

IS THERE COMFORT IN LANGUAGE? A LOOK AT THE POLYGLOT POETICS OF JULIA ALVAREZ AND ZEINA HASHEM BECK

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274 According to Sarah Dowling, translingual poetics refers to “poetry that is self-consciously situated between languages and that attends to the complex processes of domination and refusal that can be observed and interpreted from the discursive context of each” (5). This article studies the translingual poetics of two contemporary women and argues that the texts of the younger, Lebanese poet, Zeina Hashem Beck, are more explicit in their representations of respective processes of domination than those of the older, Dominican-American poet, Julia Alvarez. Both Hashem Beck and Alvarez can be considered Anglophone writers, but neither grew up with English as a first language. Neither fits entirely within Dowling’s frame of settler monolingualism and neoliberal multiculturalism, yet certain elements of these contexts are relevant for the following readings. Employing the concept of comfort, the resulting comparative analysis understands the varying representations of languages other than English through discussions of creative inspiration and forms of delivery. It observes that the contrast with a non-European language enforces the challenges polyglot poetry poses for the current global language and for what Yasemin Yildiz terms the “monolingual paradigm” (2-3).

“Bilingual verse in English renders the flipside of the global hegemony of English visible and audible” (253), Laura O’Connor writes at the beginning of her comparative study of poetry by Dominican-American author Julia Alvarez and Irish author Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin. Building on O’Connor’s argument, my comparative study of the former with the Lebanese poet Zeina Hashem Beck adds a non-Western angle to the discourse at hand. O’Connor’s focus is on a common choice of form and vocabulary that allows both poets in her study, Alvarez and Ní Chuilleanáin, to reveal the intricacies of the monolingual paradigm that “marginalize the (m)other tongue” (269). An analysis of Hashem Beck’s poems demonstrates how this technique works

when the “other tongue” is further removed through a different script and its affiliation with the so-called “Orient.” I further argue that younger generations, including poets such as Hashem Beck, can take this strategy further, to marginalize the dominant language in selected texts. The comfort language, if one is willing to consider the other tongue as such, thus receives greater prominence and power.

At the outset of *Multilingual Currents in Literature, Translation and Culture* (2018), Rachael Gilmour and Tamar Steinitz claim that “monolingual paradigms are inadequate in a world dominated by globalization and migration” (1). Likewise, in the introduction to *Multilingual Literature as World Literature* (2021), Jane Hiddleston and Wen-chin Ouyang write that their anthology “argues not only, with Spivak and Mufti, against the dominance of English, but also against a dominant concept of monolingualism that has further served to limit and skew the scope of world literature” (3). Relying on Edward Said’s “Traveling Theory,” Hiddleston and Ouyang advocate a “worldly” kind of text and critic as they reject hierarchies among cultures (2). Creative multilingualism that necessarily escapes affiliation with a single culture seems best suited to lay bare and contest the power structures at stake. This can happen even in polyphonic texts written in a single language, as Michelle Hartman argues in her study of the anticolonial framework of Lebanese novels in French. In the preface to her book, Hartman refers to the poet Nadia Tuéni, who claims to write “Arabic in French” (x), in an attempt to expose the political power of languages. Aptly captured in the title of a poetry collection by Trinidadian-Canadian Dionne Brand, *No Language Is Neutral* (1990), this connection between language and power has been the subject of ongoing debates among sociolinguists and poets for several decades.

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Since Pierre Bourdieu’s pathbreaking research in the 1970s, linguists, most recently Claire Kramsch, for example, have emphasized the symbolic power of language (Kramsch ix). In a comprehensive textbook, Kramsch points to the effect that digitalization has had on language dynamics because of its impact on distribution: “The symbolic universe that language learners are entering today requires them to have a much greater awareness of the power games that are being played with language, whether in their own or in a foreign tongue” (Kramsch ix). It is this scenario that plurilingual poetry reflects compellingly. The Spanish in Alvarez’s poems connotes a history of Iberian colonialism as much as the subsequent US-based imperialism in the Americas. The Arabic in Hashem Beck’s poems may challenge orientalist stereotypes in general, and it may summon a current rhetoric of terrorism. As Claire Gallien, in her contribution to the volume edited by Hiddleston and Ouyang, puts it, “creating multilingually in Anglo-Arabic is in itself an act of resistance” (72). The importance of a language’s power, I argue, is not diminished by its being “symbolic.” The following sections show how effects of resistance change when the other tongue receives greater prominence, when it may prompt consultations of its native speakers due to missing translations, and when it alters the script of a text as well as its structure and content. They will further show how the digitalization that Kramsch describes enables what Gallien calls a “minorization” of English (70). The first section

revisits Julia Alvarez's incorporation of Spanish in English poems to highlight her pioneering function as translingual Anglophone poet. The second section presents examples of a unique new form Zeina Hashem Beck calls the "Duet" to illustrate more recent, enforced threats to linguistic power structures, however symbolic they may be. The third section underlines divergence as well as convergence between the two women's polyglot poetics.

JULIA ALVAREZ AND SPANISH

276 Besides O'Connor's persuasive comparative study, much scholarship (see, for example, Johnson, Napiorski, and Wall) has tackled the language choices of Alvarez, who was born in New York, and then grew up in the Dominican Republic until the age of ten, when her immediate family escaped the Trujillo dictatorship. The bulk of this scholarship situates Alvarez in a context of American multiethnic literature. O'Connor's article is exceptional in that it moves Alvarez into a broader scope of polyglot poetry. Following the terminology Nadia Niaz has established in *Evolving Multilingualisms in Poetry: Third Culture as a Window on Multilingual Poetic Praxis* (2011), I favor "polyglot" in reference to the poems studied here, as they incorporate two or more languages (Niaz 2). Their discussion does not warrant a differentiation between the other relevant adjectives, such as *multi-*, *trans-*, and *plurilingual*.¹ While I see more overlap between what Niaz distinguishes as "cross culture" and "third culture" polyglot poetry, I do agree with her observation that "modern polyglot poets represent the recognition of a kind of hybridity that earlier multilinguals seemed to ignore" (196). Arguably, such recognition is a natural reaction to the establishment of English as the current global language. The section on Hashem Beck will illustrate that resistance to this status of English is growing more forceful. This article contends, however, that such a development rests on the work of preceding polyglot poets, and the current section highlights Alvarez as a prominent predecessor.

The fact that Alvarez was born in the United States ("Meet Julia"), although she went on to spend the first ten years of her life in the Dominican Republic, hints at the family's preexisting ties to North America. In "My English," Alvarez explains not only that her mother was among the first girls in her family to join the boys for a secondary education in the US (Alvarez, *Something to Declare* 23), but also that one of her grandfathers, "a Cornell man," had worked as a United Nations representative (*Something to Declare* 25). In the same essay, Alvarez refers to her family as "bilingual" after she and her sisters started attending a private school in which English was the medium of instruction. She underlines, however, that Spanish was her native language, and goes on to specify the "campuno" (21) of the housekeepers among several other registers at home. "Of Maids and Other Muses" (147) elaborates on the influence of the songs and tales related by the early caregivers and celebrated in the "Bilingual Sestina" that is at the center of O'Connor's comparative analysis.

The adjustment to the English Alvarez acquired during her teenage years in New York is the subject of “La Gringuita: On Losing a Native Language” (61).

Referring to non-fiction writing by both poets in her study, O'Connor emphasizes the association of Spanish and Irish (and French), respectively, with certain caretakers in the poets' childhoods. She writes that both Alvarez's and Ní Chuilleanáin's “linked use of muse and macaronic interpolations reveals the gender hierarchies connecting the overlapping codes of ‘mother tongue’ and the gendered myth of lyric inspiration” (O'Connor 268). This myth, harkening back to the Muses of ancient Greek mythology, is most obvious in a statement Derek Walcott makes in “What the Twilight Says: An Overture.” In this essay about Caribbean theatre that serves as preface to four of his plays, Walcott writes, “one did not say to *his* Muse, ‘what language is this that you've given me?’” (9; emphasis mine). First of all, the choice of “his” rather than “one's” clearly supports O'Connor's judgment of the “myth of lyric inspiration” as “gendered.” The poet is presumed to be male. Second, as I write elsewhere, poets may have more control over their muses than Walcott suggests in this statement (Hambuch 57). Finally, and ironically, as Walcott's own poetry demonstrates, and as the poets discussed in this article make very clear, it may not be a single language that gets offered by a muse, or muses in the plural.

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The fact is made explicit by Alvarez in her title “Of Maids and Other Muses.” Inviting poetic inspiration in more than one language resists the monolingual paradigm as defined by Yildiz. It rejects the importance of a mother tongue, or national language, as praised by late eighteenth-century philosophers such as Herder, Humboldt, and Schleiermacher (Yildiz 6-7). The openness to a multitude of creative inspirations, in more than a single language, would have encouraged Alvarez to defy the male professor's claim that one can write poetry only in the language in which one first says “mother” (*The Woman* 39-40). It allowed her not only to write the bulk of her poetry in a second language, but also not to settle on a single language at all. Such innovation creates new opportunities for both the cognitive and affective processes of creative expression. Claire Gallien captures the scenario aptly when she states that heterolingual—her preferred adjective (73)—authors “possess and are possessed by multiple languages” (69). As Alvarez shows, these complications also have to do with changing muses.

O'Connor's discussion of “Bilingual Sestina” and the corresponding non-fiction text “Of Maids and Other Muses” is exhaustive (257-262). It also refers to the poem “First Muse,” which recalls the shock over and rebuttal of the “famous” poet's declaration that one can compose poetry only in one predestined language (*The Woman* 39-40). However, O'Connor does not consider the non-fiction text “First Muse,” a text which further challenges the possibility of identifying one's source of inspiration along with the choice of language allegedly emerging from this very source. Moreover, this text offers a glimpse towards the “Orient,” the location, in its broadest sense, of the second poet studied here, because the “first muse” celebrated by Alvarez is none other than Scheherazade, who “could have been a Dominican girl: dark-

haired, almond-eyed, with color in her skin” (Alvarez, *Something to Declare* 134). This essay recounts the many characteristics, including courage, intelligence, and perseverance, that mesmerized the young, emerging poet.

“First Muse” is the first essay in the section of *Something to Declare*, titled “Declarations.” It is about the persistence required to make creative writing a career, and Scheherazade serves as a model determined storyteller. “She was my first muse,” Alvarez writes in the closing paragraph, “long before I knew what a muse was” (*Something to Declare* 145). Confirming what is already explained in “My English” in the preceding section of the book, Alvarez’s other tongue played a crucial role long before the move to the United States. Her copy of *A Thousand and One Nights*, “the only voluntary reading” for several years, was an English children’s version of the famous Middle Eastern tales.

278 While Alvarez’s second volume of poetry, *The Other Side/El otro lado* (1996), mainly reserves Spanish phrases for contexts situated in or at least related to the Dominican Republic, *The Woman I Kept to Myself*, which appeared almost a decade later, probes an ongoing conflict about language choices. This conflict becomes obvious in titles such as “In Spanish” (*The Woman* 207-208) and “Leaving English” (111-112). “In Spanish” includes Spanish sentences in italics, and followed by English translations in parenthesis, in the first stanza. An inversion of this technique in the last stanza symbolizes the idea that the two languages continue to interact during the writing process, even when this is not visible in the resulting text:

Sometimes it touches me more when I hear
 A phrase in Spanish rather than English.
 We’re walking in the campo and a friend
 Warns me to steer clear of that thorny bush,
Esa mata hay que respetarla.
 (That plant is one you have to respect.)
 My old niñera answers my compliment
 That she is looking younger every year,
Los años no perdonan a nadie.
 (The years don’t forgive anyone, doña!)
 [...]

 Yet as I write in English I murmur
 the words over in Spanish to be sure
 I’m writing down the truth of what I feel
 (*Que escribe lo que siento de verdad.*) (*The Woman* 107-108)

The linguistic interaction in this poem is intricate. The attempts at mediation expose what gets lost and gained in translation at every step of the creative process. They question the effects of language on the cognitive as well as on the affective level. They emphasize the significance of context, in particular location, and they also identify vocabulary, such as “campo” and “niñera,” that has become part of American English.

“In Spanish” is followed by two other poems with the theme of language. “You” praises the advantage of the English second-person pronoun over the Spanish coun-

terpart, which prompts a decision between the formal “usted” and the informal “tú.” The beginning of the second stanza answers this article’s title question in the affirmative: “*Comforting* when I write because it means / I’m leaving no one out” (*The Woman* 109; emphasis mine). While in “In Spanish,” it is the poet’s native language that provided comfort, in “You,” it is the second. The poem closes with a metaphor of the speaker entering a language: “Just as I once climbed into a second tongue / and it made room for me in its pronoun.” The preceding poem would suggest that this speaker is well aware of the comfort at times provided by the first tongue that continues to keep her company. The following poem describes an actual return to Spanish, be that due to a physical or a spiritual journey. The first stanza of “Leaving English” presents the “monolingual husband” as protection “against possession” by the “native tongue” (*The Woman* 111). The end of this stanza clarifies functions of both languages: “Even if Spanish made me who I was, / it’s English now that tells who I am.” The following stanza starts with the conceit of language as a drug, and the return at the end of the poem includes a personification of “living language” as something animate. Visions of language as companion support the idea that it does indeed offer comfort and care.

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O’Connor’s comparative study scrutinizes formal elements both her poets employ to create tributes to their caregivers. At the same time, these devices expose an awareness of utopian childhood innocence as accessible via language. The adult poet is well aware of the fact that both English and Spanish are colonial languages in the hemisphere, even if the latter has the status of a minority language in the US (Dowling 25). The oeuvres of both Alvarez and Hashem Beck prove that there are limits to the comfort languages may offer, though they also suggest that even a small amount of comfort is better than none. Like Alvarez, Hashem Beck has used traditional poetic forms. Readers can find English or multilingual ghazals, for example. They can further find a sestina, referred to in the last section of this study, but with a form she calls “The Duet,” Hashem Beck has created a unique new structure for the purpose of a more elaborate polyglot approach.

ZEINA HASHEM BECK AND ARABIC

Hashem Beck was born in Tripoli, Lebanon, and grew up memorizing poetry in Arabic and French (Qualey). Following the completion of a BA and an MA in English Literature at the American University in Beirut, however, she became an Anglophone poet. Very recent creative output indicates serious attempts to escape this category, as passages from the poem “Dear White Critic—رفيقي في الرحيل” will illustrate. Hashem Beck was based in Dubai for more than a decade until her move to the United States at the end of 2021. She is among the founders of Dubai’s spoken-word collective PUNCH and was a regular participant in the annual literature festival there before the coronavirus pandemic. Her first collection, *To Live in Autumn* (2014), was fol-

lowed by the two prize-winning chapbooks *3arabi Song* and *There Was and How Much There Was*. *Louder Than Hearts* appeared a year later, and a new collection, titled *O*, has just been published by Penguin (“Zeina Hashem Beck”). Different languages are represented throughout her oeuvre, but the ways in which, as well as the extent to which, they feature has changed over the years. The paragraphs in this section trace the respective development briefly to highlight parallels and differences with regard to Alvarez’s polyglossia discussed in the preceding section. The following section points to a common reliance on oral tradition and music in relation to comfort, as well as to the significance of specific themes and poetic forms in favor of the polyglot trajectory.

280 Fond of oral tradition since childhood (Qualey), Hashem Beck makes her performances available via social media and her homepage. One of the chapbooks reveals the obsession with music in the title, *3arabi Song*. The dedication of this collection to her hometown, Tripoli, to other Arab cities, and to certain family members, ends in the elaboration on the author’s passion: “May we always sing.” Famous singers celebrated throughout Hashem Beck’s texts include the Egyptians Umm Kulthum and Abdel Halim Hafez, Lebanese Fairuz and Samira Tawfiq, and Algerian Warda Al Jazairia, but also representatives from outside the Arabic tradition, such as Edith Piaf, Nina Simone, and Queen. Unlike the former five, the latter three do not receive explanations in the notes at the end of each book, a fact that reveals Western audiences as the publisher’s target. Besides biographical information on Arab singers, writers and actors, these notes or glossaries also provide translations of Arabic terms and phrases. That way, readers learn about references to folklore, such as in the title of the second chapbook, *There Was and How Much There Was*. The literal translation of the beginning of traditional Arabic tales, this formula corresponds to “Once upon a time” (*There Was* 32).

In her contribution to *Multilingual Literature as World Literature*, Gallien claims that Hashem Beck’s poetry “vibrates with interlingual and intertextual resonances that foster new perceptions, new imaginaries and cognitions (as opposed to mere recognitions) of the world” (71). Gallien analyses “Estranged / غريبة” alongside Dunya Mikhail’s *The Iraqi Nights* as examples of multiscriptual writing (76) and observes that Hashem Beck’s unique “Duet” form combines various poetic elements as in a dance. Hashem Beck herself explains that in the duet an English poem and an Arabic poem exist “both independently and in relationship to one another” (Qualey). For readers with access to both languages, “a third poem should open up in the conversation between the two languages.” In a more recent interview with janan alexandra, on the occasion of her serving as judge for the *Indiana Review* poetry prize, Hashem Beck elaborates that she was raised “on the idea that [her] access to 3 languages is a privilege that could help [her] tap into more layers of meaning and being” (alexandra). Admitting to a certain irrational element, in line with Gallien’s phrasing of “being possessed,” Hashem Beck considers her duets as reflections on continuous switching between English and Arabic in speech: “I think of them as an experiment,”

she ponders on the form, “to try to bring both Arabic and English unto the page and see what conversations happen, and to consider how perception could change with the change of language.”

The following beginning from “Dear White Critic—رفيقي في الرحيل” illustrates not only the intriguing page presentation of such duets, but also how polyglossia can prompt self-reflexivity in poetry:

Dear White Critic— رفيقي في الرحيل

If I told you I do not choose to write
about war & the children, would you believe me?

مللتُ القرقع على أبواب الامبراطوريات—

I’m tired of knocking on the doors of empires.

If I told you these words are
not in English, would you believe me?

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لم أدرك أنني كنت أقرع حتى
تكسرت عظام أصابعي .
مللت، فعدت
وأكملت العبور²

The Arabic half of the title is not a translation of the English half, and the Arabic lines on the right margin do not correspond to the preceding English lines on the left. While the English part of the title signals an address, as in a letter, the Arabic part describes an intimate friend as “my companion in departure,” or “my leisure companion,” since the departure is most likely from the public sphere associated with the critic who must be the imaginary addressee of the English rhetorical questions about writing choices. The Arabic stanza following the second question does continue the conceit of the knock introduced in the centered single-line translation: “I didn’t even realize I was knocking until / my finger bones were broken / I’m bored, so I’m back / and I completed the crossing.” This narrative neither includes questions, nor does it address anyone, but the centered translation allows for a bridge between the two halves of the text, which is emphasized by the conceit of a crossing.

In the course of the poem, there are four more centered passages. The second and third, like the first, translate a single Arabic line into English. The fourth and longest reverses source and target language: “I don’t know if I envy God his existence / outside of time, or if he envies my angst / inside the body” is followed by an Arabic rendering there. The last English-Arabic pair precedes the Arabic two-line closure of the poem. It consists of a simple “Goodbye now,” and indicates a departure from both the imaginary critic(s) and thoughts about the creative writing process, as the closing lines anticipate the arrival of friends and the sharing of toasts. Building up to this prospect of leisure with friends, a comforting prospect, there is more introspection

on the Arabic side of the poem, including a comparison of the heart with language, both seen as muscle.

On the English side, eclectic personal details alternate with skepticism towards the critic/reader. The last third of the text exposes the technology Kramsch investigated in the context of multilingualism's recent manifestations. The passage in question suggests that it is precisely this kind of technology, allowing for an electronic representation of two radically different languages in an intricate text such as "Dear White Critic—رفيقي في الرحيل," along with the author's audio performance, that renders its reception possible. Even in the absence of native speakers of either of the languages involved, electronic translation offers at least minimal access to the meaning of the unfamiliar parts of the poem: "Do my names tire you? Good. / My cities are cities & my singers are singers. / Go google." A certain impatience with ignorant readers/critics eventually leads to their exclusion from anticipated entertainment. "This is the first & last poem I speak to you" is the next stage in growing resentment that ends thus: "I banish I banish you from these lines."

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Such a harsh statement is hardly befitting someone addressed as "dear" in the poem's title, but the underlying impatience could be the result of ongoing probing. It could be the result of increasingly obvious ignorance on behalf of one specific critic; alternatively, the English part of the poem could reflect on interaction with a number of different critics. Finally, the banishment may include the narrator's own obsession with the writing process. It may simply express the need for and eagerness to get to a well-deserved and comforting break during the get-together with friends.

ORAL TRADITION, MUSIC, AND FORM

It is probably safe to assume that the friends whose arrival the closure of "Dear White Critic—رفيقي في الرحيل" announces will enjoy music along with their toasts. They may sing together as well. As mentioned early in the preceding section, the dedication to one of Hashem Beck's chapbooks ends with the encouragement to continue singing. As mentioned in the same context, a great number of famous singers from different traditions populate Hashem Beck's poems. While the presence of music is not as explicit throughout Alvarez's poetry, it does feature prominently in the context of caregivers discussed in the first section of this article. One of "The Gladys Poems" is titled "Gladys Singing" (*The Other Side* 10-11), and Rosario is called upon to "sing in me" (4) in "Bilingual Sestina." In *Homecoming*, there is also a reference to lullabies (*Homecoming* 15), to Brahms (39), and to birdsong. The statement that "[...] as if a song / was all that we needed against the pain" (105) from "Redwing Sonnets" mirrors the comforting function given to music in many of Hashem Beck's lines. It is worth recalling at this point that music can itself be considered a language in the broadest sense. The importance of music and the comfort it offers in everyday life receives equal attention in both oeuvres studied here. The Arabic voice in "Dear White Critic

—رفيقي في الرحيل—” goes as far as to consider tunes as existential in a statement that identifies a fear of death after every song. Music and rhythm are further essential for oral traditions and performance poetry. Hashem Beck takes advantage of any available technology to make performances of her texts accessible, via social media, her blog, and electronic journals. The resulting screen presence poses a major difference, or divergence, between the two poets that represent two different generations.

A clear convergence is detectable in the evocation of oral traditions, which reminds readers of a far past that cultivated the telling of tales in many versions and varying lengths, without the use of screens and modern technologies. It is in these traditions that the stories of *A Thousand and One Nights* originate, and they further provide the sources of fairy tales told by the caregivers, both mentioned in the section on Alvarez. Hashem Beck pays tribute to these traditions in the collection title *There Was and How Much There Was*. Rather than to fairy tales, however, the title poem refers to everyday stories told during a gathering of anonymous women. Some of their stories have intimate content they feel comfortable to discuss because “The walls don’t have ears here” and “Everybody is a woman here” (*There Was* 25). At one point during the exchange, a participant turns on the TV, leading to an alternation between oral tales and screened performances, such as an “Arabic-translated / Mexican show” and an “Egyptian play” (*There Was* 27-28). The media lack this kind of prominence in Alvarez’s poetry. Her tributes tend to denote much older material, such as the biblical stories of Babel and Noah’s Ark in “Passing On” (*The Woman* 140), a title which evokes the preservation of oral traditions. Alvarez also mentions Chaucer’s tales in “By Accident” (35). This poem explains the collection’s titular idea of discretion. This idea of keeping to oneself, as in *The Woman I Kept to Myself*, favors the sharing of poetry in print rather than via speech, without audience interaction that is. Hashem Beck, in contrast, favors audiovisual rendering of her texts, thus reviving the practice of oral tradition through her performances.

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Another convergence between the two writers consists in their reverence for traditional poetic forms, even if these are adjusted to new contexts. Alvarez’s “Bilingual Sestina,” as the title makes clear, revolves around language choices and the significance of language for identity formation. Key (end) words, as explained in O’Connor’s study, include “word,” “closed,” “saying,” and “*nombres*” (O’Connor 263). The self-reflexive element of this poem parallels the conversation with a critic in Hashem Beck’s duet discussed in the preceding section. Hashem Beck’s sestina “Gardenias,” in contrast, is not about language, nor is it polyglot (*There Was* 11-12). The key words here are “pain,” “eyes,” “light,” and “less,” and the text creates the conceit of a flower to symbolize depression. The speaker is a mother, though this capacity is much less prominent in this poem than it is in the remaining ones of the collection. Many of the texts in *There Was and How Much There Was* are indeed about mothers, as are many of the texts in Alvarez’s *Homecoming*.

While Alvarez also emphasizes the comfort and care received from the maids, like Gladys and Rosario, symbolized by their “campuno” language and music, the mother

is given extraordinary prominence in particular throughout earlier collections. In the “Housekeeping” section of *Homecoming*, it is “Mother” who sweeps, dusts, cooks, bakes, and sings the lullaby. The section ends with elaborations on potential conflict in “Mother Love” (*Homecoming* 44). Tributes to the mother are not limited to early collections, either. The closure of “Life Lines” addresses three of the identified convergences with Hashem Beck’s work:

I’m buoyed by poems that spring upon my lips
like prayers mothers whisper over cribs.
The winds of time would carry me away
but for the words which when my life breaks down
rise up and clap their hands and louder sing! (*The Woman* 102)

284 The immediate grief that engenders these exclamations stems from the mother’s death mentioned in the second stanza of the poem. The final line once more foregrounds music. Moreover, the self-reflexive element suggests a certain importance attributed to the parents in the context of a development as writer. Hashem Beck makes the connection between upbringing and language skills explicit in the interview with alexandra. Like Alvarez, she celebrates the mother in much of her writing. *There Was* includes poems such as “Mother, Three Portraits,” “Mother, Ka’aba,” “The Invented Mothers,” and “(Fatimah, The Mother of Her Father).” Many of these texts do not feature languages other than English, thus posing a challenge to the concept of “mother tongue,” a concept Yildiz defines as “linguistic family romance” (Yildiz 10-11). This does not mean that the mother as topic never engenders a polyglot poem, as is the case with Alvarez as well.

“Correcting My Mother’s Essay” is included in Hashem Beck’s first collection and addresses the fine line between polyglot perfection and macaronic serendipity right from the beginning:

My mother started writing essays
in English, essays with
wrong punctuation, wrong spelling,
with Arabic
terms too, typed in English
(and a French accent)
when she cannot find
the translation for ... *mina*. (*To Live* 47)

The cheerful report on a writing exercise with a prompt about a marathon run leads to the mother’s memories of running during war, presumably in Lebanon, and the poem ends with a defence of the mother’s mixing of languages. “Nothing is wrong with your broken English” (48), readers learn in the first line of the last stanza, the conclusion of which likens language, as seen also in the discussion of the duet in the preceding section, with the heart. The image of the broken heart ultimately justifies the use of “broken” language, and both conceits are represented with a break within each of the two last lines. Comfort, the poem suggests, can indeed be found in lan-

guage, as long as its users are aware of its function as muscle complying with the heart, and as long as they are open to find it in any given language, as opposed to a single, predetermined one.

CONCLUSION

In the inaugural issue of *Contemporary Women's Writing*, Marina Camboni discussed multilingualism more than a decade ago as an effective form of resistance. With the examples of Gloria Anzaldúa, Toni Maraini, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and Anne Blonstein as representatives of four varieties of multilingual poetry, Camboni argues in favour of an awareness on behalf of such twentieth-century writers that "the very words they weave into their texts ground their resistance to nationalist, patriarchal, classist, and racist ideologies" (35). The present comparative study of plurilingual poetry by Julia Alvarez and Zeina Hashem Beck has shown that the translingual strategies celebrated in Camboni's analyses have gained momentum in the new millennium. What is more, younger poets such as Hashem Beck have taken polyglot art practices even further in unique poetic forms such as the duet. To this end, they employ new technologies referred to in Kramsch's recent *Language as Symbolic Power* as radical changes to multilingualism's possibilities. While the convenience of a global language is obvious, it is accompanied with renewed attention to community languages, endangered languages, potential for translingualism, and the creation of new languages as well.

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Niaz writes in *Evolving Multilingualisms in Poetry* that "polyglot poets, by increasing the visibility of code-switching and the representation of language acquisition as a means of enrichment rather than alienation and loss, also contribute to normalizing multilingualism" (196). Their efforts may be more effective when they take advantage of new avenues of performance, such as blogs and electronic journals. These digital tools offer a revival of oral tradition, even if they are usually combined with print versions of the performed text. As the preceding discussion demonstrates, Hashem Beck excels at taking advantage of new technologies at her disposal. In terms of form and content, however, her work exhibits striking convergences with preceding polyglot poets such as Alvarez. Storytelling traditions feature prominently in the oeuvres of both these poets, as does the omnipresence of music. Both Alvarez and Hashem Beck pay tribute to established poetic forms and adapt them to their contemporary contexts. Both expose their debt to caregivers regarding respect for their various language skills, skills clearly associated with the concept of comfort. In fact, both poets stress precisely the polyglot poetics of their poetry as potentially soothing. They thus support Yildiz's demand to expose the concept of "mother tongue" at the root of the monolingual paradigm and claim affect as inspired by any given language, as well as by the interplay of several.

NOTES

1. For such differentiations, see Yildiz (213-14), though I think it is time to move beyond, as Niaz does, elitist connotations of “polyglot.”
2. “I didn’t even realize I was knocking until / my finger bones were broken / I’m bored, so I’m back / and I completed the crossing.” (All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.)

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