial, epistemic ways of seeing” within creative practices (2019, 4). This, she insists, can be expressed through engaging with migrant writers “who live and work in languages other than English”, and by citing from indigenous and displaced peoples, asylum seekers, refugees and other diasporic groups, who “know all about the loss of land and language” and whose known worlds are dissolving. Decolonizing, Phipps argues, cannot rely on theory but should become a “lived and felt practice” that is in a dialogue with the decolonizing attempts of others (2019, 5).

It is within this postcolonial contestation of nationalistic approaches to European literatures, and informed by Phipps’s notion of language as carrier of cultural heritage that is not bound by national borders, that I frame my readings of the plurilingual poetry of Fíona Bolger (b. 1972), a

Dublin-based poet and creative facilitator. The approach to migration in her poetry bears the hallmark of her own experience of living in India for over a decade and, for a shorter period, in Poland (Bellappa 2018). Words from the many languages she encountered in those contexts are present in her poems as transmitters of national and transnational experiences, histories and cultures, and it is in this light that I consider her work as essentially plurilingual, a term I discuss later in this article. Bolger's most recent collection of poems, *Love in the Original Language* (2022), most clearly articulates her care for justice and for the dignity of migrants and refugees, some of the most vulnerable and traumatized people in society, and the poems also include the voices and experiences of the migrants "in their original languages". The volume draws attention to the central role language plays in the experience of crossing different kinds of borders: geographical, physical, mental, and cultural. As Katie Donovan noted in her comments on Bolger's collection, the survival of migratory journeys often depends on "nuance, insider slang, an accurate translation, or knowing when to stay silent" (Salmon Poetry 2022).

Kristeva (1991, 15) argued that "between two languages, your realm is silence". The silences and the challenges associated with life in-between become creative potential for Bolger. This "productive porosity of cultural and linguistic boundaries" (Averis, Littler, and Weiss-Sussex 2023, 1) is best shown in the plurilingual collaborative workshops for/with migrants and asylum seekers that she facilitates and co-facilitates. The workshops welcome "all and any level of English", while also inviting the many European and non-European languages of the migrants/new writers to become part of their creative work (Cosgrove and Bolger 2023, 15). The first anthology of plurilingual poetry – *Dubylon. A Tower of Verse*, published in 2023 – created by the migrant writers and co-facilitated by Fíona Bolger and Polina Cosgrove, a Russia-born Irish writer, has been described as a "translational, national, lingual project" rooted in the languages and poetry of Dublin "while reaching across the waters and world to bring fresh phrases to the project" (Cosgrave and Bolger 2023). Such a description expands the conceptions of Irish poetry as being connected to one place with English as its dominant language. By focusing not only on the poetry but also on Bolger's facilitation work, this article responds to recent scholarship, such as *Activist Academic: Engaged Scholarship for Resistance, Hope and Social Change* (2020) that calls for academic research to pay greater attention to issues of social justice, and to the intersections of academic topics with various forms of activism, which imply decolonizing the traditional methodologies that tend to discredit the voices and perspectives of marginal groups or individuals.

This article, the first known piece of scholarship on Fíona Bolger's work,¹ looks to capture the development of her plurilingual poetics through an exploration of the key moments in her biography that helped to shape the features of her craft. The readings of the poems here show how she works towards an empathetic identification with those living between languages and borders, and how her use of plurilingualism aids this project. The article introduces other migrant poets, namely Divya Victor, Vahni Capildeo, and Fatimah Asghar, who inspired what

¹ I would like to thank Fíona Bolger for sharing her private archive and unpublished material, without which this article would not be possible. I would also like to thank Andrew Pringle for reading the drafts of this article and providing essential comments.

Bolger refers to as her “trauma informed” and “anti-racist” creative practice (Fiona Bolger Poetry). As migration, trauma and racism are closely intertwined (Le Grange 2023), the exploration of these influences allows Bolger’s work to be located within a broader context. It also provides a lens through which to examine her work as a facilitator, for instance, in the 2024 project *Dubelonging*,² as solidarities along the lines of anti-racism, anti-violence, and a culture of welcome are to the fore in both her poetic aesthetics and activism, and provide a valuable model for arts-based participation in other contexts.

In writing this paper, I worked to decolonize my own language as much as possible by carefully considering the normative or contested meanings of terms such as “migrant”, which betray existing geographical and racial hierarchies.³ Uncritical use of such terms exposes biases formed by specific scholarly and epistemological traditions, and furthermore helps to sustain these hierarchies.

2 “Chennai Had Made Me a Poet”: Emigration and the Birth of Plurilingual Poetic Practice

“Stranger is neither a race nor a nation. We are our own strangers – we are divided selves”, wrote Kristeva (1991, 32). Commonly, the idea of a stranger or foreigner is pinned to a notion of geographical borders enclosing and separating “distinct” cultures defined by a dominant ethnicity and language. Kristeva subverts this notion by arguing that the stranger is within ourselves, and once we “acknowledge ourselves as foreigners”, embracing the different and the uncomfortable, the term becomes invalidated. This process is facilitated by encounters with other cultures, through travel or exile, or by discovering different cultures within dominant ones. Indeed, a growing body of scholarship explores different cultures “within” Irish society, such as Irish Travellers, “a long-ostracised cultural minority within Ireland”, and the continued colonial legacy of silencing and othering Travellers within Irish literature (Ó Haodha 2011, 43).⁴ The contestation of essentializing, ethno-nationalist narratives of “Irishness” within the Irish literary tradition had already been taken up by different writers in the past, most notably James Joyce, who imagined “a world without a foreigner”, a world possible when everyone acknowledges the “fictive natures of all nationalism” and the stranger in the self (Kiberd 2005, 313–14). Interestingly, Kiberd noted that much of Irish literature, from the work of Yeats and Edna O’Brien to literature written in Irish in the seventeenth century, was composed outside Ireland, in the cities of continental Europe. He concluded “It is almost as if Irish writers found that they had to go out into the world in order to discover who exactly they were” (Kiberd 2005, 2).

² The *Dubelonging* workshop was advertised as “open to all language and literacy levels with ‘professional’ to new writers joining with those new to English and/or new to writing” (*Dubelonging* 2024.)

³ For an interesting discussion on the word “expat” vs. “immigrant/migrant”, which concludes that people from “inferior races” are never considered “expats”, even when they meet the requirements of the definition, see: Koutonin 2015.

⁴ *KIN. An Anthology of Poetry, Story and Art by Women from Romani, Traveller and Nomadic Communities*, published in Ireland in 2024 by Salmon Poetry, is a first such collection gathering voices of writers and artists from Europe and beyond.

Bolger's experience of living outside of Ireland and exposure to languages, such as Tamil, Hindi or Polish, are at the heart of her poetic aesthetics and decolonial practice. In her first book of poems and artwork, *The Geometry of Love Between the Elements* (2013), translations into Tamil, Polish, and Irish – all languages that were suppressed in certain periods – appear alongside English poems, which, as Bolger commented, “were responses to various moments in [her] life and the lives of people around [her]”. She spent nearly ten years in Tamil Nadu, a year in the Polish city of Sandomierz, and her childhood and youth in Ireland (Boyce 2013). The volume was published after Bolger's return to Ireland from India, which she described as “slightly less than voluntary”, hinting at the potentially traumatic nature of the move. The Indian period resulted in her looking at the different linguistic aspects of her poetic voice, particularly the issue of mixing languages, and the role of poetry itself in a new way. As Bolger concluded, “in many ways Chennai had made me a poet” (Belliappa 2018).

One of the stanzas in Bolger's thirteen-stanza poem “Telling Secrets” (2023, unpublished work),⁵ inspired by her stay in Sandomierz, traces the etymology of the word “maidan”, which becomes an opportunity to show the connected nature of distinct places and cultures, the past and present, meeting in one word that since 2014 has come to signify the Ukrainian revolution:

Lublin

Maidan, a word well travelled from central Asia
south into India and north to the heart of Europe.

A word carried in the mouths of many, speakers
of Polish and Russian and Yiddish and Ukrainian
and German, worshippers in synagogues and churches
and mosques, under rulers from Vienna and Istanbul
in a region named for the Celts, Galicia.

I meet it in Majdanek, monument of human ash [...]

The poem speaks to the author's vision of words as transmitters of national/transnational cultures and histories, but they also become testimonies of places where buildings still have the “Hebrew script” on them and a neighbour still owns “the Torah”, and locations that different minorities used to call home, like “Lehrmans, now forgotten”. Moreover, the last few lines of the stanza encapsulate the centuries of violence in the region: the colonial conquests, partitions – borders and territories in constant flux – and the Holocaust that significantly altered the fabric of societies in Central and Eastern Europe.

The difficult experience of homecoming, which problematizes the notion of “native land”, is powerfully captured in the poem “A foreigner is someone who makes us feel we belong”. With a title inspired by an Indian writer, Amitava Kumar, it appears in Bolger's collection, *A Compound of Words* (2019), and weaves her experiences of living in Dublin, Chennai and

⁵ The poem was read on the 31st of May 2023 at Wednesday's poetry readings (Sunflower Sessions) in the Lord Edward Pub in Dublin.

Allahabad. Echoing both Kristeva and Joyce, the theme of returning to the birthplace, “my native place”, to find oneself “different”, “fitting but fractured”, “without roots”, makes the poem personal and evocative of conceptions of home, loss of home and the conflicting notions belonging has for migrating persons. The poem remains sensitive to the language around migration itself, which reflects society’s acceptable inclusions and exclusions, where mere prefixes have the power to change perceptions and emotional responses. The last, slightly ironic, stanza of the poem articulates this most profoundly: “desi or pardesi / immigrant or emigrant / indigenous or disingenuous / pretending or blending / deceiving or conceiving / another way, elsewhere / anywhere, but here” (Bolger 2019, 82). The Hindi word *desi* is used to describe a person who comes from India, Pakistan or Bangladesh when they are living in another country, while *pardesi* is a Hindi word for a foreigner, used mostly within the Indian subcontinent, and sometimes used with a slightly pejorative undertone.⁶ The last line, “anywhere, but here”, suggests a struggle to settle back in Ireland, whereas the Tamil words signify the deep ties with the language of the previous home, while also accentuating the nuanced ways in which meaning is negotiated in different languages and contexts.

The 2017 anthology, *All the Worlds Between. A Collaborative Project Between India & Ireland*, edited by Srilata K. and Bolger, can be seen as a precursor to Bolger’s commitment to a plurilingual aesthetics. The anthology gathers bi-, multi- and plurilingual poets based in India and Ireland, who all responded creatively to “questions of home, belonging, identity, exclusion and homogenisation”, often considering the different associations evoked by everyday objects, like shoes, in their languages (2017, xiv). The publication recognizes that “Poets are influenced not only by the languages in which they are fluent, but also by those dialects and languages to which they have been exposed and which have somehow been absorbed into their creative consciousness”, a description that captures the essence of plurilingualism (xvii). After her return to Ireland, drawing on the languages she learned in India became a means for Bolger to channel her new identity now enriched by the scenes, flavours, sounds and other elements of Indian culture, such as Indian writing. This prompted not only an interest in, but also an empathetic understanding of, the experiences of those who, similarly to her, live between places and languages, and in the interplay between words and their meaning (Belliappa 2018).

The existing scholarship on plurilingualism has considered the concept primarily in relation to language acquisition pedagogy, as can be seen in recent publications like *The Routledge Handbook of Plurilingual Language Education* (2022). Discussions in the field of poetry have more keenly focused on translingualism, a practice of writing in a language other than one’s first language, (a notable Irish example of this being Samuel Beckett, who chose to create his works in French), or language switching, which requires a confident level of fluency in more than one language, which can also be defined as multilingualism (Loda and Viselli 2022, 20). Bolger defines plurilingualism as coming from a “deep affection” for languages that shaped one’s experiences, rather than fluency in a language (Belliappa 2018). This is consistent with the scholarly definition of plurilingualism as the ability to learn and use one’s knowledge of other languages and cultures, while stressing the “interconnected nature of the language

⁶ Many thanks to Priyanka Borpujari for her insights on the Hindi words used in the poem.

resources of the individual” and the fact that languages are themselves social constructs. Most importantly, “plurilingualism encourages seeing the *connections* between languages, which are after all just assemblies of varieties, sociolects, registers, and borrowings that become complex, open, flexible, dynamic, composite ‘polysystems’” (Piccardo, Germain-Rutherford, and Lawrence 2022, 1; original emphasis). Plurilingualism and plurilingual poetic practice celebrates and embraces work that connects languages, and the serendipity involved in this process, thus creating a sense of inclusivity that is hard to match in other -lingualisms.

The topic of migration runs “beneath many poems” in *All the Worlds Between*, and the collection solidifies a vision of work that is engaged with the subject and a poetics that goes beyond national and linguistic borders. As Srilata K. and Bolger write in their editor’s note to the volume, “At a time when the world is said to be small but borders are being raised higher and higher, words which can float over no-man’s-land and not only touch down, but take root in a handful of soil, are precious” (2017, xix). These acts are not purely linguistic but are a form of resistance that speaks to power relations that, in addition to physical borders, produce “invisible borders” between people. Overcoming these requires a “democratic imagination and ethical collaboration that allow every voice to be heard and valued” (O’Neill et al. 2018). In his acute assessment of the “ordeal of the world”, the dehumanization of migrants, refugees and other vulnerable groups, Mbembe (2019) argued that too little work is being done on “inclusions” and producing “bond-intensifying” narratives, as public discourse predominantly seeks to divide, with stories of “us” and “them” imparted in ever new contexts.

Language is vital to creating connections between places and cultures. A plurilingual poet, Nadia Niaz, who describes herself as “from Melbourne, and still a little bit from lots of other places”, observed the following about the role of language mixing in poetry:

[its aim] is not to teach general readers and listeners new languages, but rather to indulge the multilingual poet’s desire to mix languages in a way that is natural to them – to us. In doing this we expose the general reader to sounds that, while unfamiliar, can still contain glimmers of access and can potentially help them make connections across languages. (Niaz 2019)

Niaz stresses the potential that lies in the discomfort experienced when encountering “unfamiliar” words. Indeed, this seems to be a point of departure for Bolger, whose love of “foreign” words represents a love for the “foreigner”, to use Kristeva’s term, where the potential discomfort felt by the reader mirrors the discomfort of the displaced persons.

3 Plurilingualism and Identification with Migrant Experiences

In the poetry collection *Love in the Original Language* (2022), Bolger’s handling of the topic of migration articulates the decolonial practices discussed by Phipps (2019) that can help towards an identification with migrant experiences. This is shown in her use of citations, which acknowledge various experiences of migration by employing the voices of the migrants and/or through references to other migrant poets and poems “found in the cracks between borders”, and the use of plurilingualism. The twelve parts of the poem “The End of October” (12–31)

record refugee experiences across different times and spaces, and uses images of sea journeys, bodies on the sand, and lives lived under various forms of terror. Most of the voices appear in the form of direct quotes. As explained in the accompanying notes to the poem these are, for example, an anonymous rescuer on Lesbos, a comment on why Jews stayed in the Krakow ghetto during the Second World War, or the voice, in part iv, of a Syrian person caught between borders, “facing the damp hungry cold / between borders we wish / we could go home”.

Irish experiences of dangerous journeys are recalled in the stanza that speaks of “Coffin ships / Diseased Irish / Ellis Island”, and these images are juxtaposed with the Irish proverb, *níl aon tinteán / mar do thinteán féin* (“there is no hearth like your own hearth”, a variation of “there is no place like home”). This Irish language phrase becomes prominent in the poem, foregrounding how the experience of seeking refuge has been central to Irish history and identity. Confronting voices that speak of unsettling, often deadly, journeys that have become daily news across Europe, with the image of the safety of home – the ultimate motive for, and objective of, these journeys – humanizes and universalizes different kinds of refugee experiences, reminding the reader that “no matter how small or how / distant a person is a person wherever they are” (13).

“The End of October” begins with a quote from a Syrian poet, Nizar Qabbani, whose “Footnotes to the Book of the Setback” was a response to the Six-Day War that was instantly banned in Arabic countries, and so is “one of the few genuine samizdat poems in modern Arab poetry” (Qabbani, N., & Adonis, 1981, 71). “The End of October” cites Qabbani’s lines, “My grieved country / In a flash / You changed me from a poet who wrote love poems / To a poet who writes with a knife” (Bolger 2022, 13). The choice to include these lines as well as framing “The End of October” with a reference to Qabbani as a spirit of the poem, signals a new, bolder poetic necessitated by the normalization of violence towards refugees and their deaths (“These are the days of the dead”) and the growing indifference for the living: as the poem poignantly concludes, “the living are silenced / by the deafening emptiness” (Bolger 2022, 13). Bolger’s poems have been described as “often angry”, her words “sharp” (Carragher), with “heart-breaking” stanzas (Narang 2020) that provoke emotional responses. Similarly, Qabbani’s poem is said to have unleashed “a flood of pent-up frustration and anger”, a powerful creative force that initiated a new current in Arabic literature (Qabbani and Adonis 1981, 71).

Poems can work as testimonies, bearing witness to sites of violence, and as attempts to represent human suffering and memorialize the victims (Sur 2021). The titles of some poems in Bolger’s *Love in the Original Language*, such as “Stranded at Sea”, “Translated from a Libyan Life in Ireland” and “No Child is Born to Flicker in the Shadows”, are in themselves testimonies to life-threatening border crossings, living with post-traumatic stress disorder, and questions of citizenship and belonging. Striking dedications of the poems, such as, “in memory of Yussef Mohamed (died aged 11, Aleppo)” in the poem “Numbers”, or to Javad, who disappeared in 1991, in the poem “Ghazal for Parveena and her son, Javid”, express a deeply humane consideration for the suffering of people in conflict-torn countries and an effort to preserve the memory of the victims, so that they do not become just numbers. Capitalizing on other people’s tragedies could be seen as exploitative, and to forestall this the

poet acknowledges her position and the subjectivity that amplifies the often underrepresented or muted voices. Bolger's use of citations and references to real events in her notes to poems like "Ghazal for Parveena", based on Mughal Mase's kidnapping by the Indian armed forces in Kashmir in 1991, in addition to using words and phrases uttered by the people who populate her work, signals her recognition of the ethical concerns about the appropriation and commodification of those voices (Bolger 2022, 83).

The poem "Translated from a Libyan Life in Ireland" (Bolger 2022, 20)⁷ strives to create an empathetic representation of a traumatized individual making a life in Ireland. Arabic words are introduced to accentuate the experiences of the poem's persona, an Arabic speaker, who lost family members in a conflict. They spend time in iconic Dublin locations, Bewley's Café during the day and Whelan's bar at night – all, as it turns out, serve as distractions from the terror of the night when, as they admit, "I'm woken by the distant past / [...] I had heard others die / a blow-by-blow account / but when my sister died / there was no transmission / not a whisper did I hear of her". The Arabic words, as explained in the notes to the poem, such as, *mojewdia*, "to be, to exist, existentialism"; *waheed*, "alone"; or *al Ummah*, "the worldwide community of Muslims" (Bolger 2022, 83), accentuate the different layers of experience of a traumatized individual making a life in a new country. The unexpected words take readers out of their comfort zone and thus, to a certain degree, mirror the obstacles of adapting to a new place and language. The sense of alienation, trauma and of not fitting in represents the challenges faced by refugees and migrants from the Middle East, many of them Arabic speakers, across the European continent.

The volume *A Compound of Words* reflects on, amongst other things, the hybrid and in-between position of Ireland, a country colonized by Britain but also "its accessory to empire in India". Here, the language of "European and Asian etymology" invites the reader to "break their linguistic shackles", as characterized by Bilal (2020). In the poems that are testimonies of different sites of violence the presence of words in different languages invokes specific sites of trauma. They also alter the experience of reading, and, in the words of Divya Victor, "make the reader extremely alert to the work of reading", an effort that mimics the effort of navigating life as a migrant (Sur 2021).

Bureaucracy – waiting for documents, approvals and appointments – "comes to play a dominant and colonizing role" in migrants' and refugees' lives (Tesseur 2019, 441). In Bolger's view, the Arabic, Tamil, Polish or Irish words interspersed with English work to build bridges and foster empathetic connections between people of different backgrounds. As she puts it:

It is my belief that if I hold your words in my mouth, and I speak them, I cannot ever not see your humanity. I cannot kill you and I cannot hate you. Because I have held your words in my mouth. In a way, it is the most intimate kind of connection that we can have with a stranger: for me to take your word, and put it in my mouth, and speak it with love, and for you to take my words and speak them back to me with

⁷ In terms of the ethics of representation, Bolger informed me that the poem appeared in the collection after the person whose experiences inspired it had read it and consented to its publication (email correspondence).

love. There is also a risk of embarrassment associated with that and getting the word wrong. However, for an outsider, in a new country, every moment is a risk. And so for somebody who's in comfort in that place, to put themselves in a position where they may fail, or where they may fall in the gaps, I think is a brave thing to do. *But the act of migration itself is the bravest.* Perhaps that's exactly what Homi Bhabha's idea of third space is about as well, that moving out of our comfort, the moving edge of the comfort zone. I suppose the beauty of that space, where we all put our words in the middle, is that it's nobody's comfort zone anymore. Or maybe it's everyone's comfort zone. (Transcript of a recorded conversation, April 26, 2024; emphasis added by the author)

It is also important to underline how the performative aspects of poetry readings become enactments of the interventions embodied in these works in the public space. In this context, the spoken word, which amplifies the messages emotively and somatically, can be a potent source of learning and perhaps even assuage trauma, as it also enables a level of identification with migrant experiences.

4 Anti-Racism and Trauma Informed Poetic Practice

Bolger places her creative practice, including the facilitation of writing workshops with migrant/refugee writers, within a trauma informed and anti-racist landscape (Fiona Bolger Poetry). Trauma, migration, and racism are closely linked as many exiles happen due to traumatic events like war – sites of racial and/or religious conflict – natural disasters, or poverty. Migrating persons endure different forms of violence on their journeys, with hostilities continuing after arrival at their destinations. As Barnsley, Bower and Teifouri (2022, 1) point out: “post-arrival life for migrants is not a linear, forward-moving process but a kind of re-dwelling in lost homes and landscapes, the beginning of a micro-bordering which continues for years”. Other ways in which racism and trauma overlap are discussed by Resmaa Menakem (2021, 4), who in *My Grandmother's Hands* explores the racialized trauma of Black Americans caused by the “white-body supremacy”, a system that continues to privilege white people as a group, while demeaning and destroying Black bodies. Menakem argues that trauma of a different kind also lives in the bodies of white Americans, which lies under the cycle of trauma produced by witnessing ongoing everyday acts of racial discrimination and harassment. This view is amplified by Edith Shiro (2024), who expands this notion by stating that many societies currently face a “collective trauma” due to witnessing (in most media) the suffering of migrants and refugees. The collective trauma in her words occurs because “a community, a group of people, or a whole culture experiences chronic, ongoing injustice and suffering with no resources to navigate it”.

As Le Grange (2023, 14) notes “racism is inextricably bound up with coloniality and therefore anti-racism with decoloniality.” An anti-racist stance involves acknowledging the traumatic experiences present in these everyday oppressions, but also decolonizing “the knowledge produced by universities and the creative industries by examining how collaboration, a commitment to multilingualism and ‘poetic activism’ can work together in a way which affirms the way individual persons create meaning of their worlds” (Barnsley, Bower and Teifouri 2022, 3). Wade Compton (2024, 7–8) articulated this in his apt observation that to

produce an anti-racist literature, white creators must, first of all, acknowledge that they are producing an ethnic literature that belongs to a specific tradition by which the value of each literary work is measured. Rather than rejecting those traditions, Compton invites writers to interrogate them, and foregrounds “the role of writers in recovering long suppressed or devalued traditions” over what is simply understood as innovation. In practice, this involves a critical examination of one’s own subjectivity, followed by a careful selection of texts and resources that inform one’s practice, inviting perspectives that enable diverse subjects to relate to the experiences portrayed in one’s texts.

In Bolger’s lecture, tellingly titled “Writing from the Inside Out and the Outside In” (2021), which explores the role of the major influences in her work, she demonstrates an awareness of the importance to talk about her subjectivity. She opens the lecture by positioning herself, geographically, linguistically, and culturally, stressing the role of her poetry as “practice”, an act of wondering at “the imagination and the insight” of other poets, and as a way of thinking carefully about the questions raised by poetry in a kind of dialogue with other poets and texts. Phipps (2019, 8) argues that this is a crucial element of decolonial creative practice: “[i]t’s vital that privilege and position are part of our ongoing reflection on where we speak from and on behalf of whom”. The rejection of colonial epistemic violence involves acknowledgment of other, mainly marginalized and suppressed, voices, and critically evaluating the status of one’s own epistemologies.

Unsurprisingly, the main inspirations in Bolger’s work are migrant poets, for whom moving between places is a part of their poetics and who engage with plurilingualism as a way of inviting non-dominant, marginalized languages into their creative works. The most notable influences are Divya Victor, a Tamil American poet born in India, Vahni Capildeo, a Scottish Trinidadian writer, and other diasporic authors such as Fatimah Asghar, Bhanu Kapil, Moniza Alvi, and Imtiaz Dharker. These poets debate the language around migration, interrogating the contested terms of exile, refugee, diaspora, and homeland, looking for their etymological roots (the origins of words found in “strange” lands). “Language is my home”, insists Capildeo, referring to language as an idea rather than a particular language. Bolger has been drawn to Capildeo’s concept of “plurilocalism”, a concept that might be seen as a twin of plurilingualism, and which denotes “the state in which whatever place one happens to be in is referred to and through other *specific* places, whether known personally or known only as lost” (Capildeo 2021). While plurilingualism is about “being between” languages, plurilocalism is about being between places, imagined or real, “a heritage place, a place fled by parents to escape from war, your parents’ native place” or the one not yet explored (Bolger, “Writing” 2021). This approach is echoed in Bolger’s vision of writing itself:

Writing is a form of communication. Diaspora and migration are about separation from a place of origin. These [aforementioned] writers present us with interesting ways in which writers are connected with and yet separated from the place of origin. And even this notion of origin. It’s complicated. It’s contested. We have to acknowledge all of that. Poetry itself is about making. It comes from the Greek word to make. So it’s not cerebral. It’s not logical. It doesn’t have to be narrative based, but it can be about making. And I’d like to think of poems as offering new ways of thinking. (Bolger, “Writing” 2021)

The word “migrant” itself is charged with abundant negative connotations. In Divya Victor’s *Curb* (2022), a book with images and poems scattered across the pages (sometimes literally), she writes that “a migrant is a disputed / territory over which there / is *our* a disagreement / this is an *my* attempt / at resemblance *my* / a body reaching a mine / an agreement with his”. She highlights the conflict around ownership of the experiences of the migrant, who, by virtue of no longer living in their “native” place, or places, becomes a space to be claimed; at the same time, Victor attempts to disrupt this idea by introducing an awkward syntax and ungrammatical sentences. Her poetry explores a creative use of the language of bureaucracy and forms that are to be found in the strict immigration policies of “Trump’s America”. “Victor stretches form filling until it becomes a poetic form of its own. [...] She takes this tedious and painful process and uses it to build characters”, commented Bolger on this element of Victor’s aesthetics (Bolger, “Writing” 2021). The power of using forms to create poetry defies what Victor describes as the “kind of recurrent violence” that migrants must go through by constantly having to write themselves into forms. Her engagement with bureaucratic documents is “a way to rehabilitate [her] attachment to their language, and to tell a story in the midst of the bureaucratic subjectivation” (Sur 2021).

That the disruption and deconstruction of official documents brings with it an enormous creative potential is also shown in the poetry of Fatimah Asghar (2018), another influence in Bolger’s work, as can be seen in her writing workshops where she encourages participants to creatively deconstruct official government forms.⁸ Asghar uses forms as a poetic expression to capture the experiences of a “Pakistani Muslim woman in contemporary America”. Some examples include “Microaggression Bingo” (2018, 68), in the form of a bingo card; “Partition”, with a note dated August 15th, 1947 (2018, 65), a prose paragraph with spaces to be filled out; and a poem in the form of a floor plan titled “Script for Child Services: A Floor Plan” (2018, 59). Asghar’s work communicates how various aspects of identity, such as one’s gender, background, skin colour, and sexuality, intersect and add other layers to the experience of migration. Exile is always a disruption to one’s life and identity, and this is what Victor, Asghar and Bolger want to make the reader “feel” by disrupting the experience of reading, by the way, for instance, their poems appear on the page or are titled, which also finds expression in Bolger’s poem “By Halves” (2019, 62).

Victor’s poetic renditions of trauma are another important influence for Bolger, who worked with Victor in the professional development of her practice (email correspondence). In her workshops and facilitation work, often with traumatized individuals, Bolger employs some of the creative writing resources developed by Victor that are steeped in trauma writing. An example is “The Audre Lorde Questionnaire to Oneself” created by Victor for students in her Creative Writing courses at Nanyang Technological University in January 2016 (the questionnaire has since been reproduced across multiple Internet sites). The questions revolve around defying silencing, which signals trauma, one of the main themes in Audre Lorde’s

⁸ An example is a poem “Licence to Live” by an Iranian refugee poet who participated in a workshop co-facilitated by Bolger – the name is not disclosed as the author of this article did not obtain permission to share it – of which a copy was shared among the participants at the event, “In Between”, an evening of poetry reading by migrants and asylum seekers in Dublin’s Third Space on the 17th of April 2024.

essayistic writing where she confronts the marginalization and silencing of Black women in American culture and feminist writing. In “Transformation into Silence”, Lorde opens with a confession: “I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood” (Lorde 2007, 40). Victor’s questionnaire takes sentences directly from Lorde’s essay, such as, “What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?”. To which she adds instructions encouraging a conversation around painful experiences; in this instance: “[List as many as necessary today. Then write a new list tomorrow. And the day after.]” (The Audre Lorde Questionnaire To Oneself).

“The anti-racists workshop is a study of love. It advances humility and empathy over control and domination”, freeing educators to, broadly speaking, decolonize the classroom (Chavez 2021). Anti-racist and decolonial mindsets, as argued by Chavez (2021) and Phipps (2019), are not theoretical but are expressed through practice and interventions that focus on providing a platform for “those living behind the shutters, hidden away, waiting”. In the context of migration, they stress the importance of love, solidarity and embracing cultural difference as part of creating meaning and a sense of belonging, “desperately needed in the hostile environments created by some Northern countries that are designed to protect their own wealth” (Tesseur 441). Bolger has facilitated workshops with different communities of multilingual migrant writers as well as other underrepresented and underprivileged communities such as Traveller writers, and in collaboration with such institutions as the Irish Writers Centre in Dublin, Yoda Press in Delhi, Intercultural Language Centre, Ballybough and the Women 4 Women, a part of Furry Hill Community Centre, Dublin (Fiona Bolger Poetry n.d.). An Indian scholar in Ireland, Tapasya Narang (2020, 4–5), described being “comforted” by Bolger’s poetry on navigating life “between Ireland and India” that included words and cultural rituals familiar to her. She remarked on the inclusivity, welcoming atmosphere and “spirit of community” fostered by Bolger, which, as she noted in her review of the poet, was also mirrored in her works.

5 *Dubelonging: Agency and Community of New Writers in Creative Writing Workshops*

In *Material Stories of Migration: Reframing Home Through Poetry*, Barnsley, Bower and Teifouri (2022, 218) write that the dehumanizing and insensitive narratives that represent migrants in the media, and the anti-immigration discourses of politicians, “can split communities and divide nations”. Migrants are frequently deprived of a voice and the agency to create their own representations, and are fixed in othering and marginalizing narratives. Writing and performing poetry, “storying” migrant lived experiences, has the power to counter this by creating a safe space while also producing “cross-cultural meanings that resonate in “hostile environments”. The anthology *Dubylon. A Tower of Verse* (2023) is an example of such an endeavour. Instead of a table of contents there are “Continents”, which points to the coming together of authors from diverse backgrounds and languages, such as Ukrainian, Arabic, Polish, Spanish, Hindi, Chichewa, Albanian, Russian, Portuguese, and Setswana. The poems are written in and on a location, Dublin, where these languages can be heard on the streets.

The list of contributors contains short biographies that include details of the places in which they have lived, languages they know, their favourite writers, and their dreams, and yet they convey so much more about the lives of the participants: “My dreams are freedom of speech and decent accommodation for every child”, “My dream is to see Palestine Free, justice, peace and quietness in the world”, “My dream... is to leave a beautiful impression on people after leaving” (65–66).

The names of favourite writers form a global literary map inviting readers to explore creators from far-away lands such as Nizar Qabbani, Mario Vargas Llosa, Desmond Dudwa Phiri, Divya Victor, Castro Alves, Sławomir Mrożek, Premchand, and Mahmoud Darwish, to name but a few. During the *Dubylon* project, the writers brought these influences and their memories of the other places they call home together to discuss poems about Dublin and, ultimately, to create their own “poetic map of Dublin streets and suburbs” (Bourke 2023, 10). The section “Poems to Dublin and other cities we have loved”, is a homage to the city and the emotions it evokes in its new habitants; at the same time, the sense of loss and nostalgia for the places left behind lingers in the poems also. The first line of the poem, “Dublin you are a seductive lover” by a Syrian writer, Nasouh Hossari, which compares Dublin to Damascus, is “I don’t want to be a traitor”, which expresses a sense of betrayal for loving Dublin, a new home, and what it means for the “first love”, Damascus, which lives in the “ribs” and “blood” of the poem’s speaker. Metaphors of seduction and betrayal capture well the everyday negotiations of a life between two, or more places, and languages. Hossari’s poem exemplifies Capildeo’s idea of plurilocality, being in one place through a connection to other places. “Dublin was never really an ‘Irish’ city”, but a port city, a “place of comings and goings of all races” that provided access to Ireland, Europe and other parts of the world, writes Peter Sheekey in his letter included in *Dubylon* (2023, 12). The collection embodies this idea of hybridity, which is reflected in the music it creates from the many words from different languages now taking root in the Irish soil.

Dubylon oozes with invitations to speak, to participate in casual interactions. A reference to James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, an otherwise linguistically challenging experimental novel, frames the anthology with an encouragement to the creators to loosen their tongues, to share stories: “O / tell me all about / Anna Livia! I want to hear all / about Anna Livia. Well, you know Anna Livia? Yes, of course, we all know Anna Livia. Tell me all. Tell me now. You’ll die / when you hear [...]” (2023, 8). The untitled poem beginning “Dublin you gotta tell me” by Fíóna Bolger invites different tongues to tell their tales; more importantly, though, the poem’s persona is also ready to listen, which is expressed in the Polish form *stucham*⁹ and the Irish *éistim*, and these are placed alongside other languages to be heard in the streets of Dublin, such as the Jordanian expression, *Shufi mafi*, “what’s up?”, “what’s new?”:

Dublin you gotta tell me -
 in all your tongues -
 don’t stop keep talking

⁹ As of the Irish Census 2022, the Polish diaspora stands at 93,680, which makes it the largest minority in the country.

keep telling I'm listening
słucham
I'm listening to you
tell me, tell me all
I drink in your words
drain your babble
I thirst for your news
your newness,
as you bubble and burble
you tell me you tell...
you city you specificity
you fluidity you flow-er
you flower, you aul petal
speak and sing-on
I listen słucham éistim
I learn shufi, mafi
we are all here
heard and unheard
I listen

The poems are written in English but woven through them are words from the languages meaningful to the writers. For many, the workshops are an opportunity to improve their English language proficiency, while for others they are a chance to learn a few words from other languages and socialize. However, the issue of language does not present the greatest barrier that these migrants and asylum seekers face. The real obstacle is the precarity of the lives of those in the International Protection System, including accommodation issues, that “made regular attendance a challenge” (Bolger and Cosgrove 2023, 15)

How does one write in a language with limited proficiency? The conversations at the workshops revolve around accessible topics, like “Greetings”, one of the sections in the *Dubylon* collection, or animals, stimulating discussions around the words for animals in different languages and their cultural symbolism.¹⁰ The writers then “bring” their animals to Dublin; some are native to Ireland like swans, while others are familiar to the writers’ previous homes, such as in Twanda Thomas’s poem “Elephants” (2023, 57), which compares Dublin’s characteristics to that of an elephant: “a herd of elephants grey like the buildings of Dublin City”. At times in these workshops the participants lack the words to name animals in English and the meanings they express, and thus resort to finding pictures on their phones,

¹⁰ The author of this article participated in one of the Dubelonging workshops, on the 23rd May 2024, dedicated to animals. The exchanges about animals led to broader discussions about differences and similarities between different cultures.

which when shown around the room provoke surprise, inspiration or simply laughter. It is in moments such as these, with everyone interacting, exchanging, and building understanding, that a safe, supportive environment is fostered that allows for the creation of new literature, and a place one may call home.

6 Conclusion

At the 2024 International Literature Festival in Dublin, the poet Natalie Diaz argued that telling stories about a body, a family or a migrant, even if they are painful, is an expression of love since “we are close to the things we write” (Diaz). Holding someone in the words of a poem, in the language of those who are described, is an act of love. This article has argued that this approach informs the plurilingual poetry and creative practice of Fíona Bolger, whose work defies the borders of “national” literature by embracing different languages, cultures, and literatures. The inclusive writing workshops she facilitates, alongside other creators, provide a safe environment where creativity flourishes, and serve to replace alienation, loss of homeland and everyday hostilities with a sense of home and belonging, and so work towards the creation of a community of writers. Bolger’s poetry and her practice embody the inclusivity inherent in the decolonial mindset, and are part of a larger movement calling for the decolonization of the curriculum and creative practice.

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