Migrant Lives and the Dynamics of (Non)belonging in the Polish-British works of A.M. Bakalar, Wioletta Greg, and Agnieszka Dale

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European interconnectedness, manifested in the open-border travel area and aided by technological advances, has contributed to redefining the ways in which migrants maintain affiliations with their home countries. In Europe, crisscrossed by a tight web of low-cost flights, the privilege of moving from the host country to the country of origin in a matter of a few hours helps to make the experience of migration easier than it might have been several decades ago. Similarly, a visit to an ethnic grocery store, a reminder of the European common market and a witness to migrant entrepreneurship, may alleviate homesickness by satisfying a longing for the pre-migration life, as traditional food becomes "comfort food," a tangible, consumable connection to home. Even though Brexit has complicated an already complex landscape of European integration, maintaining ties to home within Europe has never been easier. That being said, contemporary migration literature written in Europe, which is the object of inquiry here, demonstrates that the apparent ease with which migrants may now straddle two points of reference—the homeland and the host country—does not necessarily mitigate the complexity inscribed into the experience of relocation, which involves redefining the notions of "home" and "belonging."

As Nichola Wood and Louise Waite (2011) observe in their editorial to the special issue of *Emotion, Space and Society*, "belonging" tends to be contextualised within the questions of nationality, ethnicity, and religion, yet as valid as these contexts are, belonging must also be tackled as an "emotional affiliation," for "[s]eldom are

questions asked that explore what belonging feels like; how it 'works' as an emotional attachment and the significance of the emotionality of belonging" (201). The latter acquires a special importance in the context of migration, which necessitates ongoing reconfigurations of the self and thus one's place in the world and among people. Such changes in turn catalyse changes in emotional life: migration as a process of continuous renegotiation of givens results in emotions being equally volatile (Boccagni and Baldassar 2015, 74). Accordingly, belonging as an emotional affiliation needs to be approached as dynamic and multidimensional: a *process,* rather than a state, of relating to oneself and others in a globalised space where traditional "entities of belonging" have been increasingly losing their monopolistic grip on their members (Bauman 2011, 434). Therefore, I propose to frame my discussion around what I choose to term "the ambivalent dynamics of (non)belonging," where the bracketed prefix "non" is a reminder that migrant attachments and affiliations are hardly unidirectional and fixed, but tend to fluctuate depending on the migrant's individual condition and the socio-cultural context against which it unfolds.

In this chapter, I will analyse the ambivalent dynamics of (non)belonging in the works of three Polish authors domiciled in Great Britain: A.M. Bakalar, Wioletta Greg (Grzegorzewska),[1] and Agnieszka Dale. Although each author tackles the dynamics of (non)belonging from a different perspective, consistent with their respective literary genres of choice and the thematic concerns of their works, their texts engage with the themes engendered by contemporary migration: the dualities of migrant life, the redefinition of the notion of home, the multifaceted nature of migrant belonging, and the question of integration within the host country, among others. Since each author has channelled her experience of being a Pole in the UK into her fiction,

[1] Wioletta Greg is the British pen name of Wioletta Grzegorzewska. All her translated works published in the UK feature the surname "Greg."

their works provide also insight into the dynamics of (non)belonging in the specific Polish-British context as seen from a female migrant perspective, while at the same time reaching beyond national dichotomies (particularly in the case of Greg and Dale) to narrate the ambivalence of living in liquid modernity.

Unlike the majority of Polish post-accession writers, these authors either write in English (Bakalar and Dale) or had their works translated into English and other European languages (Greg), which makes their writing accessible to a potentially broader reading public than writing in their mother tongue could likely procure. Moreover, the authors' respective language choices are in tune with the concerns that animate their work. Thus, writing in English has allowed Bakalar to distance herself from Polishness (Raczyńska 2012, n.p.), and Greg's adherence to Polish bespeaks the country's centrality in her work, whereas Dale's use of English foregrounds the cross-cultural quality of her prose.

In a certain sense, the structure of this chapter reflects the position which the national and cultural categories of Polishness and Britishness occupy in the works of the three writers. Thus, first I discuss A.M. Bakalar's fiction, which revolves around the question of (non)belonging as contextualised within national, and religious categories. Then, I discuss Greg's poetry and prose from the perspective of a productive duality which is characteristic of her oeuvre, but which has been reinforced by the experience of migration. Finally, I read Dale's short stories as an exercise in post-national imagination which, while still rooted in the Polish-British context, emphasises human relationality and commonality of experience over national, ethnic, and cultural differences.

Before I turn to each author, a few words regarding terminology are due. So far, I have consistently used the term migration and its derivatives when referring to

the literature produced by Bakalar, Greg, and Dale. Arguably, the terms "migration" and "migrant" seem to be better suited to the nature and the subject matter of such literature than "emigration" and "émigré." Although the difference between the two lies in but a single letter, several scholars have identified the nuances distinguishing migration from emigration and a migrant from an émigré, in addition to pointing out differences between *migrant* literature and *migration* literature.

According to Anna Nasiłowska (2018), "[i]t is emigration that has a hard, specific meaning, while migration is a fluid and variable state" (6). Nasiłowska seems to be alluding to the notion of "émigré," a French-derived term which connotes exile for political reasons, usually of a permanent character. The fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 has largely eliminated politically-driven exile. Furthermore, Polish migration patterns have evolved in the course of time, with the post-accession migration being characterised by "more complex, transitory patterns in terms of temporary settlement and shifting migration status" than the post-World War II movements (Goździak 2014, 1). The multifaceted nature of the Polish post-accession influx to the UK, involving migration for economic, family, or educational reasons, as well as temporary and permanent relocation, has thus rendered the terms "émigré" and "emigration literature" rather inaccurate, calling for more neutral and capacious categories.

Although the terms "migrant" and "migration" seem to comply with the above requirement, Urszula Chowaniec (2015) rightly points out that it is not so much the act of migrating from one place to another as "the particular existential dimension of being separated from one's own language and culture, the experience of dislocation present during the creation of the text, and inscribed as such into the text" (9) that is the substance of literature of migration. In a similar vein, Søren Frank (2008) proposes a terminological shift from *migrant* literature to *migration* literature as "a move away

from authorial biography as the decisive parameter, emphasizing instead intratextual features such as content and form as well as extratextual forces such as social processes" (3).

In this light, the literature produced by Bakalar, Greg, and Dale inscribes itself into contemporary migration literature in that it attests to the experience of mobility and interconnectedness, but also displacement and separation inherent in the twenty-first century migrant experience, while at the same time being rooted in the Polish-British diasporic context, which has assumed shape in the aftermath of 2004, but which inevitably harks back to a long-standing Polish presence in the UK. In straddling Poland and the UK in their works, Bakalar, Dale, and Greg "mobilize two or more cultural vocabularies (Walkowitz 2006, 530) in the service of literature that accommodates the experience of living in a world "in flux" shaped by "the cultural innovations that migration engenders" (Adelson 2005, 5).

A.M. Bakalar and Polish-British Entanglements

A.M. Bakalar is the pen name of Joanna Zgadzaj, Polish author based in London, who settled in the UK in the aftermath of the EU's 2004 enlargement. Although Bakalar has denied having modelled the protagonist of her debut novel, *Madame Mephisto* (2012) on herself (Zagrodna 2012, n.p.), the 30-year-old Magda must have inherited some of her ambivalence towards Poland from her creator. As Bakalar admits in one of the interviews promoting the novel, as much as she loves her Polish family and friends and appreciates Polish literature and culture, she has no warm feelings for *Polish mentality* understood as a restrictive blend of Catholicism, nationalism, and patriarchy (Raczyńska 2012, n.p.). In her debut work, Bakalar builds on this ambivalence by creating a character who defies the stereotype of a Polish economic

migrant—the very symbol of the unprecedented Polish influx to the UK—while at the same time perpetuating national clichés regarding Poland and the Polish community in the UK.

To differentiate the protagonist of *Madame Mephisto* from a typical economic migrant Bakalar turns Magda into a "drug queen," the owner of a secret cross-national cannabis business with an extensive network of Polish-British connections, who takes up a series of administrative cover-up jobs in the UK to conceal her illegal doings. Magda's double life has a bearing on her already quite conflicted personality, which splits into a ruthless and unpredictable alter ego: the eponymous Madame Mephisto. Although Magda's underworld business brings her considerable financial success, economic betterment is hardly the original push-factor for her decision to leave Poland. Echoing Bakalar's own experience, Magda trades Warsaw for London for ideological and personal reasons.

*Madame Mephi*sto defies the dynamics of émigré fiction where the motherland tends to be the object of nostalgia and longing. In the novel, Poland operates as a synonym of parochialism, bigotry, and cultural homogeneity, whose national-Catholic ethos oppresses and alienates the protagonist. The feeling of exclusion which Magda experiences as a citizen under the rule of the far-right Law and Justice party is matched by a sense of alienation at home ruled by Magda's domineering, staunchly Catholic mother. Indeed, Bakalar conflates Magda's oppressive *motherland* with her equally oppressive *mother* as both are signified by the figure of *Matka Polka* (Mother Pole), a long-standing cultural paradigm which in *Madame Mephisto* is boiled down to the stereotype of constrictive, patriarchal femininity.[2]

[2] For more information on the meaning of *Matka Polka* in the novel, see Bryla (2020).

How does the UK play into this dynamic of non-belonging? In comparison to Poland's oppressive homogeneity and standardised, gender-based social roles, London, with its vibrant cultural diversity, promises to be the place where Magda can free herself from Polish constraints and finally be herself. However, it turns out that the British society is governed by its own restrictions and unwritten social norms. Although as an attractive "white other" with a good command of English, Magda blends into the British ethnic landscape and lands a series of corporate jobs, she never settles in any of them as she fails to adapt to the British corporate culture which conceals hypocrisy behind a veneer of political correctness. She also finds it hard to establish any meaningful relationships in Britain, limiting herself to casual sex encounters with the men that she considers useful to her business.

Whereas it is clear to the reader that part of the problem is the character's antagonistic personality, Magda attributes her inability to fit in in part to her Eastern European origins. As I have argued elsewhere (Bryla 2020, 7), Magda displays what could be termed a *postdependent* mindset driven by a desire to dissociate herself from her status as a new European from a backward post-communist nation and, at the same time, a persistent reliance on this very status as a way to justify her initial inability to "circulate among the Westerners" (Bakalar 2012a, 4). As she rebels against being perceived through the prism of nationality, she nevertheless blames the British other for not comprehending the complexity of her situation, including "the daily hardships of emerging from communist rule" (Bakalar 2012a, 10). Consequently, Magda is trapped between conflicting narratives which contributes to a sense of alienation and displacement:

> I was too British for the Poles, and too Polish for the British. . . . Who are you really, they kept asking me, here and there. I was whoever they wanted me to be, a kaleidoscopic image with multiple colour combinations, a creature who

> was accustomed to the environment, until my own self adapted so that I was not there anymore. (Bakalar 2012a, 165-166)

Bakalar's portrayal of Magda as somebody who has lost herself somewhere between the home and the host country corroborates Urszula Chowaniec's observation that migration implies dislocation, which becomes inscribed into the text. Importantly, in the case of Magda, migration does not so much engender as exacerbate an already existing disjunction within the protagonist. Narratively, this disjunction manifests itself in the protagonist's split personality as well as the irreconcilability of the homeland and the host country, which results in her feeling like a stranger in both Poland and Britain. Textually, the disjunction is manifested in the shift from the first-person to the third-person narration which signals Magda's morphing into Madame Mephisto. Migrant dislocation thus becomes synonymous with feeling alienated not just from others but also from oneself.

One of the ways in which migrants may reconnect with their pre-migration self and alleviate the sense of alienation is through diasporic communities in the host country.[3] Ideally, such diasporic communities bridge the homeland and the host country, expanding the limits of national or ethnic identity by making cultural in-betweenness productive and enriching. However, "the diasporic experience does not necessarily produce transgressive and hybrid forms of identity simply because the subjects cross national and territorial borders" (Ortega 2020, 47). Moreover, if diasporic consciousness dwells on the idealised notion of the homeland as the principal

[3] The post-2004 wave of Polish migrants has necessarily redefined the UK Polonia, the Polish community which took shape in the post-World War II period: in order to recreate a sense of home in exile, Poles established local Polish clubs. According to Polish-British author Joanna Czechowska, whose father came to the UK during the war, such clubs "would be like a little home from home, a little Poland where they lived," offering or overseeing a variety of activities for adults and children, including Polish religious services (Kosmalska 2014b, 249).

point of reference, which has been lost as a result of migration, the host country is relegated to a secondary position and no hybridity can be achieved (Ortega 2020, 45).

Indeed, it is insularism and parochialism, rather than productive hybridity, that characterise Bakalar's depiction of the Polish community in London. As a diasporic extension of Poland, London Polonia is a mirror image of the diseased country; a condensed stereotype of Polish bigotry, patriarchy, and small-mindedness. In the novel, the community is signified by the figure of a migrant whose ambitions are purely economic and who therefore prefers to remain in an all-Polish enclave, where the Polish language is spoken and Polish food consumed, rather than integrate into British society. Given her aversion to national categories, Magda shuns London Polonia, refusing to cling to superficial tokens of Polishness for the sake of recreating the home which she finds so unhomely in the first place. However, since she is unable to feel at home in Britain either, she remains trapped in a state of permanent dislocation which manifests in her increasingly uncontrollable alter ego hurting herself and those around her.

Although Bakalar's novel fails to account for a more positive diasporic experience and other ways of nurturing cross-cultural connections than a ritualised reinforcement of national identity,[4] the author's journalistic pieces display a broader and more nuanced view of the UK Polonia. In her article for *The Guardian*, Bakalar concedes that Polish migration to the UK has been evolving and diversifying, with the economic motivation ceasing to be the only push-factor for Poles coming to the UK, which has resulted in "a large number of Poles [being] interested in becoming active

[4] Including Baklar's own successful integration and her involvement in promoting Polish and East-Central European literature and culture in the UK through her editorial work and support for fellow writers like Greg and Dale.

members of British society and building a bridge between the two cultures" (2012b n.p.).

Notwithstanding this more balanced appraisal of the Polish diaspora in the UK, Bakalar's second novel, *Children of Our Age* (2018), proves that when it comes to fiction she remains more interested in the Polish migrant experience gone awry. More ambitious in scope than her debut work, *Children of Our Age* traces the intertwined lives of several members of the economic-driven Polish community in London. The bulk of the novel explores the underbelly of Polish migration to the UK: a human trafficking network masterminded by a psychopathic character named Karol and enforced by his partners in crime, the Kulesza brothers, Damian and his mentally unstable sibling Igor. The men woo gullible Poles in difficult life circumstances with the promise of a well-paid job in the UK. Once the prey takes the bait, they are transported to the UK, installed in rudimentary lodgings and forced to work like slaves without a day off while Karol claims their benefits. The novel portrays economic migration as survival of the fittest where individual profit justifies ruthlessness and brutality towards others.

In focusing on the exploitation of the Polish migrants, Baklar partakes in one of the main thematic concerns of Polish migration literature created after 2004: the travails and tribulations of Poles forced to do menial, often humiliating jobs in order to stay afloat in the UK. In other words, in *Children of Our Age*, Bakalar zooms in on the very migrant experience that the protagonist of *Madame Mephisto* was so keen to distance herself from. However, rather than merely chronicle migrant exploitation, *Children of Our Age* develops *Madame Mephisto's* underlying thesis that migration only exacerbates existing problems, as it explores the nature vs. nurture dynamics in the oppressors' and victims' motivations and life choices. Migrant circumstances do

not make the protagonists of Bakalar's novel. Instead, migration reveals patterns which had been established before, often as a result of the characters' upbringing and pre-migration formative experiences.

Although Poland is no longer the main culprit, the characters' Polishness remains a shaping force in their UK lives. It is exploited by Karol and his partners who rely on their and their prey's shared nationality for bringing them to the UK as cheap labour force. For Angelika, the *Matka Polka* (Mother Pole) of the novel, Polishness, manifested in the adherence to the mother tongue, Catholic faith, traditional family values, and Polish food, is an adhesive that is supposed to keep her family together away from home. The same Polishness, however, alienates her teenage daughter Karolina who does not identify with the Poland-centred diasporic consciousness her mother wishes to inculcate.

Like *Madame Mephisto*, *Children of Our Age* problematizes the notions of home and belonging understood in national terms. In the dog-eat-dog reality of economic migration, the characters' shared Polishness is not a bulwark against exploitation and exclusion. At the same time, when migrant lives revolve around staying afloat, there is little room left for getting to know and integrating in the host country. As a result, migrant workers suffer from a double exclusion: pushed out of their homeland which had not been able to guarantee them a stable existence, they remain on the margins of the host society. This in turn has a bearing on their feelings towards their homeland and the UK, which oscillate between proximity and distance, attachment and hostility.

Bakalar's output so far attests to the writer's interest in the ambivalent dynamics of (non)belonging which migration engenders. Moreover, the writer's own relationship to Poland is marked by ambivalence. In spite of distancing herself from

her homeland and its extension abroad, Bakalar keeps coming back to Poland and Polishness for inspiration and literary material.

Wioletta Greg and the Productive Duality of Migrant Experience

Wioletta Greg, a Polish-born author who migrated to the UK in 2006, once called herself a "flesh and blood" Polish poet who not only writes in Polish, but also thinks and dreams in it (Kosmalska 2014a, 155). Polish is thus the medium through which Greg refracts her impressions and experiences to produce works in which her memories of Poland and glimpses of her life in the UK align into a kaleidoscopic whole. Although Polish has remained the poet's means of artistic expression abroad, her decision to migrate has exerted a powerful and positive influence upon her work, whereas the exposure to the foreign language and the contrast between English and her mother tongue has proven inspiring (Kosmalska 2014a). Moreover, it was only when Greg had left Poland that she realised how important her family history was to her. This realisation lies at the heart of Greg's critically acclaimed work, *Swallowing Mercury* (2017), which narrates her coming-of-age in the Polish countryside in a prose that seems "woven out of poetry" (Gralewicz 2018, 124 my translation).[5]

While Greg's adherence to Polish has helped her remain attuned to the memory of her life in Poland, migration has put a distance between herself and her homeland. In other words, Poland still occupies the centre of the poet's kaleidoscope but the experience of dislocation has necessarily shifted the existing balance, providing a new alignment of elements. Greg's 2014 poetry collection, *Finite Formulae and Theories of Chance*, translated from Polish by Marek Kazmierski, attests to this amalgamated perspective as it combines poems anchored in the author's rural girlhood (which, in

[5] *Swallowing Mercury* was originally published in Polish as *Guguly* (2014). The translated version was long-listed for the Man Booker International Prize 2017.

hindsight, pave the way for *Swallowing Mercury*) with pieces reflecting her migrant experience.

When Greg had first moved to Ryde, an English seaside town on the north-east coast of the Isle of Wight, she took lodgings in a building occupied by a number of fellow migrants from Poland. And although she herself had not come to the UK for strictly economic reasons, she quickly got a taste of that particular migrant experience. In "Lullaby," she juxtaposes the everyday hardship of migrant labour with a sweet longing for the homeland, which becomes elevated to the status of a dreamland where anything is possible:

> Sleep! A Breezer trickle runs along the floor.
> Tobacco folding into the shape of fern leaves.
> Your dreams will be done. You will go home.
>
> Sleep! You'll stop drinking, abandon the farm
> where stalks cut your hard-working hands
> and tea time is blessed respite. (Greg 2014, 67)

The dream of homecoming alleviates the harsh reality of migration as much as the small daily pleasures which brighten up the migrant's day: watching Polish television, smoking cigarettes, and taking a warm shower. Removed from their pre-migration context, everyday rituals and objects acquire an almost symbolic or even magical dimension for an exhausted, homesick addressee of the poem. Thus, in Greg's dreamy vision, tobacco transforms into a magical fern flower which, according to Polish folk tales, will grant infinite wealth and happiness to anyone who can find it, whereas the sound of the alarm clock at five in the morning heralds the pleasures of mushroom-picking instead of yet another tedious day of work.

The dreamy nostalgia of "Lullaby" contrasts sharply with the rawness of the poet's own experience of doing menial, uninspiring work. In the diary-like "Notes from an Island," Greg refers to her unskilled job in a fast-food joint as "another lesson

in humility" (2014, 106), which reminds her of a similar job she used to do when she studied Polish Philology in Częstochowa. Ironically, migration brings back that student experience except that in Poland Greg would explore the intricacies of her mother tongue while working a part-time job, whereas in the UK she is forced to face the basics of English. Forever a poet, even when she writes in prose, Greg makes a striking comparison between assimilating the new language and chewing, swallowing, and digesting scraps of fried meat: a dreary though necessary process which she as a migrant must undergo to get by.

Indeed, in Greg's poems, migrant experience is inextricably linked with entering a different linguistic reality, which is where the ambivalent dynamics of (non)belonging play out. In "Readers," the poetic I's inability to speak and read English as fluently as precisely as she would wish is a source of frustration ("When I speak, a beach becomes a bitch, keys a kiss, a sheet shit" (Greg 2014, 79)), but also an inspiration to draw a parallel between herself and her illiterate grandmother whose education was interrupted by disease and war. Ironically, migration renders Greg, an expert in words, "illiterate" in the foreign language, thwarting communication and self-expression, often to a mordantly comic effect: "Not that long ago, when I was trying to say I can't do a thing, I would call myself a cunt" (2014, 79).

Unlike Polish, which is a natural extension of the poet's world and the medium for her creative expression, English must be chewed, swallowed, and digested for sustenance. And while the poet seems to accept the utilitarian value English has for her, her frustration at her inability to inhabit it the way she does Polish is palpable when she exclaims that she "will never get to dance in this tongue!" (Greg 2014, 95). This striking image of *dancing in a language* is thus commensurate not only with linguistic prowess but also with a sense of being sufficiently comfortable and settled

in a language to embody it. In this sense, (non)belonging seems to have a linguistic dimension: while living in another language opens up new perspectives, it also triggers a sense of unhomeliness.

Simultaneously, the experience of straddling two linguistic realities ("In the depths of my native tongue and the gestation of a foreign tongue" (Greg 2014, 90)) is symptomatic of a productive in-betweenness which Greg inhabits as a Polish migrant in the UK, and which, as a poet, she transforms into a fertile ground from which poetry grows. Accordingly, Greg's migration works often weave together the here and there; her family history and her memories of her girlhood in rural Poland together with her grown-up woman experience in the UK. Thus, when she says "I am dual" (Greg 2014, 87, my translation),[6] she seems to be referring not only to the migrant's experience of inhabiting two worlds at once, but also to being pregnant with her daughter. The poet's duality is thus as much a product of her migration as of her pregnancy, both being part of her singular experience as a poet, a migrant, and a woman.

Part of this experience is cultural and linguistic diversity, which the poet appreciates and incorporates into her poetic universe. Anna Kałuża recognizes a collector's sensibility and a "cross-cultural consciousness" (2016, 199, my translation) in Greg's work, and I find this appraisal to be accurate. Rather than set her Polishness against other cultures, Greg is attuned to relationality within difference. Thus, the poem "Complex Times" juxtaposes two seemingly contrasting experiences of motherhood—that of a teenage mother of the African Sukuma tribe and a Polish mother who has just brought her baby from hospital—only to recognise a similar level of superstitious protectiveness in both young women, and reveal that their daughters are now friends celebrating their thirty-fourth birthday on the Isle of Wight. In other

[6] The original phrase, "Jestem podwójna," has been rendered by Kazmierski as "Feeling halved." However, I find the translation "I am dual" to be closer to the original.

words, in Greg's work, the experience of migration is a common denominator for otherwise disparate human stories and circumstances, bringing into focus the affinities which they nevertheless share. Faithful to the pronouncement "I am dual," Greg's migration work layers spatial and temporal dimensions, fusing seeming opposites—Poland and the UK; poetry and prose; menial work and poetry writing—into a kaleidoscopic account of the poet's experience of being a migrant, whose very (dis)location "[o]n an autonomous island, in a unified Europe, right on the edge of everything" mimics the ambivalence of her position (2014, 90).

Nowhere is this ambivalence more palpable than in Greg's latest, biographical work, *Wilcza Rzeka* (2021), which has not been translated into English yet. Unlike her other prosaic works written in the UK, *Swallowing Mercury* and *Accommodations* (2019),[7] this one is set entirely in Greg's adopted homeland, the UK. *Wilcza Rzeka* chronicles her tribulations as a dispossessed migrant and a single mother who liberates herself from an abusive relationship only to be tied down again by a series of trying circumstances, including the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, which culminate in her being forced to stay in a women's shelter with her teenage daughter. As Greg's intimate prose unveils the circumstances and decisions which have brought her to this place, the reader is challenged to grapple with the full reality of the poet's adult experience whose glimpses they got from her previous works but which, so far, has never been rendered so openly.

While Greg is still capable of softening the rough edges of her migrant story with her poetic sensibility, as when she finds solace in a solitary hornbeam growing outside the squalid tenement house she shares with other East-Central Europeans, the novel exposes the whole spectrum of loneliness and destitution bred by the unfortunate

[7] The book was originally published as *Stancje* (2017).

union of migration and poverty. At the same time, Greg's frank text, not unlike Bakalar's works, reveals migration to be a catalyst for unresolved issues and traumas which, like a piece of heavy luggage, a migrant drags over from the homeland to the host country. In Greg's case, these traumas include an abusive, co-dependent relationship with her alcoholic husband from which she had not been able to extricate herself for years and which has rendered her financially insolvent and emotionally and mentally fragile to the point of attempting suicide. And although the bittersweet experience of in-betweenness—being at once a published author longlisted for the Booker prize and an impoverished Polish migrant forced to do shifts at McDonald's—might have proven inspiring for Greg the poet, it has also put an unbearable strain on Greg the single mother trying to stay afloat in a reality made even more foreign by the alienating experience of poverty.

Arguably, until *Wilcza Rzeka* the ambivalent dynamics of (non)belonging in Greg's work had less to do with national and ideological allegiances, which are so prominent in A. M Bakalar's work, than with emotional and affective affiliations which collapse the home/host dichotomy. Greg's traumatic experiences narrated in her latest novel throw into relief the precariousness of the migrant condition, whose generative in-betweenness can easily transform into unbearable instability and volatility under unfavourable economic circumstances. As the novel revolves around the narrator and her daughter's *lack* of a place of their own, one is forced to reconsider the notion of *home*, and particularly the idealised equation between *home* and *heart*, to reflect instead on the disturbing correlation between female migration and precariousness in contemporary Europe.

Agnieszka Dale and Relationality beyond Difference

Agnieszka Dale's migrant sensibility goes deeper than her relocation to the UK. From the back cover of her debut short story collection, *Fox Season and Other Short Stories* (2017), we learn that Dale is "a Polish-born, London-based author conceived in Chile." As a child, Dale spent three years in Colombia where she picked up Spanish and where she attended a French school. On coming back to Poland, she had her first taste of the side effects of migrant dislocation: no one else apart from her family spoke Spanish and to her fellow classmates she was "'an American girl from Paris.' An alien with no distinct nationality. Not Polish. A foreigner. An oddball" (Dale and Baklar 2018, n.p.). It is possible that this early taste of what it is like to be different might have inoculated Dale against prejudice. Speaking in the wake of Brexit, she admitted that she appreciates the creative possibilities of being both a writer and a Polish migrant at this momentous time (Dale and Bakalar 2018, n.p.).

This productive duality of being "both an observer and a participant" (Dale and Baklar 2018, n.p.) characterises Dale's debut collection which has been written in English and whose "psychological territory is bridge-building" (Munch 2017, n.p.). Arguably, Dale's short stories comply with the label "migration fiction" in less obvious ways than the works by A.M. Bakalar and Wioletta Greg: Poland is neither the towering presence it is in Bakalar's fiction, nor the sharp-edged dreamland of Greg's work. Rather than grant it a narrative centrality or juxtapose it with the UK and its cultural diversity, Dale incorporates Poland and Polishness into her fantastical patchwork universe of real and imaginary spaces of Europe and beyond populated by a variety of characters, including speaking animals.

That being said, many of Dale's short stories are imbued with migrant sensibility either because they feature characters inhabiting spaces other than their

homeland, or because they are set in an interconnected, globalised reality with its challenges and pitfalls. Although in her stories Dale takes us to the UK, Poland, Italy, and the US, among others, these locations are the backdrop against which Dale explores human experience, including motherhood, loss, and trauma, rather than tokens of cultural difference. As the narrator of her short story "Belgian Passion" puts it, "I didn't believe in nationality, flags, or borders. I didn't have any faith in languages and their separateness—they all grew from one another like potatoes, which could be cultivated in any soil" (Dale 2017a, 63).

Accordingly, in a futuristic short story, "Hello Poland," Dale conjures a post-national world in which nationalities, flags, and borders have been replaced with regions, whereas languages have become regional varieties within a new global order known as *User Experience*. Dale plays with the meaning of the eponymous "Poland," which turns out to be the name of the protagonist's long-estranged daughter "kidnapped at a border crossing" (2017a, 39). Simultaneously, the reader is led to suspect that Poland is also the man's long-estranged homeland which he lost when he migrated, and which makes little sense now that national allegiances no longer apply. In this new global system geared towards efficacy and comfort, anything that comes in the way of a perfect *user experience*, such as history and trauma, is regarded as a threat. Therefore, even though the protagonist is one of the few people who still remember the pre-User Experience times, he is hardly interested in what has happened to Poland since then, because he fears that her story may be too painful to handle. What he longs for is to see Poland beautiful and grown-up but essentially unchanged "like when she was a little girl" (Dale 2017a, 44). In this sense, his equivocal attitude towards Poland manifested in a combination of nostalgia and detachment bespeaks migrant ambivalence towards the homeland, which, by virtue of the spatial and

emotional distance that migration places between the migrant and their country of origin, is at once close and remote, vivid yet unreal, as if frozen in time.

Whereas "Hello Poland" conjures a world without borders, "A Happy Nation" imagines the post-Brexit UK as an isolated and alienated entity. Based on the author's dual experience of being both the observer and the object of the pre-Brexit frenzy, the story features a generic Polish migrant, Krystyna Kowalska, who is the only Pole left in the UK. Narrated in the form of a monologue which Krystyna directs at the police officer who has come to expel her from Britain at gunpoint, the story is Dale's bittersweet commentary on the hypocrisy of imposing borders in a country whose very essence is hybridity. In a poignant punchline, the police officer turns out to be a Brit of Polish origins, the only difference between himself and Krystyna being his status as a "white British" as opposed to her designation as a "white other."

In addition to pointing out the absurdity of such divisions, Dale reflects on the question of otherness and why some foreigners are perceived as more of a threat than others. The answer seems to lie in the sense of national superiority which conceals "Britain's unresolved social and historical ills" (Veličković 2020, 657). Krystyna is perceived as a threat because, in her subversive mimicry, she has managed to assimilate so well that it is impossible to tell that she was not born in Britain. As a white other, an impostor who has managed to surpass authentic white Brits, she has become hard to control and therefore disruptive to the nationalistic and "hegemonic version of whiteness" (Veličković 2020, 658) which underlies the Brexit narrative of exclusion and isolationism. Although in the end Krystyna decides to leave the UK, she refuses to subscribe to the dominant discourse of hostility by professing appreciation for her host country instead: "I like it here. I am still happy, and there is nothing you can do to upset me" (Dale 2017a, 67). Krystyna's happy-go-lucky enthusiasm, which

may seem naive in the face of her imminent expulsion, is thus a form of resistance against Brexit's divisiveness.

Brexit looms large over another story, "Legoland," published in the collection of texts celebrating the figure and legacy of Joseph Conrad. In accordance with the aims of the collection, the writers involved in this project are inspired by Conradian perceptiveness and prescience to explore contemporary globalised realities (Hampson 2017, 9). Like "A Happy Nation," "Legoland" conjures a post-Brexit UK dominated by the white British. This uniform society resembles a Legoland—a square-edged replica of the real thing built out of perfectly symmetrical and identical Lego blocks, complete with its own Queen, a faithful Lego rendition of Elizabeth II. The only person that stands out in the Lego UK is a Polish migrant, Inga, whose trajectory is strikingly similar to Dale's. Faced with a death threat from a Lego assassin working for the imperial Lego court, Inga pleads to be taken to the Lego Queen whom she then tries to convince that she is worthy and integrated enough in British society to be spared, even if her skin colour is not a perfect Lego white and her accent and ways bespeak foreignness.

This ingenious story is Dale's commentary on how the Brexit rhetoric of cultural homogeneity excludes and marginalizes those who do not fit in the Brexit conception of the nation, but who nevertheless contribute to this nation's well-being. As Inga points out, she wants to continue living her meaningful and well-integrated life alongside her British-born children as she has done ever since the UK opened its borders to Poland. Her smart and well-mannered speech is thus a powerful migrant manifesto which resists Brexit's divisiveness with an appeal to belonging as a multifaceted emotional affiliation to a place and its people rather than a question of birthplace.

In Dale's stories, the antidote to such divisiveness lies in inter-human relationality and commonality of experience, which tend to be mightier than arbitrarily imposed divisions among people. Dale's characters—as disturbed and confused as they often are—find it in themselves to help those who are even more vulnerable than they are by virtue of their nationality or ethnicity. Thus, in her alternative-history tales, "The Christmas Pig" and "We All Marry Our Mothers," Jews and the French persecuted in a war-torn America are offered food and a place to stay. Interestingly, relationality in Dale's fiction is not limited to humans but also embraces other beings, such as foxes with which the female characters of "Daddy Fox" and the eponymous "Fox Season" feel a special affinity.

This sense of being emotionally affiliated to others despite what tends to be construed as difference permeates the shortest piece in the collection entitled "What We Should Feel Now." Although no mention of Brexit is made, the piece reads like a companion or a coda to "A Happy Nation." In a manner reminiscent of Krystyna Kowalska, the generic Polish migrant, the narrator of this story looks for affinities with her neighbours over differences between them, stressing the sameness of their experience: "children, jobs, and many other obligations" (Dale 2017a, 74). In an attempt to resist the discourse of difference, she assures her British friends and neighbours that she does not feel resentment towards them even as they remain ambivalent about her. Just like Krystyna Kowalska, the narrator resists divisiveness with love, which, as challenging as it may be in these contentious times, ultimately bespeaks the narrator's hope that a less divided future is in store: "We'll grow new apples together. One day. We'll grow them on pear trees, on flowers, on grass . . . . For everybody to share and admire, and then we'll all eat together. Our apples. Apples that do not rot" (Dale 2012a, 75).

While conflict, prejudice, and discrimination are an integral part of the quirky, disturbing universe of *Fox Season,* the collection also foregrounds the interconnectedness of human experience in the globally networked reality which, Brexit or other divisive movements notwithstanding, cannot be obliterated. In her emphasis on relationality, Dale detaches the notions of home and belonging from their usual, restrictive categories of nation, ethnicity, and ideology, as her characters search for them in relationships and emotional alliances, rather than in specific places. Simultaneously, Dale's creative shape-shifting—the ease with which she inhabits different perspectives in her fiction—only serves to reinforce the impression that she feels *at home* in fiction which, while being nourished by diversity, goes beyond difference.

Conclusions

At the beginning of this chapter, I have proposed to expand the notions of home and belonging in the context of migration beyond the categories which usually circumscribe them, such as national and ethnic allegiances, and see them also as emotional attachments to places and people (Wood and Waite 2011), which are changeable and tend towards ambivalence. As the migrant condition, which is intertwined with a sense of spatial and emotional dislocation, collapses many of the givens of the pre-migration life, it also generates new alignments which, if recognised and appreciated, may help the migrant to make sense of the world around them and their place in it.

The migration literature produced by Bakalar, Greg, and Dale exploits the productive potential of the ambivalence inscribed in the migrant condition to offer compelling insights into contemporary migrant experience which, while anchored in the Polish-British context, are meaningful enough to resonate with broader anxieties

of straddling more than one point of reference on a daily basis. By virtue of being migrants themselves, these authors display an intimate understanding of what it is like to be a Polish woman in the UK, and their texts draw from this knowledge to portray migration from a female perspective, including the experience of motherhood, the exploration of female sexuality, the sense of alienation and loneliness, as well as emotional and bodily trauma that comes from abuse.

Polishness and Britishness, understood in national, cultural, and linguistic terms, figure differently in these texts. Thus, A.M. Bakalar approaches migration as a lens for exploring the oppressiveness of deep-rooted national allegiances and cultural paradigms and revising the notion of "home" in the idea of homeland. In *Madame Mephisto*, Poland and Britain cannot be reconciled as the protagonist's hostility towards her homeland combined with her unwillingness to adjust to the host society produce a generalised sense of non-belonging. Moreover, shared nationality is no safeguard against migrant alienation, especially since diasporic communities are exposed to rely on the reenactment of national identity through superficial cultural markers, instead of fostering cultural hybridity capable of accommodating the dualities of migrant life.

Wioletta Greg, on the other hand, does not dwell on national and cultural dichotomies. Instead, her poetry and poetic prose feed upon the productive duality of the migrant condition. In many of her migration texts, Greg juxtaposes distinct cultural and linguistic realities of Poland and the UK only to recognise parallels between the two. Simultaneously, the experience of dislocation awards a new perspective on the homeland, sharpening the poet's memory and fuelling her imagination. However, for all the creative potential that the migrant perspective holds for Greg, the poet does not shy away from exposing a dark facet of the migrant condition which she herself

experienced: a heightened sense of alienation and gendered vulnerability fomented by an ill-fated combination of displacement and dispossession.

In Agnieszka Dale's fiction, the categories of Polishness and Britishness are important inasmuch as they serve to illustrate the dynamics of negotiating one's emotional attachments against socially-constructed notions of home, belonging, and otherness in transnational settings. Although Dale draws from her cultural heritage and her experience of being a Pole in the UK, her stories ultimately attest to the interconnectedness of human experience which transgresses national boundaries and cultural differences. In Dale's Brexit-inspired stories, the UK's decision to leave the European Union is the quintessence of an artificially imposed divisiveness, which goes against natural human relationality and commonality of experience that cut deeper than a socially constructed difference.

When read individually, each writer offers an original and nuanced understanding of the ambivalence embedded in the migrant condition and its implications for the questions which migration poses: what constitutes home and what it means to belong when the traditional points of references fail to sustain one's identity. When read together, these authors provide valuable insights into the vicissitudes and complexities of the migrant experience, particularly in its female incarnation, in the post-2004 UK, which has recently been further complicated by the divisive rhetoric and politics of Brexit. Finally, the works by Bakalar, Greg, and Dale convey the essence of migration literature, which does not limit itself to merely narrating the migrant experience, but casts it as one of the central human experiences in the contemporary interconnected world.

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