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## This Isa Nice Transpersonal Protean Lyric: Engagement in Farid Matuk

*This Isa Nice Neighborhood*, by Farid Matuk. Colorado and Arizona:  
Letter Machine Editions, 2011.

"For me, at its best, poetry produces enormous polymorphous  
joy." —Elizabeth Willis

"The poem is always what happens when we think something  
else is happening—the poem always exists "in spite of," rarely  
because of . . . —Bin Ramke

In Farid Matuk's *This Isa Nice Neighborhood*, cars pass by, cars are ridden, gangs of children huff paint, always amid borders that reappear, get crossed, dissolve/are dissolving. This portrait of interweaving transit allows the poems to record difference: the poems function as small machines of constantly shifting and focused generational, gender, sexual, racial, economic, etc. exchange. When excised from smooth narrative, difference necessarily goes to the street, the plane, the car. Where Whitman tried to inhabit the nation and nature in his tracing of his steps and the paths of others, Matuk's speaker can inhabit and has captured our sense of one sped-up interlacing world: hectic, ephemeral, earthy, engaged all through a lyric voice. Yet Matuk is able to put the disparate experience of a speaker into an exhilarating, recognizable balancing act using travel as a setting, rhetorical provocation, and a diction that connects the present with the ancient. In doing so, his poems move the location of difference from the margin/borderland and the marginalized to everywhere and, somehow, nowhere. In other words, in these poems, one has an exhilarating understanding of the impossibly free.

### TRAVELING

Matuk's poems often show people in transit, riding in planes, trains, and cars and their ubiquity gives the poems a gratifying sense of the

bigness of the world. Not just of vehicles changing or breaking, but of travel simultaneously miraculous and mundane. Matuk's speaker is always about to step off a curb into a car, or riding in a car, or watching cars go by. The speaker and the poems' other characters and their vehicles don't seem so much travelers going somewhere as having already arrived actually by being true travelers: they can barely recall where they've been and who has come before them. The past informs their being differently, probably because it feels as if the future has the upper hand in the poetry's imagination.

In "Long Before and Shortly After," the speaker mentions:

trees stand outside  
and grow a sticky purple  
flower over pack mules herding  
into the alley . . . (20)

Enjambment renders purple abstract momentarily, and the flower over the pack mules for a second sounds like a verb. This makes it feel as if the up close lushness can blot over any mundanity: the mind will overcome reality. And the speaker proceeds to re-imagine a childhood moment: all that he is about to understand in history (Reagan, Velcro) and the upholstery burning his legs as the car "sluices/ onto the freeway" followed by a list of LA street names. The specific past moment, the dot on the timeline leads straight to a moment of looking across the street, so to speak, to:

. . . St. Boniface doors  
tarred, I'm told, to keep the spic  
Catholics in at least  
today I am among my whites  
whom I love very much.

In his poetics statement, Matuk himself describes riding around in cars when his family arrived in LA and going to neighborhoods to look at rich people's houses. And that this made him feel on equal footing somehow with the wealthy, that they could all exist within reach of each other. So that when in the poem Matuk writes, "I am among my whites/whom I love very much" his traveling is a form of erasure, or a preserver of a perspective not gotten elsewhere: these little demarcations can be crossed at any time. This lyric voice, then travels freely, with no symptom to show but rather with nothing need to prove itself, the imagination and generosity being the shortest route

to being like or getting close to the rich and transforming the self.

At the end of "Orange County Knows How to Party," Matuk persists in making time and place multi-focal and thereby blows up categories. He writes:

I should apologize  
To the cars  
Rushing by  
I'm sorry  
I left you  
I'm sorry  
I'm looking at  
You I  
Will be  
Among  
you soon

He apologizes not to the past, the mentioned ill mother, or even to the particular place of Orange County, but to the cars, the endless cars of that city. It's as if the speaker is apologizing to that mobility of mind he left behind, or that freedom that he wants to take up again and all the people who piled into the cars, mixing and enduring. It's hard, too, not to feel this echo with "my whites whom I love very much"—the my/you intimacy for not a bar, not a corner, but for that defiant, messy inclusiveness.

There seems to be no anxiety of "getting there" or what the traveling means or could mean. Instead, the lyric allows the passing scenery or car to be sung, allows time to be still within the mind alert to all positions, all pains and certainly best for us as readers, all pleasures. The speakers in the two poems named "Talk" begin by asserting, "Today I am Moroccan" and "Today I am Sicilian" as if one person is performing both and one can see him doing his bit of traveling to inhabit both the poor thieving kid and the older tourist. This constant mobility emphasizes too the shifting nature of class and states of mind but also allows the people who populate the book to have freedom in social mobility and equanimity about surprisingly difficult feelings and moments. And instead of embedding the names of their purposes and destinations into their understanding of themselves, they seem to float on, seen as their present selves and annihilated future selves. The speaker notes in "Cairn" the airplane seatmate's cadaverous potentials:

My neighbor's  
farts turn  
and turn in my nostrils  
they make me a little carrier  
a little urn for his death

Not only is the Other's death imagined—the speaker himself becomes a little carrier, a little urn. As if this poetic requires the shortcut across time via the imagination that will bypass dreary stone urns and put two people in a closer and more essential relationship to each other. The hand extended to the stranger, raised to a blackly humorous, bodily level.

And so Matuk's poetry uses transit to throw together disparate people and offer a kind of engagement both fruitful to and banishing of self. Subject position loses its integrity in motion: at the very bottom this speaker is used to getting away with and simply used to being free to take on and take off the burdens of others in a profound but off-handed empathy.

#### THE STABILIZING DICTION OF THE ANCIENT

Besides redistricting subject with travel and repositioning him/her in socioeconomic space, Matuk foils the reader's orientation to era or time through some sleights of diction. These are surprisingly reminiscent of ancient poetics. While right on the pulse of how we live and how we sound, Matuk seems to extend his style beyond Rimbaud's notion that "you must be absolutely modern" and even beyond Ashbery's notion that "the acknowledging of the simultaneity of all of life, the condition that nourishes poetry at every second." Somehow, Matuk uses the past or some timeless effect to keep the protean quality from making poems slide away from the reader.

In "Southside Free," Matuk collages the narrative of US/Mexico border street children huffing paint along with an oracle of Delphi (who also huffed ethylene, according to National Geographic), as well as some cartoon characters. One of the most difficult poems in which to orient oneself, the texture evokes something secret, lost, historical through a strange archaic diction. One cartoon character replies to the other's worry about a pocked window:

"Divots in the pane bedull the sun  
and shadow my thigh with distant and startled crows.  
I think we're alright."

Yet this is paired with "we're alright" allowing the voices to stay warm and also straddle eras even if they are only imagined ones.

Matuk throws us some kennings when Marco has no spell to say aloud, so goes with a list of, "my horse-hair wig, my ghetto-blaster, my mineral-ridged, rail-tied, burrowed desert." These marry the very old with the recently old so that artifacts can co-exist: it's the "immaculate reality": the dings and dust that make some androids more real than less real. And once Matuk's own such spell is underway, here comes the Real, done over as a cartoon. In describing one girl's high as "the jackboots of pleasure marching through her lungs," Matuk sets history's bullies as agents of her ability to see out of the present and into, we infer, the future just as the oracle had. It's a bit dizzying but the fullness of this all-times vision, the lack of regard stabilizes us, allows us to feel the pleasure isn't fleeting, or simply in one spot. It's polymorphous.

As he says in his poetic statement, this fullness of time collects its meaning towards a:

revision of Keats's negative capability from "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties" to "being uncertainties," a shift from incongruous ideas to incongruous subjectivity.

## THE RHETORIC OF THE TRANSPERSONAL

In the example of black humor mentioned above (the fart turning in the speaker's nostrils, their little urn), Matuk reaches for the rhetorical statement that pushes the reader. In his statement on poetics, he asserts outright the purpose of this: "The fact of our reaching for otherness is the starting place of an ethic, even if our only means for approaching that otherness is clumsy and indecorous." By pushing us to feel these tensions and missteps, the poet aims for honesty, for the representation that doesn't cover up complexity. It feels equanimous somehow, this notion of saying what is "indecorous": Matuk is able to transcend finite personhood, i.e. depict the transpersonal.

In "Tallying Song," the speaker writes about his reaction to people trying to leave and escape hurricane Katrina:

When the levees broke, the voice I could make said, Look at you, you're not even tryin' to get a Camry, you never even tried to get a Camry, so now you can't get out. Of course I'm angry I don't have a Camry either.

The speaker goes on to say that he says his "indecorous line" to the TV most times it showed people standing on their roofs and that "my black friend has an Irish name. So what, sometimes the signs don't work."

So whatever Whitman had attempted in his litanies breaks down under this slippage and this version of cool rage at the inaccuracy of names. Matuk claims in his poetics to feel we need to imagine the other rather than vilify the other and understand the importance of not counting oneself impervious these feelings. He rounds these emotions up through Richard Pryor's pleadings in the poem, "But Richard, Will You Show me and Ethic of Freedom" alongside ironies and paradoxes of race stated so flatly and with so little spin that the sexual content in the poem at least provides some beautiful rhetorical cushion: "I find freedom in believing we are all bottoms first/ maybe this is a real comfort to a fool." Partly bottoms as infants and bottoms as people who have to learn to receive.

In other words, Matuk's speaker maintains a coolness that allowed him to see the rich neighborhoods as somehow part of his identity just as the speaker in this "But Richard" poem can understand the importance of hate and love being so much the same color. Of existing in many points of view at once. Through these rhetorical jabs, Matuk favors the incidental qualities of subjecthood, draws them into the light, and thinks of a way to pour it on even more. The sheen of a defined set, words clearly being stuck with, not many extra words appear in any poem here. This allows the idea of interconnectedness or oneness to take on not a "woo woo" aspect, but a diction that underscores the idea that we are limited by language, that we are dealing with some big pixels in order to draw this detailed universe. The sock is the sock until you reverse it.

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