

## **Jasmina Bolfek-Radovani, « Knitting drum machines for exiled tongues », Tears in the Fence | 2022**

**Review:** Silvia La Bruna (U. Lyon 2/U. Bologne).

*” I create musical compositions in a tongue of silent letters (...)*

*with harmonies of my foreign dusks “*

### **Jasmina Bolfek-Radovani**

Jasmina Bolfek-Radovani was born in Zagreb to an Algerian mother and a Croatian father; she has developed, thanks to this filiation and her own personal and professional background, an important multicultural capital. This is what emerges from reading her latest collection, *Knitting drum machines for exiled tongues*, made up of thirty-five multilingual poems (English, French and Croatian) intertwined with thirteen fragments both visual and textual and three calligrams or poem-drawings that respond to each other through narrative embedding. This structure creates a "shadow language"[1] allowing the highlighting of the topoi of the author's writing, linked to the displacement and acceptance both of her own origins and of the identity dimension that results from it.

The quote from the poet Mohammed Bennis introducing the book underlines the extent to which poetry and language play a primordial role in the representation of a singular destiny and allow the individual to accept and realize himself.

In his book *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, Tzvetan Todorov demonstrated that culture is characterized by its semiotic nature, such as language, and for this reason it evolves according to the contact it maintains with other cultures while at the same time bringing about a change and an upheaval in the identity of those who enter the relationship with the other. Indeed, it can be said that all individuals relate to the values of the country they grew up in and on the other hand allow themselves to be traversed by each lived experience through interactions and human relations.

According to Fernando Ortiz, who introduced the concept of "transculture" as a movement of continuous mediation between different elements and languages, the migrant experience is marked by a double movement; these specific conditions allow the migrant to transform what at first appears to be a vulnerability into a strength.

Indeed, the choice of multilingual poetry is conducive to the unveiling of the evolution of Jasmina Bolfek-Radovani's own poetic journey, as she has long immersed herself in the nuances that each language can offer to the readership, as underlined by the writer herself: "As an art form concerned with unpacking discourses of power, multilingual poetry has the potential to make language stutter, as to make it vibrate again. How we define multilingual poetry has primarily to do with how we define language" [2].

The use of interdisciplinarity is necessary to approach this artistic experience. It promotes awareness of a diverse linguistic landscape such as that of today. This appears through the many references to symbols that embody the fluidity of being: the dream, the voice, the heart – we find these in the text thirteen “Heart monologues” corresponding to the thirteen patterns that punctuate the collection – or the soul. These recurring figures or fragments modulate the meaning that the author aims to relay in her poems. In "Heart monologue 5", the terms which mean "heart" in French, English and Croatian are juxtaposed and written in italics or in bold, to underline the multilingual voices of affect in the poet, whereas in "Heart monologues 9", we no longer notice any difference at the graphic level as if the formal alterity had faded.

In this case we can speak of “performative poems” since their expressiveness stems from the intersection of words, images, and sounds. Together with the images that carry multiple readings, these poems manifest the desire to act on society. If the poet and the voice of society are a single entity, it is not surprising that among the various intertextual references we can find Michèle Lalonde (*Speak white*), representative of the Quiet Revolution who used her voice to denounce the linguistic and political crisis that divided Quebec. This intertext therefore makes it possible to read the plurilingual aesthetic of Jasmina Bolfek-Radovani as a political manifesto.

Indeed, this collection represents the final stage of a whole journey (the text "Bilingual, belonging" is exemplary in this regard), as the author testifies: "writing in my three languages was for me an experience of rediscovery of my identity. It was an experience of returning to a primordial Self; a return to my Algerian roots, but also, and above all, my Croatian roots which I thought I had lost during my migratory experience"[3].

Ultimately, “Knitting drum machines for exiled tongues” evokes the image of a patchwork of languages, noises, and sonorities which, in their intertwining, give shape to the musicality of the whole world. The collection’s title testifies to the fact that by recognizing our past accepting the inevitability of its existence as a constitutive factor of our memory (an event expressed by Jasmina with the immediate succession of a negation after an affirmation: "what is human & what is not"), we free ourselves from the anxiety preventing us from moving away from ourselves in order to obtain a new perspective of the different spheres of our identity.

Silvia La Bruna  
Université Lumière Lyon 2/U. Bologne

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[1] Pina Antinucci, in her critical analysis of Amelia Rosselli's writing, theorizes the notion of "shadow language" to refer to the "unmourned lost objects" typical of her style. The objects, in fact, give the readership different facets produced by realities that are ambiguous in their very way of being. [quoted in: Bolfek-Radovani, Jasmina, “Reveries about

language”: challenges and opportunities of performing multilingual poetry (talk given at the Languages Future online conference, 15 April 2021)].

[2] Bolfek-Radovani, Jasmina, “Reveries about language”: challenges and opportunities of performing multilingual poetry (talk given at the Languages Future online conference, 15 April 2021).

[3] Bolfek-Radovani, Jasmina, “[Mon arrivée à l’écriture: sur le \(non\)-sacrifice de la langue](#)”, 2015. A later version of this essay has been published in *Balkan Poetry Today* journal. Bolfek-Radovani, Jasmina, “‘Unbound’ Lines: Writing in the Space of the Multilingual”, *Balkan Poetry Today*, February 2018.

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