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# Interview With Farid Matuk: Alternative Systems — Liberatory Play in Farid Matuk's Poetry

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In times of political tension, reflections on history, the past, and how facts are — or are not — transmitted through time come to the fore and create new dialogues in the present. Literature as an artistic expression tells us a lot about the circumstances of a historical period, and what has been perceived as recurring in literary events and circles, where authors talk about their work, is the confrontation with the grand discourse, with the speech of the so-called "enemy", who, in the course of history, "has not ceased to win" (Benjamin, 1987, p. 225).

Contemporary poetry has established itself as one of the cultural expressions where the development of insurgent epistemologies stands in opposition to the symbolic and material violence that marks the present day. Situated in the space between aesthetics and politics, between language and body, between memory and invention, poetry can be, as Jacques Rancière (2004/2009) proposes, a regime of the sensible that redistributes the forms of visibility and audibility. Helping us to see, hear, and feel. In the contemporary world — also shaped by forced migrations, historical erasures, and disputes over narratives — poetry becomes not only a form of expression, but a field of ontological dispute. The poetry that emerges from the diasporic and migrant experience, for example, realizes what Homi Bhabha (1994) calls the "third space", a space of cultural translation in which identity is constantly negotiated. In this liminal space, the poetic self is often a subject in transit, fragmented, multilingual, whose words carry both the traces of loss and the gestures of reconstruction. It is not just a matter of narrating displacement, but of operating poetically from it, rewriting symbolic territories from what has been shattered or silenced.

Farid Matuk, born on July 18, 1974, is a poet and educator whose literary and critical work has established itself as one of the most influential expressions of contemporary decolonial poetry. Born at the intersection of territories and languages, Matuk writes from a field of forces in which landscape, language, and politics intertwine, rejecting the immobility with which the world around us can often be perceived. His poetry focuses on themes such as migratory flows, the land as ancestry, and the figure of the mother as origin and belonging. Between visual images and intimate gestures, Matuk constructs a radical geopoesy, in which melancholy, repetition, sexuality, and multiple genders coexist, where place is an interweaving. Territory is not given, it is woven (Glissant, 1990/1997), in a body-text that both resists and reinvents.

As Glissant (1990/1997) observes, "the poetics of relation" arises from the clash of otherness, from coexistence with the opacity of the other, and from the rejection

of totality. It is in this perspective that Matuk's poetry assumes a fundamental role in decolonial thought: not only as a form of symbolic resistance, but also as a mode of existence and production of knowledge that escapes colonial grammars. Authors such as Walter Mignolo (2010) and Aníbal Quijano (2000) argue that colonialism did not occur only through territorial conquest, but also through the imposition of a Eurocentric matrix of thought. When we come into contact with the work of the poet interviewed, we understand how his poems challenge such archetypes about the world and space. Demonstrating that geopolitics slips into the subjective, but not only that. By recovering ancestral epistemic voices, poetry acts as a form of epistemic disobedience. Articulating poetry and visual arts, especially in dialogue with contemporary installations and artistic practices, Matuk's writing is also anchored in the idea that beauty can be a form of insubordination. While his poetry sings of the non-static nature of what we commonly think of as inert, such as landscape, geography, and laws, the reader discovers how playfulness can also be part of committed and intimate poetry, proving that "space is the product of interrelationships; constituted by interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately minute" (Massey, 2005, p. 4).

Melancholy, the repetition of titles and their reconstructions, sexuality and gender, the multiplicity of spaces: the world may be chaos, but Farid refuses to give up beauty, much less hide pain. Where hatred, racism, violence, and borders exist to separate, whether through treaties, policing, states, or weapons, Matuk's poetry demonstrates that beyond all this, the earth remains fertile. Hands continue to carry seeds, insisting on planting what is hoped for tomorrow. There is a strong spatial dimension in his poems; his images and bodies are presented in an intimate language, often reminiscent of a stream-of-consciousness. Farid creates a poetics that not only represents the world, but also breaks and transcends it — when he combines aesthetic excellence and contemporary reflection. In this sense, poetry becomes an expanded artistic practice, summoning the sensitive as a field of struggle and reinvention of experience.

The connection between poetry and territory, central to the poems, proposes a relational notion of space, which considers territory as a constantly changing constellation, woven by social and historical relationships, named by memory or by the present. In this scenario, poetry acts as a geopoetic force reconfiguring landscapes, names, and rewriting the presence of racialized, displaced, or exiled bodies. Through poetic language, territory ceases to be merely a geographical given and becomes a symbolic, lived space — what Abdias Nascimento (1980) called the "territory of ancestral memory". Ancestry, in this context, is not a passive inheritance, but a living force that guides the poetic gesture. As Leda Maria Martins (2022) proposes, diasporic memory operates through "performances of spiraling time", in which the past is not behind us, but is inscribed in the present, straining against linear and Western time. The poetic word, in this register, becomes ritual, archive, and convocation: ancestry is thus inscribed not only as thematic content, but as a form of temporality and knowledge, whether in memory spaces or in the presence of mothers and aunts.

The following interview aims to explore these interconnected themes, drawing on the work of a poet whose production mobilizes the axes of migration, diaspora, visual arts, and ancestry as creative forces. Throughout the dialogue, the intention is not only to illuminate formal and thematic aspects of writing, but above all to listen to how poetry can operate as a language of the world — a language that, by stretching the boundaries of language, body, and art, proposes new possibilities for existence, belonging, and the future. Matuk's poems appear in *The Paris Review* (Matuk, 2024b), *The Nation* (Matuk, 2020), *Brooklyn Rail* (Matuk, 2022b), *Bomb Magazine* (Matuk, 2021), *Lana Turner Journal* (Matuk, 2024a), *Poetry* magazine (Matuk, 2022a), among others. They have been organized into anthologies, most recently in *The Best American Experimental Poetry* (Abramson et al., 2014), *Here to Stay: Poetry and Prose from the Undocumented Diaspora* (Castillo et al., 2024), and *Latino Poetry: A New Anthology* (Gonzaléz, 2024). His work has been supported by a residency at the Headlands Center for the Arts, a Holloway Fellowship in the Practice of Poetry at the University of California, Berkeley, and a 2024 USA Fellowship from United States Artists.

The more we read and reflect on culture, poetry, and historical processes, the more we realize that there is no permanence of historical interpretation due to the temporal and transitory nature of time itself. When the concept of "progress" wants to give way to the rubble caused by violence, we break this by singing about beauty and pain, the norm and the deviation, yesterday and today, in poetry where there is the possibility of making art through "a new form of exegesis, which rescues the legibility of the past against the conventions of official memory" (Buck-Morss, 2010/2018, p. 27). We hope that with the publication of this bilingual interview[1], more readers will become familiar with the author's vast body of work and the strong multi-artistic character of his production. This production helps us reinvent the way we look at the past, subjectivity, and the artistic output we create through both.

**Amanda Amaral (AA):** Do you feel any kind of external pressure from the book market? I ask this, taking into account your Peruvian and Syrian heritage, as well as what black Brazilian poets say about the literary market and what it expects from their writing. Do you think there is a demarcated theme that puts pressure on your literary work, or do you feel you can write freely and organically?

**Farid Matuk (FM):** I guess first we should define the thematic pressure, but as I try, I find it almost impossible. It's a bit of a commonplace that White liberal readers (on whom the literary market in the United States depends) want content that mourns but doesn't rage against oppression. But I've seen White liberal readers eagerly lap up poems of rage and poems of grief and poems of joy and poems of quiet contemplation by queer and trans and Black and Indigenous writers and so on. Or maybe they are sitting

[1] Interview conducted in the second semester of 2024 during the period of a sandwich doctorate at the University of Arizona, Tucson.

in penance and afterwards feel the fortitude they showed in suffering or witnessing our performances earned them some relief from guilt and complicity. I've yet to encounter a poem so radical that it can outrun an audience's desires, whatever they may be. So, maybe it's best to not worry about it and write what we need to and address our poems to our intimates, our beloveds, our kin, our future peoples who might look back on us as ancestors. My guess is that our poems alone will never trouble dominant systems of cultural production and circulation, so we'll have to come up with alternate systems of cultural production and circulation, alternate rituals for performing and experiencing our languages.

**AA:** Does being a poet influence your academic life, considering your position as an associate professor at the University of Arizona?

**FM:** Maybe the trick is to not let the academic role influence the poetic life, to teach in good faith, retire, and never look back. I'm very interested in poets in their 70s, the ones who remain curious and alive in their practice even when the invitations to readings and to journal publications slow down, when they're no longer read by the young poets, and when they can no longer hold young poets as captive audiences called students.

**AA:** Concurrently with this interview, two significant events were taking place on the American scene: the genocide in Palestine and the presidential elections. Has your experience as a poet been affected by this?

**FM:** My experience as a living person has been affected by this. First, in holding space for United States-based Palestinian friends whose relatives in Gaza and elsewhere in Palestine have been murdered, more recently by holding space for friends whose relatives in Lebanon have been murdered, and also holding space for Jewish friends who love life at the risk of exile from their own community. However, as this collective witnessing and grieving develops, it will eventually filter through my writing, but I'm not worried about that now. In the meantime, we in the United States have turned away from each other: we're perpetually walking down one long institutional hallway, and we do not know how to make eye contact.

**AA:** For you, what is the poem's place in the world? Many poems seem to name the world, sensations, and objects. Does the poem act as a tool for organization or disorganization?

**FM:** Poems can find many different places or positions in the world, from textbooks to political rallies to digital platforms that help them circulate virally. The poem I'm interested in making wants to find a way very close to the reader's private, quiet space, a space so close to an individual's nexus of spirit, imagination, intellect, and language that

it helps the individual reader connect with the ancestral and living collectives that they both carry and are carried by. I like the dialectic you name between organization and disorganization. Some kind of fluid or even pleasurable movement between those two poles is what I want when I read poetry and what I hope to offer through the poems I make.

**AA:** Sexuality and intimacy are also some of the themes you investigate poetically. What is your opinion on the use of adjectives in literature, such as queer literature, women's literature, and black literature? Do you name the literature you write with any contemporary adjectives? Why?

**FM:** I do, insofar as I collaborate with marketing directors at the presses with which I publish, and I'm happy to be included in anthology projects that organize groupings of poets by identity. It would be idiotically apolitical to not acknowledge at least two things: 1) people like to feel part of communities or tribes, these are sites of affirmation, spiritual sustenance, material aid, collective resistance, etc., and policing that impulse seems like nothing but an ego trip. 2) Power may be structural in its form, financial and military in its substance, but power's mythologies and the logic by which power distributes privileges and material benefits are embodied, having everything to do with patriarchal and white supremacist control of reproduction and the transfer of generational wealth. Organizing or tagging literature to help it circulate with an awareness of these two ideas seems, at worst, harmless, and at best, it helps readers and writers find work that might affirm what they live and challenge how they show up in politicized bodies.

All that said, I think we could be more humble about literature's ability to effect change. United States literary publishing — across big corporate publishing houses and micropresses alike — has been putting out anthologies and book series marked by identity categories for several decades. And despite important struggles and some gains in legislative protection and media representation, despite a greater variety of stories circulating, we lack an organized left with a plan to take over and transform the structures of power, and, except for small cadres of committed activists, most notably around the recent Stop Cop City[2] and Water Protection[3] movements, we lack a collective imagination that could even begin to contend with potential confrontations with the state. The right in the U.S. has cultivated an imagination and hoarded expertise that very much seeks to transform the systems of material and representational power. Liberals, who largely dominate the cultural sphere in the United States, are so committed to trusting the myth

[2] The Stop Cop City movement is a grassroots coalition of activists, local residents, environmentalists, and racial justice advocates who oppose the construction of a massive police training facility in the Weelaunee Forest in Atlanta, Georgia. The movement calls for protecting the urban forest and redirecting public funds toward community-based alternatives to policing (https://stopcop.city).

[3] The Water Protection movement is a grassroots, Indigenous-led effort to defend water as a sacred and essential source of life. It gained international attention during the 2016 protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock, where water protectors opposed the construction of an oil pipeline that threatened the Missouri River and sacred Indigenous lands (https://www.waterprotectorlegal.org/).

of the benign administrative state that they think of the kind of organizing that's happening among the extreme right as distasteful, grasping for domination instead of what it is, a sense of radical agency in creating a world they want to live in.

**AA:** When we study the ways in which racism operates in colonized and colonizing countries, we see two poles in sociological studies: as examples, in Portugal, statements such as "go back to your country" are recurrent, while in Brazil, the most common is to hear "no, there is no racism here, we are all equal". What is your view about living in North America? Do you think racism here is more veiled? Or have people felt freer to express racist acts lately? Do you feel that this has changed in recent years?

**FM:** I don't think racism has ever been veiled to those it seeks to make most vulnerable; in the United States, that's Black and Indigenous folks, first and most brutally, but that also includes every community free of having to identify as white. I say "free" because it's important to me to hold the excommunication from the privileged position of whiteness as its own kind of good.

I also think more people of color[4] in the United States do have a greater awareness now about how different communities experience, resist, exploit, and benefit from our respective proximities to whiteness. We have a language now that lets us name anti-blackness among, for example, Latinos.

While it's true that white supremacist violence and rhetoric have always been present, it's also true that some things have intensified in the last fifty years as elites have steered the United States economy from one based on manufacturing to one based on financial speculation. We shuttered the factory to trap everyone in one massive national casino, and in casinos, the house always wins. College-educated elites have benefited from this change, but the "house" here is controlled by extreme elites, the hoarders who control the top 0.1% of wealth.

It's not news that to maintain a hold of such an off-balance machine, elites will activate various enemies in the imagination of white people, broadly understood.

**AA:** The figure of the "mother" appears in many of your poems and always as a voice of multiple experiences. Where does this interest come from? Are you interested in what mothers are for the society we live in?

**FM:** Mothers and motherhood bear so many simultaneously intersecting claims from various forms of power — patriarchal, economic, white supremacist, imperialist,

[4] The term "people of color" is used in the United States as a broad, political way to refer to all individuals who are not considered white, including Black, Latino, Indigenous, Asian, Middle Eastern, and other communities. It is a political and collective term that emerged as a way of recognizing the common experiences of racism by racialized groups. However, the term is also subject to criticism, as it encompasses very diverse groups with different histories, cultures, and forms of oppression, which can obscure specificities and oversimplify the distinct struggles of different groups by grouping them together.

just to start. I can't think about power without considering reproductive labor. There are plenty of cases of economic and social mobility in the United States, lives that have exceeded (by normative measures) the circumstances of their birth, and the ability to do so is one of this nation's core beliefs about itself. But birth is also how we transfer wealth or debt, access or marginalization, privileged or less privileged phenotypes, enfranchised or precarious national status, etc. I'm someone's son and someone's father, so I participate in these dynamics in various ways.

But way beyond being an analytical category rendering legible the intersection of different power dynamics, parenting can be a practice of care work. And though anybody, cis or trans, femme or masc, can provide care, it's also true that care work disproportionally falls to cis women and femme people. In my own life, since my mother and aunt pre-emptively kidnapped me and brought me to the United States from Peru to get away from my father and his physical violence, cis women were the only adults caring for me. I'm lucky that they provided all the direct care they could — clothes and food and housing — and that they were warm and funny and truly kind. When we were in Peru, they also provided me with a certain kind of mother tongue or poetics. Though they were in their early 40s, I got to see them practice femme glamour and joy. My mother wore a black leather trench with wide lapels. I never saw her put her arms in the sleeves; she wore it like a cape over her shoulders, and the light would land on the planes of those lapels and on the mounds of her shoulders, the coat would move with her as she walked. They had a solid group of girlfriends who'd visit our apartment, or they would all go out dancing. My mother and aunt wore disco-era spaghetti-strap dresses, their nails were long and bright red, their hair was black, and their smiles were emissaries of the sun. Moving to the United States ended those particular expressions of their joy, but I got enough of a taste to sensitize me to some confluence of the body, aesthetics, and imagination that still guides my poetry today, or that my poetry is trying to get closer to with each next book.

It also has to be said that racialized and gendered systems of exploitation in Peru created the conditions in which my mother and aunt could express their joy in those ways, while other systems of exploitation in the United States created the conditions in which my mother and aunt had to live harder, more isolated, and more precarious lives. Though my mother had never finished high school and my aunt had never advanced her education beyond high school, both were able to parlay their intelligence and their relatively fair Syrian skin to clerical roles in Peruvian government ministries that paid well enough to buy them a comfortable apartment in Lima and to hire domestic care labor in the form of a nanny who could watch me while they worked or danced and a housekeeper who would help them keep up with the cooking and cleaning.

**AA:** Some of the poems convey concomitant sensations, registers of feelings, that happen in the poem like a *flâneur*: "I'm in the park, there's a lady smoking, dogs lying on the grass", all at the same time. Your poetry seems to build a lyrical self of a society in

a frenetic rhythm. How is your creative process? Was this an aesthetic project, or did it happen unintentionally?

**FM:** I feel that as writers, we can read a lot of different types of work, we can share a lot of examples and techniques with one another, but we tend to be captivated by only a few things enough to really practice and internalize them. One of the first lessons that helped me feel grounded in my practice was the notion that I could let go of the executive function that would, through mastery of craft, express ineffable, fleeting feelings and impressions in the form of poems. Instead, I could simply take notes — observations of the world around me as well as observations of my internal weather, those currents of thought and feeling. Sometimes I could curate these notes into constellations I could then revise into coherent poems. Maybe what has changed across the books, my own sense of "craft" that I've practiced, is that I've tried different principles for organizing those constellations, and I've tested different degrees of association between each constellation's elements. I've been influenced along this process by a lecture that the poet Jorie Graham[5] gives (search "Jorie Graham on description" in YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VjjCfS009BU) where she offers a fairly extreme set of principles for how one could (should?) sequence sensory imagery in poems. Each image, like most words, offers connotations, and while the move from one image to the next may feel like a "leap" across a wide or narrow associative gap, the sequence of one set of connotations to the next could offer a more coherent logic that, hopefully, would accrue into a fairly clear feeling, or reframing, or mood. This way of writing asks readers to lean in fairly close to the text, and not everyone finds pleasure in that kind of reading, which is fine.

**AA:** What is your relationship with other types of artistic language? You mention paintings, installations, and artists. Do they connect with the way you write poetry?

**FM:** I love how succinctly certain artists can create complex experiences. Artists tend to think about their materials in rigorous ways, so that even if they render something that can seem conventionally beautiful or decorative, a given work can still conjure layers of complex and even contradictory thought and feeling. Some of my favorite living artists are also friends: Khaled Jarrar[6], Mariel Miranda[7], Sama Alshaibi[8],

[5] One of the most celebrated poets of the American post-war generation, Jorie Graham (1950–) is the author of numerous collections of poetry, including *Hybrids of Plants and Ghosts* (1980), *Erosion* (1983), *The End of Beauty* (1987). Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/jorie-graham).

[6] Khaled Jarrar was born in Jenin, Occupied Palestine in 1976. Attempting to create a life between the military and an artistic practice, Jarrar entered the field of photography in 2005 (https://wildegallery.ch/artists/khaled-jarrar/).

[7] Mariel Miranda (1993–), works as head of Interdisciplinary Learning & Research Programs at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tucson. Miranda's creative and pedagogical work encompasses counter-narratives, collective memory, and resistance tactics in the borderlands (https://marielmira.com/en/exhibitions/).

[8] Born in Basra to an Iraqi father and a Palestinian mother, Sama Alshaibi (1973–), is based in the United States where she is chair and regents professor of photography, video art, and imagining at the University of Arizona, Tucson. Sama Alshaibi's photographs and videos situate her own body as a site of performance, considering the social and gendered impacts of war and migration (https://www.samaalshaibi.com/artwork).

David Taylor[9], and Cecilia Vicuña[10]. I've been very lucky to collaborate with two artists in particular, Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez[11], and I made the book-arts project *Redolent* together (Matuk & Friedemann-Sánchez, 2022; https://www.faridmatuk.com/books/redolent). And Daniel Joseph Martinez[12] allowed me to title my first book *This Isa Nice Neighborhood* (Matuk, 2010), which is also the title of a never-executed public art piece he designed. He also contributed images for the cover and interior of the book. Martinez's project would have arched that titular phrase in steel over the former site of the Filipino community razed to make space for San Francisco's Moscone Center[13]. I was drawn to the way the phrase commemorates that displacement even as its compounded verb and article invite us to accent our articulations without prescribing exactly whose accent we should embody. Simultaneously, the phrase conjures the correcting pen, particularly for those of us who have earned our bread by teaching students to make their ideas and their identities legible within the frame of standard American English. That collaboration with Daniel gave me access to a whole set of visual and textual referents that developed my thinking and allowed me to begin my publishing trajectory with a book that announces my desire to stay close to the politicized helix of subjectivity and articulation.

**AA:** To end our interview, I'd like to mention how the book's endnotes[14] stitch your poems together. These notes end up functioning as a paratext, a supporting text that often takes the reader to other levels of interpretation or knowledge. It's interesting because they give a sense of how poetry is constructed: different references and how they

[9] David Taylor's artwork examines place, territory, history and politics. Exhibited internationally, his projects reveal how borders can function not only as spatial demarcations, but also as an amplifying device particularly attuned to geo-political, environmental and social conditions (https://www.dtaylorphoto.com/home/?showSplash=false).

[10] Cecilia Vicuña (1948–) is a poet, artist, activist and filmmaker whose work addresses pressing concerns of the modern world, including ecological destruction, human rights, and cultural homogenization. Born and raised in Santiago de Chile, she has been in exile since the early 1970s, after the military coup against the president Salvador Allende (https://www.ceciliavicuna.com/).

[11] Nancy Friedemann-Sánchez (1961–) is a Colombo-American, with an interdisciplinary practice. She grew up in Colombia as the child of a Colombian and a United States citizen and migrated to the United States as an adult. Her art is about the curious and intense experience of having physically migrated, yet still having a piece of herself rooted in Colombia (https://www.nancyfriedemann.com/).

[12] Daniel Joseph Martinez was born in Los Angeles in 1957 and received his bachelor of Fine Arts from the California Institute of the Arts in 1979. Martinez's work utilizes a conceptual operation that takes the form of photography, painting, installation, robotics, performance and public interventions delving into topics of race and sociopolitical boundaries present within American society. More of his work is available on the MoMA website (https://www.moma.org/artists/38839-daniel-joseph-martinez#exhibition).

[13] The Moscone Center is one of the main convention centers in the city of San Francisco, California. It is one of the largest and most important event centers in the United States, and frequently hosts international trade shows, conferences, conventions, and large corporate events, especially in the areas of technology, science, and innovation (https://www.moscone.com/).

[14] Endnotes refer to books, poetic references, artists who were part of the creative process, historical facts, or explanations of terms. Example: "I borrow and tweak the line 'Ellington was only after your confidence' from Fred Moten's *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Moten is quoting Herb Jeffries, a Duke Ellington vocalist, who suggests the listener's ear is an element of a composition waiting to be arranged" (Matuk, 2018, p. 79).

are linked to so many historical episodes, people who existed. When did you come up with the idea of inserting the notes?

**FM:** It's too late in the tired history of the Western self to pretend we just sit down and write poems.

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