**National Poets on Tour in June 2016: ‘Shore to Shore’ and Brexit**

**Author’s Accepted Manuscript**

**ABSTRACT**

**In June 2016 Carol Ann Duffy together with Gillian Clarke, Imtiaz Dharker and Jackie Kay undertook a reading tour of the British mainland to celebrate Independent Bookshops Week. The tour, entitled ‘Shore to Shore’, travelled from Falmouth to St Andrews making fifteen stops *en route*. Although ‘Shore to Shore’ had been planned a year before the referendum on British membership of the European Union, it took place just as United Kingdom citizens were preparing to vote and then acclimatising to the outcome. As a result, the touring national poets encountered audiences who were at a pitch of anxiety, giving their work and their roles amplified significance. In two parts, this essay offers first an account of the tour, and then reflects on three salient metaphors which emerge from ‘Shore to Shore’: the island, the road trip, and the border. It does this in order to advance understanding of the cultural significance of the confluence between the tour and the political moment of its delivery, and to demonstrate how political division exposed by the vote was already long established in cultural articulations of British self-understanding.**

In the summer of 2015, Carol Ann Duffy and her publisher Picador planned ‘Shore to Shore’, a reading tour of mainland Britain to celebrate the tenth anniversary of Independent Bookshops Week which fell on 18-25 June 2016. No-one could have foreseen that this would coincide with the referendum on British membership of the European Union held on 23 June 2016, not announced until 20 February 2016. Yet, in the event, Duffy headed across country at a time when national identity was under intense scrutiny and resulting political division was palpable. The unforeseen compression between political upheaval and the public performance of poetry generated a reflective agency for the ‘Shore to Shore’ readings rarely accorded to encounters between British poets and their audiences. This was amplified and complicated by the fact that not only Carol Ann Duffy as Poet Laureate but also two of her fellow travellers were National Poets whose role it was to represent their nations, to speak for them and to them.

Duffy embarked with the outgoing National Poet of Wales, Gillian Clarke, the incoming Makar, National Poet of Scotland, Jackie Kay, and the Pakistan-born British poet Imtiaz Dharker, declared ‘world laureate’ by Duffy, to read at fifteen venues scattered between Cornwall and Fife from 19 June to 2 July 2016.[[1]](#endnote-1) At each venue, hosted by an independent bookshop, they were joined by a local poet. Many had contributed to the anthology Duffy commissioned as part of the tour, *Off the Shelf. A Celebration of Bookshops in Verse*.[[2]](#endnote-2) Amongst them were the incoming National Poet of Wales, Ifor ap Glyn in Caernarfon, and the out-going Makar, Liz Lochhead in St Boswells on the Scottish Borders. National identity was kept firmly in the spotlight not only by the poets and the political moment, but also by the sporting calendar: ‘Shore to Shore’ played against the backdrop of the Euro 2016 football championship which saw Wales unexpectedly victorious in the quarter-finals on 1 July.[[3]](#endnote-3) The tour ended on the day that Jackie Kay as Makar addressed the new session of the Scottish Parliament, reading her poem ‘Threshold’ on 2 July 2016.[[4]](#endnote-4) The journey itself gave the travelling poets a unique opportunity, as Kay asserted, ‘to take the political temperature of the country’.[[5]](#endnote-5) This included observation of their own experiences, which were recorded in a diary, published by the *Guardian* online.[[6]](#endnote-6) Often figuratively resonant, these diary entries contribute to the material assessed throughout this investigation which itself is in two parts. The first is an account of the ‘Shore to Shore’ tour; the second reflects on three metaphors of national configuration made available by the tour: the island, the road trip, and the border. The analysis of these tropes draws on wider aspects of poetic and literary tradition, juxtaposed with socio-economic analysis of the referendum. Its purpose is to explore how the tour articulated with rapidly changing politics and offered, sometimes despite its own ambition, a cultural commentary on a nation fragmenting into a self and its antagonist double.

1. ‘Shore to Shore’. An Account of the Tour.

Both before and after the referendum, the ‘Shore to Shore’ readings demonstrated the public purchase of these poets’ work. In Oxford on 21 June, after a bright fanfare on the post-horn by accompanying musician John Sampson, Gillian Clarke opened the performance with ‘Daughter’ written in October 2012 for the murdered six-year-old April Jones.[[7]](#endnote-7) She dedicated it anew, by suggestion rather than by name, to the memory of Jo Cox, Labour MP for Batley and Spen, murdered for her ‘Remain’ campaign on 16 June 2016 outside her surgery office in Leeds: the refrain, ‘everyone’s daughter’, the plea, ‘Let her change us forever’. The guest poet, Bernard O’Donoghue, read next. His work also struck an elegiac tone, mixed with apprehension, in ‘The Year’s Midnight’, and ‘The Day I Outlived my Father’: ‘So I am in new territory from here on: ... at liberty at last … to swim against the tide’.[[8]](#endnote-8) Amongst Kay’s selection was the poem ‘Extinction’, its working title ‘Planet Farage’.[[9]](#endnote-9) Dharker read poems linked by the theme of the language of public discourse including ‘The right word’, a poem to domesticate our relationship with terrorist threat.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Carol Ann Duffy concluded the performance, opening with the sonnet ‘Prayer’, ‘Pray for us now … ’. The choice enabled her to circumscribe the island crossed by her tour, name its immediate fragility, and to enact the creation of community through the ritual of reading poetry aloud in public.[[11]](#endnote-11) ‘Mrs Schofield’s GCSE’ followed, a witty repost to the censorship of her dramatic monologue ‘Education for Leisure’ from the AQA English Literature GCSE anthology in 2008;[[12]](#endnote-12) then ‘The Counties’, a protest against Royal Mail plans to abolish county names from addresses by the end of 2016.[[13]](#endnote-13) This poem ends with a citation of Edward Thomas’s ‘Adlestrop’, ‘*all the birds of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire*’ which Duffy encouraged her Oxford audience to chant aloud with her. Shifting tone again, she read ‘Liverpool’, honouring the dead and bereaved after the Hillsborough tragedy of 1989 who were vindicated in law by the conclusion of the Hillsborough inquests on 26 April 2016.[[14]](#endnote-14) Her final poem, ‘Snow’, ended the reading as a whole with a question, ‘Cold, inconvenienced, late, what will you do now/ with the gift of your left life?’[[15]](#endnote-15)

The careful plotting of the performance created an interface between poetry, politics and private experience, in which the poets’ work was completed and embellished by the audience’s contexts of place and time. These would change over the course of the tour, altering and in some cases intensifying the significance of each poem, not only for audiences but also for the poets themselves. For example, travelling from Chipping Norton to Monmouth on 22 June they made an impromptu visit to Adlestrop. It was an encounter which reinserted the resonance of Thomas’s poem, written in June 1914, with the immediate moment. As the poets reflected in the bus shelter which now commemorates the railway station, Kay observed ‘[i]t is like finding hallowed ground. We fall silent and listen to the birdsong. Yes, blackbirds, Gillian says, probably all blackbirds.’[[16]](#endnote-16)Thomas’s poem captures calm before cataclysm. The whole of England is compressed into the view from his stationary train; it is pastoral, local, and eerily empty of people. Kay’s likening of the place to ‘hallowed ground’ affirms Edna Longley’s claim of Thomas that ‘[f]ew poets have been such a muse to other poets.’[[17]](#endnote-17) Duffy’s citation of ‘Adlestrop’ in ‘The Counties’ holds hands with Thomas across the century, lifting him into the present. The ‘Shore to Shore’ visit to that poem via the place itself on their way to the Welsh borders offered a refuge in the value of the poets’ craft at time of national crisis ahead of the referendum which they sensed would bring tumultuous change. ‘And for that minute a blackbird sang/ Close by, and round him, mistier,/Farther and farther, all the birds/Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.’[[18]](#endnote-18)

That evening, taking further cover in the work of fellow poets, Gillian Clarke read privately to the touring company a ‘moving statement’by her countryman Owen Sheers ‘outlining his reasons as a father for voting Remain.’[[19]](#endnote-19) The location of their reading, in the borderlands between England and Wales, was a felicitous alignment of place and event since the referendum itself was experienced with the force of a physical border: tour organiser, Helen Taylor, received a text from one of her daughters on the way to vote on 23 June: ‘See you on the other side.’[[20]](#endnote-20) Watching the results come in overnight, Duffy concluded her diary entry early in the morning of 24 June; she reported a tweet by J. K. Rowling which asserted that ‘Cameron’s legacy will be the breaking of two unions.’ Duffy assimilates this with a slogan of the leave campaign and signals her frustration through simile: ‘[h]is unleashed genie has indeed given us our country back – torn in two like a bad poem.’[[21]](#endnote-21)

The readings which took place in the immediate aftermath were marked by profound emotions of anger, resistance and anxiety. These feelings were established and articulated through poetry, and recorded in the personal evidence of the online Guardian diary entries. The first post-referendum reading took place in the Shropshire town of Bridgnorth on Friday 24 June, with guest poet Liz Lefroy. ‘The audience give their local poet … enthusiastic applause when she says she comes from a family of Huguenot asylum-seekers and chooses to be European.’ Imtiaz Dharker, writing this diary entry, underscores the evident accord between Lefroy’s foregrounded transnational heritage and the political choice of her audience by noting a line from Lefroy’s ‘Michelangelo’s David’ which asserts a transcendence of boundaries through love: “Love can be translated into time in any language”.[[22]](#endnote-22) Dharker observes how the poets responded to the altered situation: ‘[a]ll of us shift our readings slightly. Gillian reads ‘Lament’,[[23]](#endnote-23) Jackie ‘In my country’,[[24]](#endnote-24) Carol Ann ‘Weasel Words’:[[25]](#endnote-25) all poems written years ago, but relevant today. There are no overt political statements but the choices are fierce. The people who come to speak to us at the signing tell us that the poetry has helped.’[[26]](#endnote-26) Her comments indicate how the poems, individually and collectively, are transformed by circumstance into vessels of powerful feeling, holding more than could be anticipated at their creation. On Saturday, travelling to Oswestry, Clarke recorded how ‘all exclaim at a sight that Liz Lefroy warned us of last night, a monstrous construction in a field: fly-tipped junk, a garish “sculpture”, a tipped boat with a sly insinuation of refugees. Immigrants on a sinking ship, the loveless word LEAVE in weeping paint. A word to wound, not heal; to sink us, not save us.’ Clarke’s vividly emotive description shows the way in which the poets perceive the landscape itself to be defiled and laid waste by the prevailing political choice of its inhabitants. Again Clarke began her reading with ‘Lament’. Written originally about the Gulf War of 1991, the title of the poem is an imperative verb, the poem an inventory of mourning: ‘For the ocean’s lap with its mortal stain./For Ahmed at the closed border./For the soldier in his uniform of fire’.[[27]](#endnote-27) As she read aloud, she was ‘wondering what our listeners see. In my head is a sinking ship, wreckage, the work of a fly-tipper in a green field.’[[28]](#endnote-28) She articulates internally how the reference points of composition sit in palimpsest with those acquired in the new political context, observing afresh the shapeshifting signification of their work which Dharker had observed in Bridgnorth.The following morning Clarke focusses on fragmentation, both intimate and national. She notes that her daughter considers how to retain her EU citizenship through her Irish ancestry, and she juxtaposes this with ‘[s]ackings and resignations in the Labour party’. She turns immediately to poetry in an effort to articulate the momentous turbulence of the present, quoting from Yeats’ poem, ‘The Second Coming’ (written in 1919, published in 1920): ‘Yeats speaks in my heart. “Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold,” and the premonition: “And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?”’ New allegiances, changed identities, an abandoned and abandoning homeland, all adjuncts of border crossings to which the ‘Shore to Shore’ poets had become so finely attuned, were announced as internalised and familial. In Caernarfon on Sunday 26 June, Kay observed the intensity of audience attention and again the way in which circumstances altered the resonance of their repertoire. The reception of her poem ‘Extinction’ had changed: ‘[n]ow that satire has become a reality, it suddenly isn’t funny any more’. [[29]](#endnote-29)

On 28 June the poets were performing in Carlisle Cathedral, approaching the next border for negotiation, between England and Scotland. Imtiaz Dharker stated, ‘[t]he map of the country I thought I lived in is changing from one day to the next, before my eyes.’ She observed alarm triggered by overheard conversations at their stopping points, ‘[i]n Carlisle a busker mentions that the quality of the music on the street has dropped because of eastern European musicians. Casual racism is back on the map.’[[30]](#endnote-30) As if to shore against this, Dharker emphasised the hybrid aspects of their location, the city ‘feels like it has one foot in Scotland’; the cathedral, with its twelfth-century Norman nave intact, was a monument of cultural difference and assimilation. The acoustics of this place wereemblematically astonishing, the voice of the architecture resonating with the poets:

It also suits the music of guest poet Jacob Polley’s voice, and the perfect pitch of his poems. He reads The News:

The moon’s not sad; the sun won’t worry.  
 Despite your suffering, England’s still  
 And only some of us are sorry.

The readings have become more and more like conversations … seeming to respond to the bizarre turns of events … even though some of them were written years ago.[[31]](#endnote-31)

Polley’s ‘The News’ was published in *The Havocs*, a collection composed between 2006 and 2012.[[32]](#endnote-32) Dharker quotes the last three lines of the poem which, Polley states, was not written in response to a specific event. Instead it is one utterance in the mounting and with hindsight prophetic expression of civic unease which sounds throughout Polley’s volume, captured most precisely in his title poem, ‘The Havocs’: ‘Havoc is committed to care for the elderly, education for all, and narrowing the gap between rich and fabulously rich’.[[33]](#endnote-33) Polley’s ‘The News’ chimes too with the 1916 poem by Thomas Hardy which Clarke invoked in her diary entry for the following day, ‘In Time “of the Breaking of Nations”’, ‘Yet this will go onward the same/Though Dynasties pass.’[[34]](#endnote-34) The articulation between poets, poems and audience deepened and shifted under the pressure of political tumult. It encompassed not just the immediate shared experience of performance. Social media enabled those absent to overcome geographical distance and join in. But, for all its inclusive aspiration, the more expressive and mutually affirming this Remain community became, the starker the division between it and those who voted Leave.

The regional divisions within the United Kingdom exposed by the referendum results are well known. Wales and England voted predominantly to leave the EU, while majorities in Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain. The poets were eager to reach Scotland, to feel themselves no longer in the political minority. Drivingnorthfrom Carlisle they couldnot agree on the route. Gillian Clarke, teased by Duffy for her backseat driving, denied that she was still reading the map on her tablet, but she was caught out: ‘I can see the A2 reflected in both glasses**,** a church on your chinand a mountain on each of your cheeks’**.**[[35]](#endnote-35)Despite their shared politics, finding a way through the newly configured landscape was a challenge for all of them. In that moment Clarke’s face held the image of their disorientation within the fragmented country.

Jackie Kay described their border crossing on 30 June: ‘[t]hen there’s a huge sign: Welcome to Scotland. We all cheer. I have never felt more pleased to cross the border. “Je suis haggis,” Carol Ann shouts. We’re all Scottish now. There’s a tender feeling towards everything as we arrive in the beautiful town of St Boswells.’[[36]](#endnote-36) Liz Lochhead, their first guest poet on Scottish soil, opened her reading with ‘Lavender’s Blue’, a poem dedicated to the memory of the friend dear to many on the tour, socialist and pacifist poet Adrian Mitchell, who died in 2008: ‘this whole bloody/turning world/has piled new atrocities and lies on old/- Gaza’s latest hell happened/without you to sing the song/of simple *this is wrong*.’[[37]](#endnote-37) The politics are again obliquely stated and personally channelled. Even the high comedy which followed Lochhead’s performance of ‘In Praise of Old Vinyl’ with its refrain, ‘Old vinyl … old vinyl/Nostalgia’s everything it used to be/when you’re half-pissed and playing that old LP’, acquired a political undertow in the context of the nationalist nostalgia evident in the ‘give us our country back’ Leave slogan.[[38]](#endnote-38) The following evening, in Biggar, as the evening ended, Imtiaz Dharker reported, ‘Gillian lifts her mobile phone above her head. Wales have won 3-1 against Belgium and are through to the semifinals. Suddenly we are all Welsh.’[[39]](#endnote-39) The national identities of the poets seem fluid, Scottish one moment, Welsh the next. Yet this is one way in which they state their resistance to the decision made by the majority of British voters. They assert the impossibility of separating or fixing individual nationhood; they act out the porousness of geopolitical boundaries. In St Andrews on the last night of the tour, together with guest poet Robert Crawford, they adopted not French but silence in which to take their last stand: four poets lifting placards, a word each, to spell out ‘NOT IN MY NAME’.[[40]](#endnote-40)

Carol Ann Duffy closed the tour diary of their journey from ‘celebration’ to ‘consolation’ and asserted that ‘[h]ome will be different when we get there.’[[41]](#endnote-41) On Saturday 2 July, the last day of the tour and Kay’s reading in the Scottish Parliament, the *Guardian* published a full page in its *Review* section in which four poets, Jackie Kay, Imtiaz Dharker, Andrew Motion and George Szirtes, reflected on the referendum result, their thoughts, like Duffy’s, dominated by the change of relations between self and home. Kay and Dharker published versions of their online tour diary, together with their poems, Kay’s ‘Extinction’ and Dharker’s ‘Minority’, the last stanza of which reads,

until, one day, you meet

the stranger sliding down your street,

realise you know the face

simplified to bone,

look into its outcast eyes

and recognise it as your own.

Dharker’s poem urges its reader to be alert to the contingency of ‘minority’, to observe a common humanity. In reversing the relationship between ‘stranger’ and native, the poem also questions the authority, both political and existential, on which that distinction is made. As Kristeva posits, ‘by recognising our uncanny strangeness we shall neither suffer from it nor enjoy it from the outside. If I am a foreigner, there are no foreigners.’[[42]](#endnote-42)

The third contribution was a new poem by Andrew Motion, former Poet Laureate. Called ‘In the Air’, it is an in-flight view of ‘my country falling away beneath me’ with the speaker imagining that ‘everything will be here and almost the same/supposing I ever choose to return … ’, believing ‘I am the one who will first become a stranger.’ The second half of the four stanza poem corrects this complacency: ‘history does not exist to benefit ourselves/and bring us peace and homecoming at last.’ Instead, ‘History flies onward like the lonely albatross/ … riding the wind until it decides enough/is enough and lands roughly where it pleases.’ The legendary bird flies into the present out of Coleridge’s ‘Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ in which the Mariner, and all his listeners, are denied homecoming. Embodying ‘history’, the albatross is a primal force without recognition of individual human choice, bewildering the places where it ‘lands roughly’. From this aerial perspective, the idea of home becomes nothing more than a rock in a stormy sea. Motion’s poem speaks directly to Duffy’s opening poem of her ‘Shore to Shore’ set, ‘Prayer’ with its sense of home as an island at the rocky ends of the earth, ‘Finisterre’.

‘Shore to Shore’, billed as a ‘Celebration of Poetry and Community’, was unforeseeably, darkly, successful in its aim, as the community it sustained became increasingly beleaguered. Nor could it be anticipated how the tour’s independent bookshops would find themselves at the heart of national turbulence rather than local stability.[[43]](#endnote-43) ‘Subtly, subversively, words speak to the heart, the hurt, the anxiety of a nation in crisis. We see it, and hear it, in every audience, every town, every stopping-place on this journey,’ wrote Gillian Clarke.[[44]](#endnote-44) The national poets were important for the success of the tour, because of their repertoire, experience and fame, yet it was clearly poetry itself which came to the fore, ‘words speak[ing] to the heart’. The sheer number of poets taking part, not only as performers but also, like Hardy, Yeats or Adrian Mitchell, as off-stage presences, their work quoted or honoured during the two week period, meeting sell-out audiences in encounters of evident intensity, demonstrates the vitalising place of poetry in the public life of the nation.

2. Reflections on the Tour: The Island; The Road Trip; The Border

When ‘Shore to Shore’ was over, Carol Ann Duffy observed to Robyn Marsack that it had been a tour ‘of two halves’ pivoting on the referendum. What follows here is a sequence of reflections on the primary cultural metaphors of the tour, the island, the road trip and the border. Each of these metaphors can be seen to contain its own antagonistic ‘other’, so that the ‘two halves’ which Duffy experienced chronologically can be seen as synchronous, inextricable parts of the whole. These divisions map onto a commonplace of political analysis of the competing campaigns for referendum victory, namely that they exposed and strengthened divisions already latent within British society. Despite the unanimous pro-European and Remain convictions of all participants in the tour and many of their audiences, they were at times ambushed by contradictions embedded in their enterprise. This extends beyond the obvious paradox that the reading tour conducted by poets convinced of the value of national inter-dependence was nevertheless designed to celebrate the ‘independence’ of bookshops during decision-making about the claims of this question.

The Island

The ‘Shore to Shore’ tour could have been called ‘Falmouth to St Andrews’, ‘Cornwall to Fife’, or, since abstraction was preferred, ‘South to North’. But each of these possibilities contains a hierarchy of prime and concessive terms, and announces that the distance travelled guarantees encounter with difference so that the starting point is not the same as the end point. ‘Shore to Shore’, on the other hand, contains equality of terms and announces that unity overrides the diversity traversed on the way from one ‘shore’ to another. The name permits difference to rhyme with sameness, as the ‘shore’ of Cornwall converges with the ‘shore’ of Fife, each coast conceived as part of the same continuous boundary of mainland Britain. ‘Shore to Shore’ proclaims a revelation of the fully stretched extent of the island to itself and affirms the cohesion of its composition. Furthermore, by foregrounding the coastal boundary of the mainland, the imagery of the tour’s name emphasised exclusive strength over internal division.

The connotation of the island’s integrity announced by the name is both apt and expected for a tour led by the UK Poet Laureate. From the outset, however, Duffy articulated how the island, and indeed the individual it represents by extended metaphor, are threatened both from within and beyond its boundaries, by choosing to read ‘Prayer’ as the opening poem of her set: ‘Darkness outside. Inside, the radio’s prayer – /Rockall. Malin. Dogger. Finisterre.’[[45]](#endnote-45) With submerged invocation of ‘Britain’ through its play with the BBC Radio 4 shipping forecast, the tone is foreboding. It pictures the island nation held captive by the elements and guarded by place names that are both familiar and threatening, from ‘Rockall’ to ‘Finisterre’. Exposing their etymology and conjuring with the fragments of the words, all rock, mal, dog, dogged, and the end of the earth, this ‘Prayer’ warns that Britain contains and is contained by its own uncanny alter ego. The shore, like a hard border, protects by excluding others, and contains by isolating the inhabitants.

The recognised threat of isolation that is the dark corollary of shored boundaries, points towards an echo harboured by the name of the tour which is made relevant by the political circumstances in which it took place. The echo is from Matthew Arnold’s 1852 poem ‘To Marguerite – Continued’ in which the metaphor of the island is used to address the acute loneliness of individual isolation. Arnold’s lyrical voice asserts that desolate separation can only be overcome when

The nightingales divinely sing;  
 And lovely notes, from shore to shore,  
 Across the sounds and channels pour -

While it is unlikely that Duffy considered the travelling poets as nightingales, she did subscribe to Arnold’s view that poetry reaches across division: ‘I think poetry is a unifying art, a way of talking across differences’ she stated on 21 May 2016 in advance of the tour.[[46]](#endnote-46) Yet the plangence of the Arnoldian echo evoked by ‘Shore to Shore’ also reminds us that the rhyme of sameness and difference is a hollow rhyme, and the accord signaled by the repeated word ‘shore’ may be similarly empty. A further irony created by the reference to Arnold’s poem is generated when the effects of the nightingale’s song of 1852 are read alongside the ‘Remain’ convictions of the travelling company of 2016. For Arnold, the nightingales’ audiences experience

… a longing like despair  
 …  
 For surely once, they feel, we were  
 Parts of a single continent!  
 Now round us spreads the watery plain —  
 Oh might our marges meet again![[47]](#endnote-47)

Arnold famously leaves his readers adrift in ‘the unplumb’d, salt, estranging sea’. The travelling poets, in their quest for community as well as by their ‘Remain’ convictions, seek to undo the existential as well as the political consequences of isolation.

Jackie Kay presented her vision of insularity with her reading of ‘Extinction’. Like Arnold who draws on the science of geology to plead for a restoration of connection between island and continent, Kay also deploys the imagery of science - hers is theory of evolution - to charge her political satire; ‘[e]xtinction,’ Gillian Beer reminds us in her study of the discourses of islands, ‘happens more rapidly within the limited and unreplenished populations of islands than it does where there are open borders’.[[48]](#endnote-48) The poem was first printed in the *Guardian* on 15 May 2015, commissioned by Carol Ann Duffy for the ‘Keep it in the Ground’ campaign to engage with Climate Change.[[49]](#endnote-49) Launching that collection of poems, Duffy wrote, ‘[i]nformation … is not enough …. As Rusbridger says, journalism is a “rear view mirror”: good at telling you what has happened but not so good at explaining what’s round the next bend.’[[50]](#endnote-50) The conceit of ‘Extinction’ is to match the destruction of natural diversity with the homogenising grip of racist, sexist political extremes. The poem’s augury, its shift from ‘satire’ to ‘reality’ as Kay saw it, came faster than anticipated. The 2015 poem opens with ‘We took control of our affairs. No fresh air/ No birds, no bees, no HIV, no Poles, no pollen’, a direct anticipation of the dominant slogan of the Leave campaign, ‘take back control’. Kay’s version of the poem printed in the *Guardian* on 2 July 2016 and performed at all her ‘Shore to Shore’ readings, differs from the first publication on precisely the topic of borders. The tour version opens with three new lines: ‘We closed the borders, folks, we nailed it./ No trees, no plants, no immigrants/No foreign nurses, no Doctors; we smashed it.’[[51]](#endnote-51) These lines are additions to the sixteen-line poem of 2015. Expanding to nineteen lines, the poem has no closed boundaries; the aesthetic form itself resists closure, in gesture towards the means of survival in an era of extinction.

While Jackie Kay satirised the isolationism configured by the fortress border of an island state, none of the touring company could anticipate their encounter with the makeshift expression of the opposing viewpoint. We have seen how Gillian Clarke recorded their shock at the junk sculpture of a boat in a field, daubed with the word ‘LEAVE’. One crucial aspect of her response was to identify the boat not as an emblem of migrants commanded to leave, as presumably its makers intended, but as an icon of country and self: ‘LEAVE …. A word … to sink us, not save us’.[[52]](#endnote-52) Clarke’s use of ‘us’ states her sense of identity with those ejected. Seeing the sculpture two days after the ‘leave’ outcome, her response captures her own sense of eviction. For Clarke, the word ‘leave’ on the boat sculpture of junk tilts from imperative verb to descriptive label. This response carries the freight of tradition, whereby boat, island and individual are emblematically interchangeable. Gillian Beer, drawing out these symbolic links, considers how ‘even Noah’s Ark can serve anew as the extreme image of the island population, consisting entirely of immigrants’ and she cites Tony Harrison’s ‘t’Ark’ from his poem cycle ‘Art and Extinction’ to demonstrate how ‘the Ark … doubles as the ship of death, bearing away the conquered’.[[53]](#endnote-53)

At the outset, the ‘Shore to Shore’ title of the tour emphasised the mainland’s internal cohesion and external boundary, yet the connotations of the name changed over the course of the tour with the shift in national politics. The island became a fortress which became an ark which could founder on the rocks of Finisterre. The island topography of mainland Britain dominated Carol Ann Duffy’s closing entry of the tour diary:

Crossing the old Forth Road Bridge, the blue skies and rolling white clouds are the Saltire’s colours. Approaching St Andrews, a fortnight after we set off from Falmouth and the Atlantic, we see the glittering North Sea to our left, the waves moving in then out. “Shore to unsure,” says Imtiaz Dharker .... [[54]](#endnote-54)

Duffy’s sense of surrounding oceans emphasises the island’s position on the globe, with the bridge crossing heralding separation rather than connection; Dharker’s pun throws emerging uncertainty over the geopolitical future. ‘Shore to unsure’ undoes all the confidence that was conveyed by the name of their tour, just as the political landscape which changed during the fortnight of the tour required total readjustment.

Reassessment began immediately and also deployed the imagery of the island: ‘being an island makes a difference, but geography is not destiny’ Timothy Garten Ash stated in the *Guardian* on 24 June 2016.[[55]](#endnote-55) Crucially overlooked here is the fact neither Britain nor the UK is ‘an island’, but several islands and territories; in 2002 Glenda Norquay, Gerry Smyth et al. argued that ‘Atlantic archipelago’ would better represent the alliances of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland in post-devolution Britain than ‘United Kingdom’.[[56]](#endnote-56) Duffy’s ‘Shore to Shore’ set out with no pretentions to cross the archipelago; it began and ended on the mainland. Only in retrospect does this seem to reinforce exactly the island mentality the poets stood against, an example of the ambushing antagonist embedded within the metaphors of their enterprise. With ‘Clarke for Wales, Kay for Scotland, Duffy for the UK and Dharker … in the notional role of world laureate’ they represented the multi-national, multi-ethnic terrain to be covered.[[57]](#endnote-57) The grouping points up, however, that while Wales and Scotland have National Poets, England and Northern Ireland do not. The result is the elision of the latter two with ‘UK’. Politically problematic this may be, yet it seems at least to point towards a cultural bridge across the Irish Sea embodied by the UK Poet Laureate.

But the situation is completely different. There is no National Poet for Northern Ireland not because that role is subsumed by the UK Laureate (though it is), but because it is already occupied by an institution of cultural accord between Northern Ireland and the Republic established in 1998 to honour Seamus Heaney, ‘a distinguished northerner, resident in Dublin’.[[58]](#endnote-58) This is the Ireland Professor of Poetry, a role which treats the island of Ireland as internally cohesive and places the cultural border firmly in the Irish Sea. Within Ireland the three-year tenure of the Chair is uncoupled from national politics by its residency in three sponsoring universities, Queen’s, Trinity and University College on either side of the border; it is supported by both Arts Councils and administered by a Trust; poets are elected from Northern Ireland and the Republic. The duties of the Ireland Professor of Poetry include the delivery of an annual lecture, one at each host university, and are otherwise congruent with those of the National Poet of Wales or Makar. In 2016 the outgoing Ireland Professor of Poetry was Paula Meehan, a Dubliner and the second woman to occupy the Chair who had shared many platforms with Duffy, Clarke and Liz Lochhead throughout her tenure. Incoming was Eiléan Ní Chuilleanain. The closest Northern Ireland has come to appointing a National Poet was in 2013 when the Mayor of Belfast appointed Sinead Morrissey to a newly created City Laureate role, tenable for one year and subsequently discontinued. Morrissey shared the stage with Clarke, Duffy, Lochhead and Meehan at the Women of the World (WOW) Festival in London’s Southbank in 2014. Northern Ireland is doubly represented by the Ireland Professor of Poetry and the UK Poet Laureate, and perhaps therefore also doubly silenced.

In March 2018 the EU proposed that the island of Ireland should become a single regulatory area aligned with European laws post-Brexit as a means of solving difficulties presented by the land border that divides Northern Ireland from the Republic and the EU. By positioning the border between Britain and the EU in the waters separating these two islands the proposition puts a political border where the cultural politics of poetry has already placed it. Heaney himself anticipated the separation of these islands when he objected to the presence of his work in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Verse* (1982) by publishing *An Open Letter* repost with Field Day in 1983: ‘Be advised! My passport’s green./ No glass of ours was ever raised/ to toast the Queen’. It could be that for both Ireland and the British mainland, there is, after all, destiny in the geography of islands and ‘Shore to Shore’ may unwittingly have heralded the future.

The Road Trip

‘Shore to Shore’ was declared by the *Guardian* ‘a road trip’ across Britain, and placed in the tradition of The Beatles’ ‘Magical Mystery Tour’ and the ‘Union Jack-emblazoned bus’ of the Spice Girls’ ‘Spice World’, except that a ‘lorryload of laureates’ replaced the pop stars of the past.[[59]](#endnote-59) Where did it go and what did the journey achieve? In literal terms, the tour’s stops were: Falmouth, Bath, Oxford, Chipping Norton, Monmouth, Crickhowell, Bridgnorth, Oswestry, Caernarfon, Bramhall, Carlisle, Corbridge, St Boswells, Biggar, and St Andrews. Figuratively, this is a meandering and discursive route which proclaims that its purpose is not to arrive at one shore as quickly as possible, but that each location on the route has equal importance, and the endpoint of the trip was to have visited them all, not to have reached a particular final destination. Celebrating an independent bookshop in each place, the tour mapped a peripheral, indirect and liminal path across the country which, in journey terms at least, was as much about ‘remaining’ as it was about ‘leaving’. ‘Traveling,’ Susan Stanford Friedman argues, ‘is a concept that depends upon the notion of stasis to be comprehensible. Routes are pathways between here and there, two points of rootedness.’[[60]](#endnote-60)

The strap line on the tour programme states that ‘Shore to Shore’ was ‘Celebrating Poetry and Community with the Laureate and Friends’, and we are further told that ‘a local guest poet will join the tour in each location’. ‘Shore to Shore’ therefore illuminated the local with the celebrity status of the ‘lorryload of laureates’. At the same time it recalibrated the distinction between ‘laureate’ and ‘local’: not simply because the national poets were reading on the same platforms as the ‘local guest poet’ and therefore declaring an equality of status, but also, more conventionally, because all of the ‘local guest poets’ already had national profiles, which were in turn reinforced by the publication of their commissioned work in the anthology *Off the Shelf* which accompanied the tour. The effect was to unveil the local as being already national. By projecting the local onto a national stage, and *vice versa*, the identity of each was brought into a new relation with the other. Integration was mapped and asserted.

Seen from this perspective, the ‘Shore to Shore’ tour was less like the model of the Magical Mystery Tour, and more akin to the very first road trips across Britain, made by the stagecoach in the 1790s. These, as Ruth Livesey argues, afforded Britain the new possibility of geographical cohesion by which ‘villages fixed on a map as groups of dwellings … are transformed from the strictly local to the national thanks to a particular transport system; they gain meaning through mobility rather than stasis.’ As a result, Livesey asserts, ‘a tiny local place becomes integral to a national network.’ [[61]](#endnote-61) The geographical quickly transforms into the geopolitical.

Gillian Beer has explored how a more recent technological advance in transport went hand in hand with a new configuration of nationhood in ‘The island and the aeroplane: the case of Virginia Woolf’:

Gertrude Stein in her book *Picasso* (1938) … comments on the formal reordering of the earth when seen from the aeroplane – a reordering that does away with centrality and very largely with borders. It is an ordering at the opposite extreme from that of the island, in which centrality is emphasized and the enclosure of land within surrounding shores is the controlling meaning.[[62]](#endnote-62)

‘Shore to Shore’ insisted on a decentred ‘reordering’ of mainland Britain by making use of the existing road network to impose its own remapping, connecting a sequence of towns, otherwise unconnected, in such a way as to traverse the mainland without visiting a single major city. In seeking out the regional, as though the more remote from a city, the more assured was the ‘independence’ of the bookshop and its readers, the tour emphasised the value of the parish over that of the metropolis. The road trip, seen in its entirety, presented a picture of Britain in which the conventional distinctions and hierarchies between peripheral and central were overturned. Furthermore, as Beer suggests, this construction of a dispersed rather than a centralised cultural identity is antithetical to the identity posited by the island narrative of the tour’s title.

It seems that both centralised and decentred representations of the mainland are equally and simultaneously true. One possible resolution to this contradiction is to consider the valorisation of locality inscribed in the itinerary of the tour not only as a means of enacting what Carla Sassi terms ‘resistance to homogenisation or cultural imperialism’, but also to see this as a particularly feminist project.[[63]](#endnote-63) Aileen Christianson has argued that ‘women’s writing … is often assessed in terms of borders and margins that provide those tropes of liminality … identified with the position of women in society.’[[64]](#endnote-64) Yet it is a metaphor for the place of women’s writing in culture which seems to reinforce gender stereotype. If this is the case, then theall-women company of travelling poets transvalue the geographically liminal just as the traditionally subordinate social status of their ender is transvalued by the public offices they hold.

A post-colonial rather than a gendered interpretation of the potential for cultural renewal that is situated in the periphery is advanced by Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh. He asserts resistance against the homogenising and centralising forces of colonial norms by claiming the ‘social and artistic validity of [the] parish’. He universalises the creative energy of the local, declaring that ‘[all] great civilisations are based on parochialism’; he draws out the human scale of the alignment between individual experience and deep knowledge of a locale to present this union as the fount of culture.[[65]](#endnote-65)

Discussing Kavanagh’s position, Willy Maley concludes that he chooses ‘to celebrate specificity, locality and region rather than nation’ as a means of resisting the overwhelming force of the colonial power.[[66]](#endnote-66) It is also clear that Kavanagh prizes membership of the parish not simply as a means of turning away from obliterating interference from outside but also because of its human scale. There is a commensurability between a ‘lane’ and a ‘lifetime’s experience’, which is absent from the relationship between individual and metropolis. This too is a quality which the ‘Shore to Shore’ itinerary insists upon: it draws out the dynamism of the relationship between each independent bookshop and its community, while the venues selected for the readings ensure that the relationship between performers and audience has an intimate chamber quality which facilitates personal exchange. This may resonate, paradoxically, with Leave voters’ desire to withdraw from the seemingly distant and overweening bureaucracy of the EU.

Yet the local, as represented by the tour, is also seen to be shaped as much by its relationships beyond the immediate physical place as by those internal to it. Duffy’s ‘The Counties’, which ends with the citation of ‘Adlestrop’ to evoke the crossing of boundaries by birdsong, explores these ideas overtly. Duffy insists on the value of geographical distinctions:

But I want to write to an Essex girl,

greeting her warmly.

But I want to write to a Shropshire lad,

brave boy, home from the Army ….

Each place is tagged with a stereotype of how it appears to the outside; the refrain ‘I want to write to’ maintains a sense of dynamic interrelations between the fixed and moving, between one place and what lies beyond it. Together, these two features of the poem enable Duffy to embrace negative connotations of localism, stasis and nostalgia, and to overturn them with a demonstration that, as Doreen Massey states, ‘the global is in the local in the very process of the formation of the local’.[[67]](#endnote-67) ‘The Counties’ offers no geographical order to the sequence in which counties are named; instead, the jumble of locations is organised through rhyme (in a structure of abcb). It is writing, and in this case poetry, which lends cohesion to the disparate. For these travelling poets, poetry is its own parish to which they all belong. Poetry provides a means of creating and asserting community which crosses, as Arnold posits, the ‘estranging sea’, once more bridging the antitheses of island and road-trip narratives.

The tour to celebrate ‘our wonderful independent bookshops’ entails a valorisation of the local as a site of resistance. The bookshops are, Duffy states in the programme, ‘so often the cultural heartbeat of their local communities’ and ‘they offer’, she continues, ‘readers in their communities a service akin to pastoral care.’ Asserting that she is ‘delighted … to meet the communities who support them’, she acknowledges the mutual exchange of the relationship.[[68]](#endnote-68) Duffy’s emphasis on the ‘pastoral’ nature of decentred vitality was a further aspect of cultural construction asserted by the tour. Yet this too enfolds a contradiction. The independent bookshops’ ability to promote local authors and nurture community events rests on financial stability afforded by book sales, most of which are inevitably best sellers, selected by metropolitan trends. And some of the host bookshops, for example Toppings and Co. in St Andrews, or Blackwells in Oxford, have capitalised on the affluence of their local and tourist customers to extend their franchise, replicating patterns of metropolitan commerce to become quasi enclaves of the city within the provinces. This explains the apparent contradiction between evident audience enthusiasm for the tour’s Europhile platform in decentred locations despite the fact that, as O’Reilly states in her analysis of the referendum results, ‘[s]upport for Remain was strongest in the major cities of England and weakest in the provinces’**.[[69]](#endnote-69)** The centre therefore facilitates culture in the region, just as the tour itself was sponsored by Duffy’s publisher, Picador.

While the economics of ‘Shore to Shore’ could be seen to consolidate the mutual dependence of metropolis and region, confirming the irrelevance of the distinction and affording another layer of national cohesion, the context of the EU Referendum added a darker symbolism to the tour’s celebration of cultural independence. The ‘Leave’ campaign made lavish claims for the economic benefits of independence, announcing that the UK sent ‘£350 million a week’ to the EU which could be saved for the NHS. This is still top of the list of reasons to leave on the Vote Leave website’,[[70]](#endnote-70) although the claim was denounced as a ‘mistake’ by UKIP leader Nigel Farage the day after the Referendum.[[71]](#endnote-71) This, then, was the contextual narrative of the politics of independence at large during the tour, and not one to which any of the performers subscribed. The poets had embarked to celebrate cultural independence and to boost the financial well-being of those who supplied it. They appear, ironically, to have been captured by their own alien ‘other’ before they even set out. This is reinforced by a wider post-referendum perspective: the tour’s self-selecting audiences were composed of ‘cosmopolitans’ rather than ‘locals’, as Christopher Grey denotes the distribution of ‘Remain’ and ‘Leave’ voters. ‘Cosmopolitan remainers’ he argues, ‘encompass big business, … along with liberal and left-leaning intellectuals … and internationalists’ while ‘local leavers are also a diverse amalgam, running from the remnants of the industrial working class through to empire-lamenting nationalists’.[[72]](#endnote-72) In Grey’s analysis the terms ‘cosmopolitan’ and ‘local’ are no longer geographical but conceptual, serving to identify the ‘us and them’ division exposed by the referendum. It would seem that however the itinerary of ‘Shore to Shore’ was mapped it could never have been anything but cosmopolitan.

The unplanned compromise of the tour by the overarching political narrative through which it travelled is itself subverted, however, by a model supplied by consideration of another stagecoach story. The metamorphosis of a journey conceived as a celebration of national identity into an experience of fragmentation has a literary forebear in De Quincey’s ‘The English Mail-Coach’ (1849). Here, De Quincey famously recalls his high hopes at setting out with the liveried mailcoach to spread news of the British victory against Napoleon. Overcome by sleep, neither the coachman nor De Quincey can prevent the foreseeable death of a young girl hit by the speeding coach. The concluding section of De Quincey’s account is of rioting delirium in which he travels with coach-crocodile and dead girl through constantly shifting symbolic landscapes: ‘the dreamer finds housed in himself some separate chamber in his brain … some horrid, alien nature …. How if the alien nature contradicts his own, fights with it, and perplexes it, and confounds it?’ Commenting on De Quincey’s essay, Simon During argues that the ‘coach represents not civil society but the state’, and that ‘the mailcoach’s power and discipline place it beyond the control of individuals whom it smashes in its way’.[[73]](#endnote-73) He concludes that the violence of the state against the individual enforces an outward passivity which is resisted by the proliferating subjectivities of the subconscious. Dreams, or nightmares, are the resulting expressions of self-renewal in the face of overweening political force. Rescuing victory from the mouth of defeat, literary works of the imagination, During contends, are a means of resistance not capitulation.

During’s analysis of ‘The English Mail-Coach’ affords analogous illumination of ‘Shore to Shore’, if we think of ‘the state’ represented by the referendum itself. Like the mailcoach, the referendum was omnipresent across the whole nation and it appeared therefore to proclaim cohesion. Its frame of reference, however, presented as a Yes/No answer to a question, guaranteed division. The referendum asserted and denied national unity at the same time and in equal measure, and the poets found themselves moving across this conflicted landscape at the most heightened moment of its expression. Their encounter with fragmentation was acute on numerous occasions, but what became evident was that the poetry they carried with them was indeed received as a way of countering division: Kay observed that the post-referendum response to ‘Extinction’ was for audiences to ‘want to be on the side of poetry’,[[74]](#endnote-74) a view that was affirmed when the audience in Caernarfon told her, ‘“You were like a building, each one of you held a different bit up. You lifted us.”[[75]](#endnote-75) Equally, at the end of the tour Duffy reflected on the significant role of poetry in the opening of the new Scottish Assembly on 2 July 2016:

the new makar, Jackie Kay, is reading her specially commissioned poem, Threshold. It’s a movingly fitting penultimate moment to our strange journey. We notice Nicola Sturgeon’s genuine pleasure as she listens to Jackie’s poem, then later quotes Edwin Morgan and Liz Lochhead in her speech to the Queen.[[76]](#endnote-76)

The ‘fitting … moment’ is the coming together of poetry and politics, poet and politician, as each embarks on a new season. Not simply amongst audiences in scattered towns but also in the seat of a doubly oppositional government (Scottish National Party and Remain), poetry was a means of articulating regeneration.

The Border

The opening poem of Carol Ann Duffy’s first Laureate collection, *The Bees* (2011) is called ‘Bees’. It is a manifesto poem, about her craft as a poet, its heritage and direction. Her bees are ‘buzzwords, dancing/their flawless, airy maps’.[[77]](#endnote-77) In the second stanza we hear how the bees have been nourished:

Been deep, my poet bees,

In the parts of flowers,

In daffodil, thistle, rose, even

The golden lotus .…

Their ‘airy maps’ have taken them into Wales (daffodil), Scotland (thistle), England (rose), while their entry to enlightenment, symbolised by the golden lotus flower, has been enabled by their predecessors. The ‘golden lotus’ points to Sylvia Plath, whose bee poems were published in the posthumous collection *Ariel*, and whose grave bears the epitaph ‘even amongst the fiercest flames the golden lotus grows’. Mapped out and harmonised in dance, this is an inheritance to celebrate and share: ‘honey is art’. Border-crossing is as easy for the bee as for the aeroplane; difference is observed without hierarchy, a perspective fitting for the UK Poet Laureate. Three years later Duffy deployed the symbols of rose and thistle to respond to the outcome of the referendum on the independence of Scotland. Her poem ‘Scotland 2014’ was published in the *Guardian* on Tuesday 23 September 2014, following the Scottish referendum on 18 September in which 44.7% voted for independence from the UK, and 55.3% against.

A thistle can draw blood,  
 so can a rose,  
 growing together  
 where the river flows, shared currency,  
 across a border it can never know …. [[78]](#endnote-78)

Here, again, nature does not observe political boundaries.

But these aerial and natural images of border-crossing do not tell how it is on the ground for the travelling poets, who crossed from England to Wales, from Wales to England and from England to Scotland at a time when sensitivity towards borders became increasingly acute. Sovereignty and immigration were core issues in Leave campaigning, while the result made division between the nations of the UK conspicuous.[[79]](#endnote-79) ‘Crossing a border,’ Ali Smith wrote in 2012, ‘is not a simple thing. Geopolitically, getting anywhere round the world … requires a constant proof of identity. Who are you? You can’t cross till we’re sure …. then we’ll decide whether or not you can.’[[80]](#endnote-80) Such questions had shaped the lives of each poet on the tour. Duffy, her mother Scottish, her father Irish, records her childhood reach for credentials in ‘Originally’ (*The Other Country*). There she recalls the splintering of her mother tongue on moving from Glasgow to Stafford; its last surviving word is ‘skelf’. Imtiaz Dharker, ‘world laureate’ of the tour, moved from Lahore to Glasgow as a child. She too records the outsider’s acquisition of local voice, ‘I said it in Scottish. *girril*’ in ‘The day the marks made sense’. This poem was published in her 2014 collection *Over the Moon* [[81]](#endnote-81) which holds her grieving for her beloved late husband, Simon Powell, Welsh poet and founder of ‘Poetry Live’, their marriage having following her settled life in India. Dharker’s role in the tour could be seen to counter-balance the very idea of ‘national poet’, since through her biography she is a transnational inheritor of Empire, embodying contemporaneity by her movement across the globe. Jackie Kay, of Nigerian and Scottish parents, celebrates her mixed heritage in ‘Between the Dee and the Don’. That poem opens with the epigraph ‘“*The middle ground is the best place to be”* Igbo saying’; its refrain, ‘I was conceived between the Dee and the Don./ I was born in the city of crag and stone.’**[[82]](#endnote-82)**

Contrasting with these expressions of containment and crossing as external to the self, Gillian Clarke’s outline of inspiration for her autobiographical cycle ‘The King of Britain’s Daughter’ states that border country is a place ‘in the self’, an ‘edge where there is both tension and conflict’. She finds there a meeting of two languages (Welsh and English), two cultures, past and present. For Clarke the border provides ‘the definition of self and other’; it is a ‘complex mental landscape of fractures and sutures’.[[83]](#endnote-83) ‘The King of Britain’s Daughter’ grows out of this inner borderland, even fracturing and suturing what is understood by ‘Britain’, reminding us that ‘Britain’ once named Welsh territories whose legendary extent in the *Mabinogion* stretched west to Ireland, as well as south and east across England. Clarke’s title occludes present-day ‘Britain’ even as it seems to name it, destabilizing and historicizing geopolitical certainty.

Clarke notes of their approach to Wales via the Shropshire townOswestry that they were travelling to ‘the borders of another language, landscape, culture, a cliff-edge in the heart’:[[84]](#endnote-84) her emphasis falls on the repetition implied by ‘another’ as well as on the disjunctive difference inscribed there. She anticipates the terms in which the referendum was analysed: ‘[t]he Brexit ‘fault lines’ of political and social divisions cut across regions, generations, class and ethnic cleavages in a visibly disunited kingdom’.[[85]](#endnote-85) It is a paradox that for all the poets’ personal transnationalism, the public offices of National Poet of Wales and Makar, are themselves carriers and agents of internal fragmentation since both roles were established as cultural expressions of devolved governments in Wales and Scotland following the 1997 referendums. If, as Akos Rona-Tas argues in an effort to understand Brexit, [t]here are two pillars on which the current appeal of nation states rest: one is security, the other is culture’[[86]](#endnote-86) then the authority invested in Clarke and Kay as National Poets works at least in part to support the disassembly of the UK. It is a trajectory that is mirrored and completed by the ‘Leave’ outcome.

Yet as well as manifesting an ‘us/them’ binary, the way in which the National Poets move across borders throughout the tour also emphasises the very simultaneity of self and other, inclusion and exclusion. These dualconfigurations of the cultural impact of the border chime with Susan Stanford Friedman’s theoretical discussions of how borders can be understood. She states that borders ‘have a way of insisting on separation at the same time as they acknowledge connection.’ She uses the simile of a bridge in order to conceptualise the idea of a border, noting how bridges make manifest the space and distance between places but at the same time invite and make possible the act of crossing between them by creating physical contiguity. Friedman’s simile of the bridge enlarges the liminal spaceof the borderfor intellectual scrutinyand thereby makes more visible theopportunities for exchange and interconnection as well as the risks of misunderstanding. All of these physical qualities emblematise moral categories such as ‘transgression, dissolution, reconciliation, and mixing’: these, Friedman states, can apply to individuals and groups as well as nations. As the experience of the travelling company of ‘Shore to Shore’ makes clear, the value ascribed to these physical qualities depends on the politics of the individual, group or nation.The moral and material ambivalence of borders is contained in Friedman’s summary, ‘[b]orders protect, but they also confine’.[[87]](#endnote-87)

Where the travelling company experienced the border as a demarcation of protected space most intensely was in their post-referendum crossing from England to Scotland, as they moved from the land dominated by ‘Leavers’, to the land of the ‘Remainers’. Heralding this transition Jackie Kay wrote in the *Guardian*, ‘We cannot wait to cross the border. We cannot wait to feel at home’.[[88]](#endnote-88) The geopolitical boundary represents an ideological line whereby Scotland, the stateless nation and threatened minority partner of England, comes to represent a refuge. It is a paradox that what qualifies Scotland as a home place is the fact that it voted for open borders and free movement, yet it can only be accessed by crossing a line which here functions to exclude and protect. Kay’s urgency to reach ‘home’ is a conceptualising of the border which seems to contradict her satire on the aggression of the exclusive border which was articulated by ‘Extinction’.

The restoring and quickening effects of feeling ‘at home’ in a particular place, and indeed nation, had been observed previously on the tour. When the company crossed into Wales on the day of the Referendum itself, Duffy noted of Gillian Clarke that ‘her spirits soar as we burrow further into her beloved Wales’.[[89]](#endnote-89) Clarke’s homecoming alters both her sense of self, and how her travelling companions perceive her. Her location changes her affect as she is restored to her native ‘parish’. Reaching Scotland, all have returned to the parish of their political choice. The changing political circumstances reinstate the unequal relations of a dominant with a resistant culture which the ‘Shore to Shore’ island narrative through staging posts of equal liminality had sought to dismantle.

Ali Smith states that ‘there’s a kind of forbidden magic on the borders of things, always a ceremony of crossing over.’**[[90]](#endnote-90)** Duffy’s border shout ‘Je suis haggis’ is an instance of such magic. It adapts the French slogan ‘Je suis Charlie’ designed by Joachim Roncin and posted on Twitter hours after the terror attack on the office of the satirical journal *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris on 7 January 2015, spreading rapidly across the world as a statement of defiance. Duffy’s words also glance at J. F. Kennedy’s proclamation, ‘Ich bin ein Berliner’ on 26 June 1963 on the fifteenth anniversary of the Berlin Blockade; Kennedy’s too was a statement of resistance, yet it was not without comedy generated by the idiomatic meaning of ‘Berliner’ as ‘doughnut’. Duffy’s use of French to assert a comic identity with Scotland’s most iconic food, further embeds a reference to the mixed contents of the sausage, standing here for the heterogeneity of the British. The use of a foreign language to assert a home identity places Duffy firmly on the ‘other’ side, where the self is hybrid and the outlook transnational. The use of French in particular recalls not simply Charlie Hebdo but also the Auld Alliance between Scotland and France, agreed in 1295 to contain English expansionism, its legacy stretching beyond the 1707 Act of Union into the present day. Finally, ‘je suis haggis’ acts on the imperative of the political majority in England, ‘Leave’. That is just what these poets, in this moment, chose to do: ‘We’re all Scottish now’.

But Duffy’s ‘je suis haggis’, resists the binaries of identity which are scorned by ‘Extinction’ and over-written by the conceptual itinerary of the tour. Her words assert the safety as well as the exuberance of the transnational and the intercultural, a contradiction of the supposed security offered by the nation state. The voice of this homecoming is polyglot; it emphasises identity between self and other. ‘Je suis haggis’ is a greeting to cross rather than to close borders. And in turning so explicitly to face Europe, it doubles Scotland with Europe, claiming both together as homeland. Duffy uses this dual identity as means to call out the political cleansing that seemed victorious in the Referendum outcome. Playfully triumphant, her words are spoken as the company crosses the border, by which they are both border-making and border-crossing. Blending two languages they also fulfil a third term, claiming the border as a passage of ‘encounter and hybridisation’.[[91]](#endnote-91)

Duffy’s hybridising words return us to her observation of the island they had crossed in the two weeks of their tour. From a bridge in Scotland she recalled the Atlantic and looked at the North Sea. The entire mainland had become a borderland, precarious and peripheral to the Europe it had cast off. The nation as a whole now occupied in relation to Europe the position which Scotland had traditionally occupied in relation to England, so often imagined as feminine to the dominant masculine. In this context the reconfiguration of national identity inscribed by the ‘Shore to Shore’ tour, with its feminised representation of mainland geography, its emphasis on decentred cohesion and its celebration of the local and the liminal, even its assertion of island isolation, seems prophetic in the way it matches the new political situation. Imtiaz Dharker’s ‘Shore to unsure’ chimes with Aileen Christianson’s assertion that, ‘[a]ny exploration [of national identity] must be tentative, flexible, non-linear as the only certainty carried by ‘debatable lands’ is that of uncertainty.’[[92]](#endnote-92) And just as contemporary writers of Scotland have appropriated their liminal status as an instrument of empowerment, there is hope in this place of ‘encounter and hybridisation’. Alert to this, Duffy noted the ‘sound-bite irony’ of their last venue, Hope and Martyr’s Park.

Throughout this discussion of the tour’s metaphors it has been clear that each one has required the terms of the others in order to advance. The island, the road trip and the border are not mutually exclusive figures, nor are they internally consistent. The contradictions between an island which is strong because it is a fortress and weak because it is alone, tension between literal and conceptual mappings of local and global, the duality of borders which separate and connect, all these were embedded within ‘Shore to Shore’ from the very opening stages of the venture. But they were not part of what the sponsor planned or the poets expected to deliver. These internal antagonisms became visible and significant only in the context of the EU referendum. This emergence mirrors the way in which the referendum exposed and brought into focus immanent political division. It is also striking the extent to which the latent literary, figurative and cultural contradictions of ‘Shore to Shore’ match substantive fault lines in the evolving politics of Brexit, and illuminate its nuanced complexity.

1. <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jun/11/carol-ann-duffy-poems-bookshops-shore-to-shore-clive-james-jackie-kay> > [accessed 13 July 2016]. Tour details given online <<https://www.panmacmillan.com/carolannduffytour>> [accessed 13 July 2016]. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Carol Ann Duffy (ed.), *Off the Shelf. A Celebration of Bookshops in Verse* (London, 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Gillian Clarke proclaimed her poem ‘The Stadium’, retitled ‘The Match’, to support the Welsh national team on the eve of their semi-final against Portugal on 6 July, on BBC2 Newsnight: <<http://player.mashpedia.com/player.php?q=zG4GJqa91hs> >[accessed 13 July 2016]. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Kay’s reading of ‘Threshold’ is online <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rmLxjUNVtQU> > [accessed 1 May 2018]. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Kay, interviewed in the *Sunday Herald* on 10 July 2016, <<http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/14609490.Makar_Jackie_Kay_says_Brexit_vote_could_force_her_to_quit_Manchester_home_for_Scotland/?ref=rss> > [accessed 1 May 2018]. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. < <https://www.theguardian.com/books/series/shore-to-shore-carol-ann-duffy-tour-diary> > [accessed 1 May 2018]. Further references to the Shore to Shore tour diary are given as the author’s name and date of entry. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. ‘Daughter’ was published in WalesOnline on 26 October 2012 <<http://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/national-poet-gillian-clarke-pens-2022836> > [accessed 15 July 2016]. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Bernard O’Donoghue, *Outliving* (London, 2003), 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The poem was published in the *Guardian Review*, 2 July 2016, and online <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2016/jul/02/poets-tour-reeling-after-the-referendum> > [accessed 15 July 2016]. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. < <http://imtiazdharker.com/poems_7-the-right-word> > [accessed 15 July 2016]. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. ‘Prayer’ is the closing poem of *Mean Time* (1993). Carol Ann Duffy, *Collected Poems* (London, 2015), 226. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. ‘Mrs Schofield’s GCSE’ was first published in *The Bees* (2011), *Collected Poems*, 445; ‘Education for Leisure’ from *Standing Female Nude* (1985), *Collected Poems*, 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. ‘The Counties’ was first published in the *Guardian* on 7 August 2010 in a feature about the Royal Mail plans: <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/aug/07/royal-mail-county-addresses-plan> > [accessed 16 July 2016], reprinted in *The Bees* (2011), *Collected Poems*, 469. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. ‘Liverpool’ was published in *Ritual Lightning* (2014), *Collected Poems*, 515. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. ‘Snow’ was published in *The Bees* (2011), *Collected Poems*, 487. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Kay, 23 June 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/jun/28/saturdayreviewsfeatres.guardianreview22> > [accessed 9 December 2017]. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Edward Thomas, final stanza of ‘Adlestrop’, *Selected Poems and Prose*, ed. David Wright (London, 2013), 164. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Duffy, 24 June 2016. Sheers attended the performance the following night in Crickhowell. Many Welsh artists supported the Remain campaign, see <<http://www.strongerin.co.uk/welsh_cultural_leaders_back_remain#vhLXqQYOYPxiht6E.97> > [accessed 13 July 2016]. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Duffy, 24 June 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Duffy, 24 June 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Liz Lefroy’s poem ‘Michelangelo’s David’ was Highly Commended in the 2015 Bridport Prize. Lefroy can be heard reading it at < <http://fairacrepress.co.uk/podcast-on-liz-lefroy/> > [accessed 25 August 2018]. Lefroy’s account of the event can be found at <<http://someonesmumsays.blogspot.com/2016/07/i-carry-placard.html> > [accessed 25 August 2018]. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. From *The King of Britain’s Daughter* (Manchester, 1993), 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. From *Other Lovers* (1993) < <http://www.poetryarchive.org/poem/my-country> > [accessed 23 July 2016]. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. From *The Other Country* (1990), *Collected Poems*, 135. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Dharker, 27 June 2016. Dharker herself introduced the poem ‘Minority’ to her set. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. ‘Lament’, *Daughter*, 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Clarke, 27 June 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Kay, 2 July 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Dharker, 30 June 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Dharker, 30 June 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. *The Havocs* (London, 2012), 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. *The Havocs*, 30. I am grateful to Jacob Polley for supplying information about this collection. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. The poets were on the way to Corbridge on 29 June, Clarke, 1 July 2016. ‘In Time of “The Breaking of Nations”’ was first published in the *Saturday Review,* 29 January 1916, included later in Hardy’s *Poems of War and Patriotism* (London, 1916). [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Dharker, 30 June 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Kay, 6 July 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
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38. Lochhead, *Fugitive Colours*, 116-19. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
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40. See photograph in Duffy, 7 July 2016. These placards had been the closing statement of each reading since the 24 June 2016. See photograph on Liz Lefroy’s blog< <http://someonesmumsays.blogspot.com/2016/07/i-carry-placard.html>> [accessed 25 August 2018]. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Duffy, 7 July 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
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