This special issue introduces fresh critical and cultural perspectives in contemporary Scottish women’s poetry of the twenty-first century. It gathers established and new poets, not to provide a survey, but to discuss a cross-section of the imaginative, political and cultural impulses currently driving women’s poetic creativity in Scotland. The diversity of poetic practices by these poets, in turn, generates an eclectic range of subjects, including ecopoetics, geofamilial politics, and aesthetic strategy. Politically, the new century has presented tremendous and sometimes exhilarating challenges to dominant notions of identity and governance, in witnessing Scottish society grow into its devolved powers since the reinstating of the Scottish parliament in 1999, but also regarding the wider contestations of conceptions of sex, gender and sexuality that have entailed the reconfiguration of the boundaries of heteronormativity, in the legalising of same-sex marriage, for instance. Given Scotland’s complex geopolitics and history as well as the intricacies of gender politics, contributors determine how poetry might play a key role in renegotiating one’s relationship with notions of home, including the nation. For Carla Sassi and Silke Stroh, “‘Nation’ and ‘home’ point respectively towards distinct ideas of community that are grounded in history/culture and in domestic/affective values” (144), and these demarcations are often complexly interwoven given women’s historically embedded domesticity. Resultantly, ideas of community, voice, representation, agency, and landscape are raised throughout this special issue of Contemporary Women’s Writing, as it engages with poetry’s polyphonic possibilities. Before introducing our contributors to this collection, it is expedient to outline some critical overview of Scottish women’s poetry within the wider milieu of Scottish Literature.
According to Alison Mark and Deryn Rees-Jones (2000), “Currently, within the field of contemporary poetry, women’s work tends to be far less prolifically interpreted, mediated, and analysed than that of men” (xxii). Though this statement was published two decades ago, regrettably, it still clearly resonates. It draws attention to the lingering effects of poetry’s long history as a male-dominated genre, and to the protracted perception of women as “trespassers” into that forbidden territorialized space. To possible objection that we should not fixate upon gender, these facts remind us that, on the contrary, we must do so, at least until women’s poetry is equally “interpreted, mediated, and analysed [as] that of men.”

Spaces must be provided, moreover, to allow for critical engagement with too easily overlooked yet crucial poetic contributions. Given women’s prolific and ongoing poetic output yet relative critical invisibility, the question should not be whether academic studies are polarising gender by focusing upon women’s work. Rather, one should enquire why there are not multiple critical volumes to, at the very least, keep pace with their creative industry.

As such, this imbalance requires a poetics of remapping so that women’s poetry can transcend its critical eclipse and receive long overdue scholarly engagement free of rhetorical skewing. This special issue is aware too of Scottish literature’s relative marginalization within English Literature’s canonical hegemony; as Douglas Gifford and Dorothy McMillan assert (1997), “Scottish women’s writing arguably suffers from the double bind of being Scottish and being by women” (ix). However, such othering can lead to resistance. Michael Gardiner (2007), for instance (borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari), regards Scottish literature as a “minor literature” which “exists within and despite of a major literature, and is quite similar to what we understand as postcolonial literature” (48). Gardiner is not diminishing the smaller nation’s literary contribution since, continuing with Deleuze and
Guattari’s thread, he notes, “the minor is invariably more literary than the major” and, as such, it is “a literature of effect and becoming rather than one of static assumptions” (48). As a dynamic literature of “becoming”, Scottish literature perpetually evolves and resists homogenous stagnation, thus imbuing itself with a heterogeneous diversity that embraces otherness.

When one combines minor Scottish literature with that specifically written by women poets – identified above as marginalised by gender politics – then contemporary Scottish women’s poetry is an energetic area ripe for critical interest. In that sense, the remapped poetics identified above must be a geopoetics, enabling Scottish women’s poetry to be considered in light of its minor national as well as gendered developments. Like Gardiner, Rosi Braidotti’s philosophical feminism frequently utilises the concept of “becoming”, to deterritorialize liberal humanist subjectivity in favour of “what we are capable of becoming” (2006, 87). She posits the disruption of hegemonic unified selfhood in favour of journeying towards endless becoming’s hybrid oscillation not unlike the interstitial encounters and interplay of “the geographics of identity” (Friedman 17) identified by Susan Stanford Friedman (1998) as a remedy to transcend gender’s static subjectivity. Thus, in reimaging their relationship with Scotland as/and home, the contemporary poets discussed here help to redress that geo-gendered imbalance and to consider the significance of women’s voices in exploring national margins and ethnocentric alterity.

While we are concerned with contemporary poets, their journey is, of course, indebted to those previously helping to plot the route. Women have “trespassed” into poetry’s patriarchally territorialized space throughout history, including Mary, Queen of Scots. Carla Sassi’s edited International Companion to Scottish Poetry (2016) includes “fifteen centuries
of poetic production … from ages when ‘Scotland’ did not exist, or its geopolitical configuration was very different from that of today” (1). Although this does not focus specifically on women’s poetry, it does chart Scottish poetry’s early formations and Thomas Owen Clancy’s chapter in that volume – “Early Celtic Poetry (to 1500)” – observes “important phenomena … for instance, poetry by women”, noting “the presence of female voices in the Gaelic tradition strongly represented” (12-13). Though these medieval manuscripts contain poems by aristocratic women, in later periods, for example the nineteenth century, evidence of “women’s own acceptance of their secondary role as passive carriers of tradition (outwith female-only environments)” (Frater and Byrne 30) may have discouraged creativity, and even then with regard to women’s crucial role in producing and sustaining the oral and ballad traditions the male collectors “overshadowed their sources” (Gilbert 38).

In contrast, Margery Palmer McCulloch’s (2000) study of late twentieth-century Scottish women’s poetry observes an optimistic link between social and cultural progress, since “the changes in society which are allowing more women to assume public roles have contributed to the confidence of the 1990s. … This more positive environment is reflected by the number of new voices appearing in the 1990s” (22). The historical dearth of women’s poetry, then, correlates with their confinement to the private sphere and a resultant lack of confidence in wielding the phallic pen. Likewise, for Dorothy McMillan (1997), “Scottish women’s poetry is probably having a better time now than it has ever had” (549). McMillan’s celebratory mood and McCulloch’s enthusiastic assertion that women’s increased entry to the public sphere is “reflected by the number of new voices” in poetry, though, is something that Mark and Rees-jones (2000) might well query in terms of its critical reception. Their identification of the patriarchal dilution of “women’s work” so that it is deemed less than men’s poetry
suggests a phallocratic diminishing of women’s writing as lack, just as women’s paid or unpaid labour is also often derided as somehow lesser. In turn, women themselves are diminutively embodied as lesser or lacking; an other to the normative male.

Given women’s historical association with domestic duties, this clearly confines their poetry to a secondary pedestrian league, and diffuses any perceived threat to male poetic potency. Despite the plethora of emergent voices, McCulloch concludes, “It is not the ‘informationist’ poetry of the younger male poets, nor poetry which plays intellectually with language registers. It does not fight over old battlegrounds of religion and national identity, although it has concern for personal identity and sense of place and the natural world” (25). This casts late twentieth-century Scottish women’s poetry as unthreateningly apolitical and comparatively unintelligent, and reaffirms women’s domestic caretaking duties within “personal identity” and nature. Where women’s work does not comply with the domestic/nature allocation, any concern that they might transgress into public engagement is diffused by comparing it to a kind of wholesome social work, since their “poetry, in its variety, is socially grounded in that it is concerned with the conditions under which people live their lives and with the qualities which make us human” (25). These are all vital themes, but it is disconcertingly restrictive to straightjacket their interests to essentialist thematic roles rather than allow their poetry space to develop and identify its pluralistic potential beyond thresholds of domesticized and nurturing milieu. As such, twentieth-century Scottish women’s poetry urgently requires fuller critical attention to offer further negotiations and contest existing views in order to provide a fuller picture of this vibrant work.

Though published twelve years later, Rhona Brown’s (2012) discussion in many ways mirrors McCulloch’s assertions, positing that “twentieth-century Scottish women’s poetry
often calls on a more localised vocabulary not only in its language and form but in its references to shared experiences and memories, traditions and archetypes” (140). The use of “localised” seems to reconfirm it as a more domestic form than male Scottish poetry. To reiterate Mark and Rees-Jones’s assessment of the relative invisibility of critical engagement with “women’s work” in the late twentieth-century poetic domain, it is worth pondering the negative impact that neglect may have. If, as they argue, women’s poetry is critically disregarded and relegated as an inferior medium, perhaps it becomes more self-conscious of “trespassing” into that phallocratic “field”. Historically conditioned to know their place, women’s Angel-in-the-House legacy perhaps inevitably leads to what Brown identifies as “localised”. But, even the “localised” becomes potentially fraught in an already minor literature; as the second sex in patriarchal Caledonian culture, Aileen Christianson and Alison Lumsden (2000) identify ways in which Scottish women writers must remap the nation through literary imaginings of their own. They note that “[f]requently, it is women writers within national cultures who seemingly disrupt homogeneity” (2), foregrounding the instability of borders and margins in “tropes of liminality used to point up a fluidity and an ambiguity identified with the position of women in society” (Christianson 2002, 67). Borders of nation and self are locations of “multi-dimensional perspectives … in a perpetual state of flux” (68). Through such reconceptualization the Angel can be slain and the poet unleashed.

If women writers are busy remapping that terrain, it is imperative that critics assess its altered topography by revisiting women’s contributions. Crucially, Brown acknowledges that “[p]oetry by Scottish women in the twentieth century is a fertile seam of the Scottish literary tradition, yet to be fully mined” (140), which equally suggests that further critical readings could and, indeed, should revisit this body of work and perchance even uncover evidence of poems which are aberrant in their thematic concerns to the perceived topics. In discussing Liz
Lochhead’s (appointed Scottish Makar in 2011) work, Sassi (2016) notes, “she constructs nationhood as a democratic and inclusive polity, envisaging poetry as a medium to express local as well as planetary consciousness” (1). This suggests that Lochhead’s work, whose first collection *Memo for Spring* was published in 1972 and most recent, *Fugitive Colours* in 2016, goes far beyond safely contained feminine thresholds and opens doors to wider cosmopolitan vistas.

As it stands, we agree that much of the modern critical focus so far, sparse though it is, has been on twentieth-century work. With that in mind, it seems crucial to explore the contemporary terrain of Scottish women’s poetry in the twenty-first century and whether, for instance, those voices will journey beyond apolitical concerns or local communities in their relationship with home. An example of perhaps more outward-looking themes includes Anita John’s “And so the People Spoke 18-9-2014” in Katie Allies and Sarah Paterson’s edited anthology, *Aiblins: New Scottish Political Poetry* (2016), a poem which charts “when Scotland cast its vote” (84) during the 2014 independence referendum. This poem and the anthology’s title signal an appetite within women’s poetry to address home more widely, as geopolitical nation, and to confidently contribute to Scotland’s remapping. Current Scottish Makar, Jackie Kay, has always engaged with political themes in her poetry, including sexuality, race, and gender, leading to Lumsden’s assessment of her as “an important voice in the new Scotland, which must include such diversity within its own definition of itself” (90).

Kay’s latest collection, *Bantam* (2017) continues that conversation, particularly in light of Brexit’s impact; “Planet Farage” epitomizes a clear pro-EU voice at odds with the main proponent of Britain’s exit Nigel Farage’s insular views of borders, just as Scotland itself voted strongly to remain within the EU, signalling a divergent geopolitical fissure within the
UK. Kay’s repetitive use of “No” throughout the poem emphasises the insularity of Brexiteers and their equal hostility for anything deemed leftist like environmentalism, such as “No trees, no plants, no immigrants … No recycling global-warming nutters”. The long list of refusals magnifies Britain’s “Little man, little woman” closed mindset against alterity: “No Greens, no Brussels, no vegetarians, no lesbians / no vegan lesbians”, cements a conservative concretization of heteronormative values that hostilely silences dialogism and negates civil and environmental rights. The endless repetition of “No” throughout “Planet Farage” is a haunting revenant too of Scotland’s squandered opportunity when No voters won the 2014 independence referendum, setting the nation on a fraught Brexit path alongside “little” Britain. That lost opportunity reverberates through “April Sunshine”, where Kay recollects her adoptive parents’ lifetime of activism “for democracy” paralleled with their recent hospitalization preventing joining a “march against Trident with Nicola Sturgeon”. Worlds away from the small-minded hostility of “Planet Farage”, their open-hearted empathy is still vibrant in old-age as they identify with the cosmopolitan leadership of Scotland’s First Minister. Kay’s poem “Threshold”, her first as Makar and read at the opening of the Fifth Session of the Scottish Parliament in 2016, continues this affirmation of radical openness with reference to “Scotland’s changing faces” and a diverse list of people who now align themselves with Scottishness.

Important work is clearly being done by poets, practitioners and activists, and this special issue kick-starts a vital engagement with that work and begins to interpret its relevance to the field of contemporary Scottish women’s writing. Lucy Burnett’s poem ‘The Brexfast After’ in Tripping Over Clouds (2019) recollects the morning after the 2016 EU referendum and Brexit’s daunting impact: “refilling the bitter smell / of the first morning coffee / with something more akin to fear / than I like to / acknowledge these days”. Reminiscent of a
bitterly regretted one-night stand, accentuated with the coffee’s “bitter smell”, anxiety creeps over the persona as the morning after breaks with the dawning reality of Brexit’s uncertainty and fear. Future outcomes depend upon the rash naivety and hostilities of the referendum, as the poem descends to utter despair. It ends as it began, in a heightened stage of anxiety: “tomorrow is another day – I fear – and yesterday’s coffee not yet begun”. A cinematic echo of Scarlett O’Hara’s resolve turns to the stale aftertaste of “yesterday’s coffee” anticipating future “fear” and uncertainty.

If twentieth-century women’s poetry depicts a cultural feminity or localism, as McCulloch and Brown respectively indicate, how and in what ways does this potentially evolve with the dawning of a new century? Certainly the first two decades have been notable for a range of liberalizations in relation to identities of sex, gender and sexuality. Same-sex marriage is now legal in all nations of the UK and the Gender Recognition Act of 2004, at time of writing under consultation, enables transgender people to legally change their gender. These judicial developments reflect changes in social attitudes after long civil rights campaigns by trans and queer communities. Though the debates around sexed identity continue to rage in certain quarters, gender and sexual fluidity are increasingly visible bringing out “a queerness, or sexual excess, and a transness, or gender ambiguity, that exceeds simple divisions between gay and straight or trans and cis” (Halberstam xii). Most pertinent to our purposes here, the categories of “woman” and “women” have been in question since feminist challenges emerged. Virginia Woolf in 1930 in the same essay in which she kills the “Angel in the House” asked, “I mean, what is a woman?” and asserted “I assure you, I do not know” (142). Similarly, with some infamy and before Judith Butler’s development of the same theme, Denise Riley in Am I that Name? argued that “not only ‘woman’ but also ‘women’ is troublesome” (1). We advocate the current troubling of the category of women and agree
with Riley’s vision that ‘‘women’ is a volatile collectivity in which female persons can be very differently positioned, so that the apparent continuity of the subject of ‘women’ isn’t to be relied on’’ (2). This special issue on Scottish women’s poetry understands that instability as a constructive rendering of a category in process, that embraces queer and trans women as creators, co-conspirators and collaborators in the feminine. This is reflected in thriving poetry scenes across Scotland and present in contributions to the virtual roundtable included in this issue.

Considering further the evolution of poetry in this new century, with globalization, transnationalism, refugees fleeing global conflicts or climate change, and ecological impacts affecting Scotland’s demographic, women’s twenty-first century “poetic domain” appears to be envisioning further as a wider plethora of voices contribute to and reposition considerations of local/home. Does Scottish women’s poetry need, then, to be re-evaluated along critical lines that respond to broader cosmopolitan frameworks? This is certainly thematically relevant with the dynamic discussion emerging in the virtual roundtable, as poetry becomes a space of engagement and multifarious perspectives. Within a nation that voted to remain in the EU, is Scottish women’s poetry a more welcome home for alterity, and can locality be regarded through a kaleidoscopic prism? While viewed historically as a troublesome other, Scotland’s devolutionary powers have enabled it to reposition itself from the centralized grasp of Anglo-Establishment dominance. Scotland’s arguably newfound confidence since devolution and beyond has generated a flourishing literary community, especially including many women who are actively reshaping and re-imagining the nation within and beyond its borders. It is, then, surely time to consider the impact of these contemporary feminine poetic voices.
Perhaps this decentralization of hegemonic Britishness is evident throughout the UK’s devolved nations. Certainly, Alice Entwistle regards gender and nationhood to be key interrogators of geopolitical identity in contemporary Welsh poetry, “explor[ing] how the female poet is shaped by, imagines and helps shape the geo-cultural politics of a partly devolved, newly self-conscious and outward-looking twenty-first century Wales” (xvi). In order to delineate precisely how women’s poetry can renegotiate or remap a recentred yet globalized Wales, Entwistle utilizes the postcolonial interstitial third space of Homi K. Bhabha’s cultural relocation alongside Friedman’s feminist geographies of spatial encounter.

In essence, Entwistle believes Welsh women’s poetry etches its literary landscape across fields of hitherto established masculinized territories, generating an in-betweenness that takes account of minority gendered and national identities within a centrally framed patriarchal Britishness. As such, it breaks the frame in a similar vein to Christianson and Lumsden’s detection of women’s writing envisioning a literary remapping of Scotland. Entwistle notes that Vicki Bertram “identifies poetry by women as ‘a valuable index of cultural change; yielding insights into the placing and construction of women in culture and society and [recording their] changes and challenges to the status quo’” (Entwistle xvi), and progresses to offer insightful ways in which Welsh nationhood can further complicate and infuse such poetic documenting. Entwistle asserts, “By comparison with their English, Scottish and Irish peers, women have been writing poetry in Wales for an unusually long time” (3), which is a fascinating aspect of Welsh women’s poetic intrusion into a male literary form. But this lacks extensive commentary or timescale to determine what is meant by the comparative “unusually long”, and whether this includes ordinary or establishment women, while we know from Clancy that Scottish women’s poetry is evident in medieval manuscripts. But, as with Christianson and Lumsden’s view that Scottish women’s writing offers a national remapping to unsettle established patriarchal conventions, we determine that contemporary
Scottish women’s poetry merits the discussion afforded in this special issue. In that sense, we identify a welcome convergence with Entwistle’s project which, in time, might provide further debate concerning women’s post-devolutionary Celtic poetics. Meanwhile, we offer a specifically Scottish dialogue.

Of course, neither Scottish literature nor women’s writing, specifically poetry for our purposes, is inherently uniform but, as we noted above, is a diverse process of becoming. Its plurality is detected in terms of the nation’s diverse cultures, landscapes, languages, geopolitics, genders, races, ethnicities, and sexualities. Just as Entwistle reads Welsh women’s poetry through Bhabha’s theoretical lens, likewise Christianson and Lumsden utilize his use of cultural hybridity, to “celebrate the plurality with Scottish women’s writing” (6). We too wish to acknowledge and celebrate such diversity and that very heterogeneity is disclosed in the vibrantly diverse articles that compose this special issue. If, as McMillan claims, twentieth-century Scottish women’s poetry exemplifies positive inroads, this issue explores that journey’s progression in the new century. Indeed, the proliferation of late twentieth-century women poets in Scotland is a period populated by prominent innovators, such as Liz Lochhead, Kathleen Jamie, Carol Ann Duffy and Jackie Kay, as well as neglected but pioneering and experimental practitioners from the mid-century such Veronica Forrest-Thomson and Margaret Tait, all of whom are vital torchbearers carving a pathway for newer poetic voices.

This special issue brings together newly commissioned essays from practitioners and critics, both established and emerging voices in Scottish poetry and criticism, to forge new perspectives on this proliferating creative arena. In “Daughterlands: Dialogues in Scottish Women’s Poetry”, Glenda Norquay presents the concept of “daughterlands”, tracing
conceptualisations and connections between established poets Duffy, Lochhead, Kay and Jamie and the more recent work of Claire Askew. Her reading of several poems outlines how women’s poetry re-imagines Scotland through interstitial spaces: in its fusion of daughter/lands, Norquay’s essay emphasizes that the relationship between the many complexities, ambiguities and instabilities of familial positionings can be mapped to a geopolitical envisioning of Scotland’s hybridity. Equally hybrid in its reimagining and “trespassing” into phallic poetic forms is Greg Thomas’s exemplary work of contemporary criticism, “Concrete Poetry and Scottish Women’s Writing: the case of Veronica Forrest-Thomson”, where Thomas uncovers a piece of neglected literary history in the experimental work of Forrest-Thomson. In a Guardian article in January 2017 questioning the celebrating of Burns Night, Stuart Kelly searches for an alternative Scottish poet to valourize: “Here’s a suggestion. You probably haven’t heard of Veronica Forrest-Thomson … Seek her out, instead of sentimentally praising the boor-bard of Scotland”. Thomas does exactly that, situating Forrest-Thomson in the concrete poetry movement, interrogating its masculinist aesthetic premises and presenting her connection to the movement as foundational to her work. Equally, poetry’s often romanticist influenced androcentric relationship with nature breathes fresh air in Laura Severin’s consideration of the work of Valerie Gillies, in particular her collaboration with textile artist Anna S. King in their exhibition “A Garden of Time and Silence” at Dawyck Botanic Garden in 2016. Here ecofeminism informs an exploration of a different way of interacting with nature; collaborative, accepting of transience, and challenging established aesthetic hierarchies. In contrast, Alan Gillis’s close reading, in “Late Negotiations: Ecopoetry and Kathleen Jamie”, finds “corrective scepticism” at the center of Jamie’s ecopoetics, which “refuse the illusion of simple harmonization with nature”.

Continuing thematic links between human and landscape, Peter Mackay’s “‘If You Don’t Get Caught’: Islands, Isolation and Entrapment in Contemporary Scottish Women’s Poetry”
discusses the significance of islands for women poets, prompted by Jackie Kay’s post-Brexit referendum odyssey of Scottish islands, and focuses on their charged and varying role in reconfiguring place in visions of “Scotland”, utopian and otherwise.

As contemporary Scottish women’s poetry is seen to unsettle and reconfigure phallocratic notions of poetry and place, an interview with Japanese-born poet Lila Matsumoto furthers the pluralistic prism of Scottish identity, and considers the influence of the nation’s poetry and culture on her work. The dialogic and relational dynamic of poetry’s potential, underpinning all of these essays in different ways, is brought to fruition in a virtual roundtable discussion that engages with the contemporary meaning of “Scottish”, “woman”, “poetry”, in which Jane Goldman both facilitates and contributes to the creative/critical dialogue between twenty leading and emergent poets. This cutting-edge conversational piece showcases the multifarious dynamic trajectories currently evident in the field and provides a poetics of Scotland’s diverse contributory voices. In the dynamic space afforded by this vibrant virtual roundtable, the cross-sections of meaning applied to contemporary Scottish women’s poetry are simultaneously affirmed, problematized and remapped in an exchange that reaches ever forward towards new fluid possibilities. Our closing piece, it emphasizes the heteroglossia of Scotland’s contemporary poetic voices and offers a new direction in poetry’s ongoing creative journey.

This special issue introduces important debates and voices within the area of contemporary Scottish women’s poetry. Although it is a sparsely populated critical field at the moment, our aim, as aforementioned, is not to survey the area but to make a targeted intervention to overturn preconceived notions of gender, nation and poetry’s male-dominance, and inspire
new discourses on the diverse aspects of the prolific poetic production of Scottish women writers. By doing so, we hope to offer new seeds of critical interlocution.

We would like to give our sincere thanks to all the contributors and, in particular, to Sarah Dunnigan who was instrumental in the early stages of this project, in preparing the groundwork for this special issue. We also want to extend our heartfelt thanks to Holly Laird and Kaye Mitchell for their generosity, tireless editorial endeavours and enthusiasm in bringing this project to fruition and affording it a key platform in *Contemporary Women’s Writing*.

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