

# Transcultural Hybridity and Dialogism in Khaled Mattawa's Poetry

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## Introduction

Transcultural poetry represents a writing style that evolves from the experience of navigating between different cultures. This state of in-betweenness is described by the American historian W. E. B. Du Bois as a "double consciousness," in which "[o]ne feels his two-ness, ... two souls, two thoughts." (*The Atlantic.com*) The double or multiple-identity of immigrants, exiles, or poets in the diaspora manifests itself in the development of poetry that is characterized by the depiction of multi-layered perspectives that express different worldviews.

One of these immigrant poets is Khaled Mattawa, a first-generation Libyan-American writer who is considered Libya's first established poet in English. Mattawa integrates personal, local, and regional experiences with global and human dimensions. Mattawa's poetry (written in English) becomes a conduit to investigate cultural hybridity of the worlds he crosses and the sociopolitical aspects that shape his life and transform the way he perceives the world. Poets, such as Mattawa, who are suspended between cultures, can be described as living in a liminal space, in which they extend themselves, self-consciously, across worlds and cultures, capturing, in the process, the complex nature of mediation and negotiation through spatial and temporal representations.

Engaging with multicultural experience, Mattawa interweaves these overlapping cultural, social, and geographical spaces to create new hybrid images and dialogical forms of poetry. The spaces created by such interaction allows the writer to express his resistance to assimilation by recalling and merging the *Other* cultures and histories in his poetry. However, I argue in this article that Mattawa does not only employ hybridity and dialogism as a power-resistance strategy towards his adopted new home, but also promotes a sense of liberation that creates a critical distance from his native culture and the people in his homeland, aiming through this process to form a global identity, which allows him to engage freely with a global panoramic worldview. The article focuses on the techniques for such hybridity and dialogism and the uses Mattawa follows to stress the release from familiar ties and an openness towards human civilization. The analysis will include

some selected poems from Mattawa's published collections of poetry: *Ismailia Eclipse*, *Zodiac of Echoes*, *Amorisco*, and *Fugitive Atlas*. The discussion aims at illuminating concepts and techniques of resistance specially as it relates to the dilemma faced by immigrants in dealing with their confused identity and the cultural gap that stretches between resistance to assimilation within the new culture and a growing feeling of disconnection from their native culture.

## Theoretical Background

Many literary critics engage with the literature of the immigrants and the diaspora for their cross-cultural dimension, and for the diversity of the topics they explore. Their literary work is signified by the double-vision that allows them to cross the boundaries, mediating between their native and their newly adopted cultures. This state of living across-cultures is explained by the concept of liminality, which is a middle phase of transition, or in-betweenness adopted by Victor Turner from the study of the "rites of passage" by the anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep. Van Gennep's original theory of the "rites of passage" consists of three phases: pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal. Turner focuses on the middle phase of transition and develops the concept of liminality or the state of in-betweenness. Liminality, as elaborated by Baynham, can turn out to be "a way of life" (123), i.e., adapting to the in-between state of existence.

The state of liminality that Mattawa and other immigrants and refugees are experiencing acts, according to Keating, "as [an] agent [...] of awakening, inspire[s], and challenge[s] others to deeper awareness" (293). Their poetry, thus, has assumed a political force that creates a critical outlook for resistance, transformation, and creativity. Turner elaborates on how these liminal spaces can foster a mood of creativity:

These liminal areas ... are open to the play of thought, feeling, and will; in them are generated new models, often fantastic, some of which may have sufficient power and plausibility to replace eventually the force-backed political and jurat models that control the centers of a society's ongoing life. (vii)

Homi K. Bhabha, on the other hand, describes this situation of living in-between as a "third space," which is threatening and liberating at the same time. It is located across worlds and cultures, integrating a diasporic representation of conceptual space (53-56). This integration not only presents insights into the experiences of these multicultural worlds, but also "can create imaginative forms to articulate the dualities, ironies, and ambiguities of this cultural in-betweenness" (Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse* 6). Mingling multicultural experiences in hybrid poetic forms produces a creative transcultural hybrid poetry.

Hybridity has become a major characteristic, or the “basic fabric” of this transcultural poetry (Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* 100). Writers and literary critics, especially those focusing on postcolonial literature, note the widespread use of hybridity. The new trend of this period, according to Perry Anderson, is marked by the “cross-over, the hybrid, the potpourri” (qtd. in Burke 1). The concept of hybridity and other related concepts have played a vital role in the formation of theories concerning identity. As elaborated by Elizabeth Russel, “hybridity, multiculturalism, diasporic consciousness, nomadism and cross-culturalism have become a cause for celebration in theoretical writing on identity” (xi-xii). In fact, the influence of the diasporic hybrid poetry on English literature has been remarkable. Ramazani acknowledges that “[a] rich and vibrant poetry has issued from the hybridization of the English muse with long-resident muses of Africa, India, the Caribbean, and other decolonizing territories of the British Empire,” creating “exciting new possibilities for English-language poetry” (*The Hybrid Muse* 1). Shifting across spaces allows these poets to traverse between languages and multiple perspectives, creating a multi-voiced discourse which becomes another major characteristic of transcultural poetry.

Hybrid poetry constitutes a Bakhtinian dialogic aspect of discourse, stemming from Bakhtin’s concept of dialogism, while at the same time, it disputes the notion raised by Bakhtin (*The Dialogic Imagination* 286, 434) himself that poetry is monologic. Many literary critics claim that dialogism is not only an inherent characteristic of the novel but of poetry too. Mara Scanlon, in her study of Robert Hayden, maintains that “dialogic poetry is possible” (2). Marianne and Michael Shapiro insist that “poetry remains importantly ‘dialogistic’ despite Bakhtin’s own prejudices, derived, perhaps, from the residual Romanticism that tinges all Russian scholarly writing of the first half of the twentieth century” (392). Transcultural poetry, which has a multi-voice trait, invites critics to carry out their studies through the lens of the Bakhtinian concept of dialogism. It has been noticed that current trends in the study of literary studies focus on expanding the scope of the application of Bakhtinian dialogism towards poetry.

The poetry of immigrants and poets in diaspora demonstrates features of hybridity and double- and multiple-visions that are drawn from their double-consciousness. These poets are stretched out between two identities with distinct cultures and different languages and eventually are located in a space for addressing audiences from these different cultures. Their divided self, thus, occupies them with conflicting issues of their double consciousness and engages them in dialogues within their selves and with the others, which is depicted in their poetry. This makes this transcultural poetry eligible to be described as dialogic based on the Bakhtinian notion that “[e]very type of intentional stylistic hybrid is more or less dialogized” (*The Dialogic*

*Imagination* 76), and that “[d]ouble-voiced discourse is always internally dialogized” (*The Dialogic Imagination* 324). The concept of dialogism according to Bakhtin is in its essence a quality of language. Michael Holquist, the editor of Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination*, points out that for Bakhtin, “[l]anguage, when it means, is somebody talking to somebody else, even when that someone else is one’s own inner addressee” (xx1). In this sense, the notion of *addressivity* is prominent and “essential to every discourse” as exemplified in Bakhtin’s analysis of Dostoevsky’s discourse in the novel (*Problems of Dostoevsky’s* 237). Shapiro and Shapiro (402-10) affirm the dialogic nature of poetry drawn from the Bakhtinian concept of *addressivity*, which is based on the notion that interlocutor’s utterances usually target a listener and expect some sort of response. They claim that since poetry exhibits engagements of different voices that form a dialogue in a single poem that constitutes an addresser and addressee, poetry can be categorized as dialogic.

Two important Bakhtinian concepts derived from dialogism are polyphony and heteroglossia. Bakhtin asserts that “the authentic environment of an utterance, the environment in which it lives and takes shape, is dialogised heteroglossia” (*The Dialogic Imagination* 272). Based on the analysis of the novel Bakhtin further lists features of heteroglossia:

Authorial speech, the speech of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel, each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized). (*The Dialogic Imagination* 263)

These elements on which Bakhtin based his categorization are present in poetry as well, especially in postcolonial and transcultural poetry where heteroglossic dialogism is a prominent feature. Bakhtin’s analysis of Dostoevsky’s novel reveals multiplicity in characters’ voices, each representing its distinct self through polyphonic dialogism. The concept of polyphony in music attracts Edward Said as well, and he utilizes it in his own writing driven by his belief in presenting a multiple identity: “And so multiple identity, the polyphony of many voices playing off against each other, ... is what my work is all about. More than one culture, more than one awareness, both in its negative and its positive modes” (*Power, Politics and Culture* 99). As with Said’s diasporic background, poets with double identity, double voices, can also accommodate polyphonic discourses that engage different cultures and geographical spaces. Through hybridity and dialogism, these poets are able to express the contradictions that exist between their attempts to resist and their growing feeling of disconnection from their homeland. In this article, I will explore the interplay of the context of Mattawa’s poems with these techniques and discuss their tendency to foster within the Western

reader an openness towards the human experiences and at the same time reflect Mattawa's attempt for transcendence through maintaining a critical distance that liberates him from familiar ties.

### Hybridity and Dialogism in Mattawa's Poetry

Mattawa's ongoing journeys across spaces, geographically and conceptually, allow him to evolve and restructure the form and content of his poetry with deep provocative thoughts as well as painful disappointments, and experiences. Privileged with his double-vision, Mattawa has been able to access a critical distance from these worlds, which allows him to engage with a global panoramic worldview, melding in his poems personal, cultural, sociopolitical, and historical aspects. Russel comments on this position held by the privileged with double identity in relation to the world, saying that, nowadays, it turns out to be "more and more fashionable for the privileged few to be at home everywhere and to belong nowhere" (79).

As a diasporic poet of Libyan origin, Mattawa negotiates between his native culture, history and its regional civilizations from a diasporic lens that allows him to focus on the fate of his people and the condition of humanity in general. In fact, the significance of Mattawa's attachment to his native country Libya, and his birthplace, the city of Benghazi, cannot be underestimated. Libya and the surrounding region provide him with personal as well as cultural and historical inspirations. Through the in-between space provided by a transcultural identity, Mattawa believes that "postcolonial and diasporic poets," to whom he referred to as "poet-strangers," offer "alternate visions of co-existence that respect our diversity and that affirm a shared, and indivisible humanity" (*When the Poet Is a Stranger* 379). In this sense, Mattawa is a "poet-stranger" himself, engaged with his own culture, past and present. He is using the English language in a Western poetic convention and presenting his poetry to Western readers and listeners, particularly in America, his adopted homeland. Although he is in America, Mattawa admits that he has got a "sense of political grievance" and "anger" for being "trapped." He longs to "preserve something which was about to be lost." He writes: "I was writing in English and my sensibility was rooted in a vision that needed to be translated" ("Identity, Power, and a Prayer" par. 5).

Mattawa, the "poet-stranger," follows strategies in his writing that are based on meditations of his culture to his American readers and listeners, exploring in the process connections to the general human civilizations with all its ups and downs. These strategies could be a way of shifting the *Other* towards the center instead of the assimilation strategy that immigrants are expected to follow. This shift towards the center is elaborated by Mattawa when he says that "[t]he poetry of bilinguals in America ... vacillates between the desire to address the

mainstream and to ignore the center in order to feel that its experience is the center of all existence” (“Against the Lapse” 188). To implement these strategies, Mattawa develops certain techniques in writing his poetry, ranging from inserting local language and images, adopting poetic forms from his native poetic tradition, using visual highlights and innovations in the structure of his poems, and interconnecting and integrating his ideas and thoughts with words and lines from English, American, Arab, and other poets and literary works of the past centuries as well as of the present.

### The Interplay of Context with Techniques

In his poems, Mattawa blends personal and cultural experiences with historical dimensions, shifting between times and places, among historical figures and landmarks, and present-day characters. His hybrid poetry corresponds to postcolonial poetry, which is “hybrid not only in language but also in form ... [that] embeds a long memory of its diverse cultural inheritances” (Ramazani, *The Hybrid Muse* 17). Hopping with agility between traditions and daily customs, Mattawa does not overlook the human conditions of the present. This strategy is eloquently depicted in his poem “East of Carthage: An Idyll” (*Amorisco*), “a poem that speaks to the history and identity of the Maghreb, detailing the locale and the local, while having a near-epic sweep, in the way Pound spoke of the epic as a ‘poem that includes history’” (Joris). The narrator persona in this poem recounts his visit to Marcus Aurelius’s temple in the ruins of the Roman Emperor in *Sabratha*, a city in the Northeast of Libya. In this poem, different figures and voices from the past and from the present intertwine: Marcus Aurelius, Augustine, Hannibal, Apuleius, African migrants, and the locals. Spatial and temporal dimensions are also interwoven, bringing to the scene ancient and historical places such as Carthage and Madaura with present-day locations and cities such as *Sabratha*, *Mt. Akakous*, *Ouagadougou*, and the stage and the marble statues of Marcus and his woman in the ruins of *Sabratha*. The narrator is addressing Marcus, hinting at the secrecy around visiting such ruins, although he does not know the reason for that, as if it were a forbidden land. However, this is not what worries him but the human conditions of the illegal immigrants from all parts of Africa who are trying to cross the sea to the North for Europe. In this poem, this journey of the “passport-less” Africans conjures up images of Hannibal, the Carthaginian general who fought the Romans and crossed the Alps. The speaker compares the perplexing situation in which these Africans find themselves to Hannibal’s “stupefied” elephants while forced to cross the Alps with its very cold climate and rocky terrain and where many died in the process. The speaker describes the miserable situation which those Africans face and the

gloomy fate that is confronting most of them who struggle in the waters and are forced to return to detention camps. This depressing condition leads the speaker to feel more blessed for not being faced with such humiliation: “they’ll lift diffident heads and drag feet lead-heavy with shame” (*Amorisco*, “East of Carthage”). As in other poems of Mattawa, here the poet shifts from the personal to the universal, focusing on the burdens of witnessing the suffering of others, a humanist commitment that Mattawa explores more profoundly in his poetry, especially in his fifth book, *Fugitive Atlas*.

Having the advantage of living in the space in-between, Mattawa in this poem expresses distance from his native countrymen, fluctuating between addressing Marcus as “your descendant” and calling one of his people “one of my ancestors” (*Amorisco*, “East of Carthage”). Being in a liminal and transcultural state, which “conveys the idea of moving between cultures and breaking free from culture” (Greaves), Mattawa is able to sustain such distant stance. Nevertheless, the speaker is trying to find connection to the people of his native country, looking for a face that looks like his father, wearing the traditional Libyan cap: “Among the older men, / ... , I kept seeking / my father’s face” (“East of Carthage”). He is trying to connect to “the life” he “left behind.” Linking historical tradition to the present personal experience, the speaker describes Augustine’s eating “a barley porridge” as similar to the one the speaker’s “grandmother used to make” and while walking “the market of *Sabratha*, the speaker feels that it is “like my old city brought me back to me.” However, he concludes that reliving such experiences of life in his native country will not bring him back but as he tells Marcus Aurelius: “your descendant knows I’ll leave / as I arrive, so empty he gets lost in me.” This idea of keeping a liminal position is confirmed in Mattawa’s poem entitled “The In-Between” (*Amorisco*):

I don't want either side of this river  
I don't want my life to be the ferry  
bridging its banks

### Codeswitching

Codeswitching is a technique that displays the immigrant poet’s double identity and the position he/she occupies not just in-between two cultures but also in-between two languages. Edward Said, who was an exile, elaborates on how he navigates between two languages, Arabic, which is his native language, and English, which is his school language. For him, these two languages “were inextricably mixed.” He says: “I have never known which was my first language, and have felt fully at home in neither, although I dream in both. Every time I speak an English sentence, I find myself echoing it in Arabic, and vice versa” (*Reflections on Exile* 557). Mattawa, on the other hand, feels the same

with these double languages, but that he adopts English as his language of writing does not mean that he neglects Arabic, his native language. On the contrary, he still holds strongly to his mother tongue. This attitude is described by Mattawa in his poem “Borrowed Tongue” (*Ismailia Eclipse*) in which one verse reads as follows:

Maybe I’m a fool  
holding two threads,  
one black, one white,  
waiting for dawn  
to tell them apart.

No, I haven’t outgrown  
my tongue. It’s a coat  
your mother gives you,

That’s Arabic to me.

Mattawa, here, expresses a true devotion to Arabic, his native language, as do other postcolonial poets for their native languages. Dealing with double-bilingual identity, Mattawa and other poets experiment with languages in their poetry, creating a bi-linguistic interplay that invites readers and listeners from both languages to read and interact in dialogical sense with their poetry. Through codeswitching, they manage to produce a hybrid dialogic poetry that resonates the poets’ two languages and their own people and cultures. Meanwhile, this hybrid dialogic poetry displays resistance to signs of submission to the language of the dominant center. Within this trans-cultural space, hybridity is manifested in the technique of codeswitching, where the fusion of Arabic words in Mattawa’s poems highlights his bicultural identity as a Libyan-American immigrant.

In a discussion of codeswitching in a poem by Chicana Evangelina Vigil, who combines Spanish and English in her poetry, Mattawa states that “[t]hrough strategic use of code-switching, the poet gains ‘authority’ by demonstrating that she is in command of the situation and that we need her as a guide, suggesting that there are several reasons why we should stop and listen carefully to her, and in turn, to her people” (“Against the Lapse” 183). So, for Mattawa, codeswitching is a powerful tool to attract the attention of the audience towards the poet and his/her people and engage him/her in dialogic interplay with these different languages, maintaining in the process a resistance stance. These lines from “East of Carthage” illustrate this codeswitching technique as they are loaded with Arabic words and Libyan idioms and hints at some Libyan tradition while visiting the market of *Sabratha*:

A Sudanese waiter carried a tray  
with a giant pot of green tea with mint. Among the older men,

their heads capped with crimson shennas, I kept seeking  
my father's face. An old lust wafted past me when the abaya-clad  
women, scented with knock-off Chanel, sashayed by.  
The sawdust floors of the shawarma and falafel eateries,  
the sandwich maker dabbing insides of loaves

with spoons of searing harissa, my mouth watering  
to a childhood burn.

Through the fusion of Arabic words, the poet presents a vivid depiction of everyday life in the market of *Sabratha*, where people drink the "green tea with mint" and eat "shawarma and falafel" with a lot of "harissa." He goes further, describing some terms for distinguished traditional items that Libyans wear such as the "crimson shennas," a red hat that old Libyan men wear and the "abaya" that women cover themselves with when outdoors, "the abaya-clad /women."

It is common to some Arab-American writers to integrate Arabic names of popular dishes in their writing. Mattawa follows this tradition, though focusing on Libyan traditional dishes that may be unfamiliar even to some other Arabs. This is demonstrated in "Atta" (*Ismailia Eclipse*), a poem depicting the life and daily struggle of a Libyan young girl who has been burdened with the responsibility of taking care of the whole family including the preparation of food:

Cooking she learned quickly and better  
than any of her aunts, her tajeen, a favorite  
the potatoes browned, never burned  
her couscous flavored with orange blossom,  
cinnamon and cloves. She even learned  
to make aseeda, the way her grandfather  
like it, with melted butter and honey  
from Labyar.

Names for popular Libyan dishes, *tajeen*, *couscous*, and *aseeda*, are described in this poem with details of their main ingredients. In addition, there is a reference to the name of a Libyan town, *Labyar*, from where the honey is brought. In other poems such as "Echo and Elixir 5" (*Zodiac of Echoes*), the speaker declares that words of sentiment and love are best expressed in the native language to have its full power and effect:

Maybe these are the heart's cymbals that guide its trance:  
Rouhi. Gharami. Ishqi. Ahla ayami.  
Maybe to say "I love you"  
in another language  
is not to love you at all.

Hear me say it, Habibti.  
I say: N'hibik

So, for this bilingual speaker, “I love you” and other expressions of love and affection will not carry the intended meaning unless spoken in the speaker’s native language, Arabic, using such words of love as *rouhi* [Arabic for my soul], *gharami* [my passion], *ishqi* [my adoration/adored], *ahla ayami* [the best of my days], *habibti* [my lover], and *n’hibik* [I love you].

In addition to blending within the lines of the poems Libyan-Arabic words denoting traditional items, popular dishes, expressive sentimental terms and locale, Mattawa inserts Arabic words and names in the titles of some poems. The poem “Shikwah” (*Fugitive Atlas*) has its title in Arabic and, as Al-Mutawa mentioned in the notes section of the book, it is based on a poem in Urdu with the same title by Muhammad Iqbal. The word “Qassida” in Arabic appears also in the title of two of Mattawa’s poems “Qassida to the statue of Sappho in Mytilini” and “Malouk’s Qassida” both in *Fugitive Atlas*. Many of his poems have also Arabic names of people and places in Libya and other Arab countries for their titles as in some poems in *Ismailia Eclipse*; “Maryam,” “Letter to Ibrahim,” “Isma’ilia Eclipse,” “I was Buried in Janzoor,” and “Saniya’s Dreams.” The incorporation of these Arabic words and names written in Latin script in the titles of his poems and within the poems adds another dimension to form and meaning and imposes Arabic terms and names in poetry written in English for a reader whose language is English and who probably does not know Arabic, although there are of course other Arab-Americans who can relate to what is written in Arabic. The contradiction is that Mattawa’s poetry in general, with all its Arabic and Libyan sentiments, is inaccessible to the Libyan readers due to the language barrier, and thus his choice to write his poetry in English creates a distance that is not bridged.

### Adopted Non-Western Poetic Forms

The Libyan literary heritage influences Mattawa’s writing of poetry in the sense that he adopts one popular form of short unrhymed poems called *Ganawat ‘Alam* in some of his poems. *Ganawat ‘Alam* is a distinguished genre of poetry known in the Eastern part of Libya and the western part of Egypt, recognized by its one-line composition. Women and men usually recite them aloud in a special rhythm and in a tone prone to melancholy depending on “their social circumstances, and the vicissitudes of their personal lives and interpersonal relationships” (Abu-Lughod 178). The ‘Alam song is characterized by eloquence, brevity, and the expression of grand meanings in very few sentimental words and compelling images. In his fifth poetry book, *Fugitive Atlas*, Mattawa presents a number of ‘Alam poems that consists of three short stanzas arranged in a row with three lines in each, planned in a way that can be read horizontally or vertically

without losing the flow of meaning. It is noticed that Mattawa's 'Alam poems does not follow English punctuation. They do not start with capital letters and do not close the sentences with periods, commas, or even exclamation marks. The omission of punctuation and capitalization highlights the foreign aspect of the 'Alam form and enforces a sense of challenge to the syntax and grammar of the language of the center. This creative approach to the implementation of Ġanāwat 'Alam in the English language adds a cross-cultural dimension to the form and structure of Mattawa's poetry.

In "Alam for Robert Hayden," one of the 'Alam poems in *Fugitive Atlas*, Mattawa makes use of the same techniques he uses in all of his 'Alam poems, creating a hybrid poem that is distinct in structure and form:

was it discipline	sacrifice	self-hate
or self-love	a bleary rain	a harmattan
brought us	insolvent	upon these shores

Here, the speaker describes the miserable human condition of the refugees who find themselves under stressful circumstances similar to those African slaves in Hayden's poem "Middle Passage" from which Mattawa borrows the phrase "upon these shores." Through this intertextual reference to "Middle Passage," the poet compares the situation of the African migrants to that of Atlantic slave trade that is recalled in Hayden's poem. The fusion of phrases and words from a mid-twentieth-century American poet adds to the hybridity of the poem and interconnects literary traditions, cultures, and human conditions from different times and locations, enforcing the detachment from local ties towards a more global view of human miseries.

*Ġanāwat 'Alam* is not the only non-Western poetry form that Mattawa adopts in his poetry. He integrates the *haibun*, a Japanese literary form that has established itself as a genre in world literature. A haibun can be defined as "a hybrid genre that joins two modes of writing, ... its basic unit or building block is one paragraph and one haiku," which is a short poem of three lines (Woodward par. 2). However, Mattawa substitutes the haiku with the *renga*, another form of poetic verse from the Japanese literary tradition that is hybridized with verses from other poets. By employing the *renga*, Al-Mutawa was able to wander through times and spaces juxtaposing lines and phrases from other poets in a collaborative attitude that interconnects voices and worldviews. Lines and phrases from poems of poets from different times and cultures are all merged in a few lines with the words of the poet.

"My City" is *haibun* in the poetry collection *Fugitive Atlas*, in which the poet voices an emotional appeal for his native city,

Benghazi. The speaker in the prose part of the haibun recounts with regret and sorrow what happened to his city as a result of a war that destroyed its city center, with its “date-palm-frond-covered souqs and its charming worn-out piazzas,” where the speaker spent his childhood. Amid these painful scenes of destruction and ruins, the poet notices palm and eucalyptus trees and reed stems rising among the rubble. Seeing birds' nests and upright trees resisting this demolition and destruction, the speaker recalls lines from Su Croll's poem “The Consolation of Tree,” and from Derek Walcott's poem “Sea Grapes” and incorporates them in the renga at the end of the haibun as an attempt to get consolation for the speaker's “exhausted mind.” However, the feeling of grief is stronger and deeper, and the speaker ends the *renga* by saying that the trees can console, but this is not enough to compensate for this devastation and damage: “A scruffy opulence / Veils the ruins green. Nests/ And birdsong to soothe/ The mind's exhausted surf. Trees/ Can console./ But not enough.”

Mattawa's use of *renga* in his haibun nurtures the tendency for dialogic poetry since a renga poem incorporates lines written by two or three poets. This dynamic process of polyphonic exchanges and of addressivity in the renga develop a sense of negotiation and mediation that transcends time and place. Shapiro and Shapiro acknowledge the *renga* as a good example of dialogic poetry. They assert that the renga's “inner narrative of feeling seeks to elicit a response, which propels it forward” (402) and thus creates an exchange of responses with different voices and worldviews among these poets. As in the case of the above examples of renga that Mattawa integrates in his haibun, Shapiro and Shapiro maintain that a poem “could lead to a poetic response centuries later when recalled by another poet” (402). A *renga* poem thus creates a polyphonic engagement in dialogues among voices across time and space.

### Polyphony and Heteroglossia

Mattawa's poems, in general, demonstrate how dialogism enables the poet to express his distant position within conflicting worlds and to establish a distinct voice among many confused ones. If we take “East of Carthage: An Idyll” as an example of polyphony, we will notice different voices compete to engage in the dialogue and impose their presence on this dialogical exchange. From the first line of the poem, the speaker addresses the narrative to *Marcus Aurelius* and asks him questions which require a response. The speaker actually registers a response from Marcus: “To that he responds, ‘a Platonic echo;’ and / ‘What will come of such a plasticine love?’” The speaker even claims that the descendants of Marcus are “leafing through” the speaker's chapters, and writing questions in “the margin of [the speaker's] thoughts”:

“How is it,” he asks, “that starlight announces the hour:  
how can a song divide desire in two?”  
“My flame,” I must have written or said, “coated her body  
like silk, ...”

These voices that engage in dialogues invite responses not only from a persona within the poem but also from the reader and the listener of the poem. Bakhtin’s concept of “[a]ddressivity” expresses this dialogic engagement by stating that the speaker “while speaking with himself, with another, with the world, he simultaneously addresses a third party as well” (*Problems of Dostoevsky’s* 236-37). Based on this notion of Bakhtin’s, “all language is addressed to someone, never uttered without consciousness of a relationship between the speaker and the addressee” (Guerin *et al.* 362).

The method of engaging competing voices with conflicting interests and different worldviews creates a heteroglossic work of poetry that is dialogic. This heteroglossia appears in some poems in *Fugitive Atlas*, Section III, which is designed to reflect on the sociopolitical conflict in Mattawa’s native country, Libya. In “After 42 Years,” images and voices intertwine with space and time to depict flashes of historical and present-day conflicting moments experienced by the Libyans during the reign of Ghaddafi and the aftermath of the uprising in 2011 that overthrew the whole political regime. The form of the lyric in this poem facilitates a Bakhtinian clash of voices and ideas, where voices of the victims of the dictatorship recount glimpses of their tragedies, the rebels who caught the dictator express their revenge and joy, and Ghaddafi himself begs for mercy:

But that’s all over now—  
How can you say over when it took 42 years—  
I was five when the dictator took my brother away.

His face half blood-covered, half smirking,  
Hand raised, fingers pressed together upward saying,

*wait,*  
*calm down, wait.*  
Wait 42 years.

The poet persona reveals his/her shock, witnessing the brutal behavior of his/her own people. In a dialogue between this persona and the voices of people from his/her country, the poet tries to remain distanced from the people as a kind denouncement of violence by calling them “sons of my country”: “Who taught you, sons of my country, to be so fearless and cruel? / Him, they say, for 42 years of him. / Who taught you to treat a human being like this?” They continue with providing excuses and reasons for such cruelty: “The no-life we had to live, / Under him, / The lives we were asked to live as dead.”

In a related context, but adopting a different attitude, the poem “After 42 Years (revisited)” portrays a further engagement of conflicting voices in a creative lyrical form that depends on visual presentation. In this poem, as pointed out by Layla Azmi Goushey, Mattawa expresses the uncertainties of unrestrained freedom, lost salaries, and hungry children combined with feelings of nostalgia for a stable yet oppressive past.” The visual display of the poem suggests the presence of different voices, each of which holds a special attitude and reaction to what they are experiencing. The poem is divided into three columns; each column is read vertically before moving to the second and then the third. The reader gets the sense that the voices in these three columns are talking at the same time, not hearing each other. However, if read sideways, there might be a possibility of correspondences between these voices. The first column is italicized, and the middle is in bold font. Coupled with the lack of any capitalization or punctuation, this hints at the idea that they are the voices of simple people who are affected tremendously by the upheavals of the aftermath of the uprising in Libya. What distinguishes these three columns, in addition to their peculiar forms, is that each represents a special stance that is different from the other and that they are open to different interpretations facilitated by these alternative forms and ways of reading them. Both poems, “After 42 Years” and “After 42 Years (revisited),” present dialogical propensity that is strengthened through the employment of the address and response technique and the mobilization of voices and forms in different or even clashing discourses, in which the poet is trying to express his role as a witness but who is detached from all this chaos.

## Conclusion

The concept of “double consciousness” was originally articulated by Du Bois as a powerful portrayal of the human condition of African-Americans, but according to Mattawa, this concept of double consciousness “lives within all who feel between two places, two languages” (“Against the Lapse” 188). Mattawa, who describes himself as a “political refugee,” expresses the puzzling situation of living in-between, with the feeling of uncertainty about where this liminal situation takes him and what he “wanted to be.” He says: “I was aware that I’d been gone too long, that the link between my upbringing and my early adulthood had many gaps, which were the only place I could exist” (Mattawa “Identity, Power, and a Prayer”). Living in this liminal space is supposed to be transitional leading to reincorporation in a post-liminal state of being as described by the original theory of Van Gennep’s “rite of passage.” However, Mattawa as well as other immigrants and poets in diaspora feels that this state of in-betweenness has become “a way of life,” as has been articulated by

Baynham. They have adapted to it as de facto living in transcultural state. Regardless of the confusion Mattawa feels with his double identity, he benefits from the privilege of having cross-cultural perspectives to enrich his poetry with a creative and hybrid context and form through which he articulates his liberation and establishes a subtle social distancing.

Transcultural poetry, in general, and the poetry of Mattawa, in particular, develops a dialogical cultural space that calls for the immersion into the process of negotiation and meditation. Through this process, he engages in the play of denouncement, appropriation, and resistance. He transcends linguistic, cultural, and geographical boundaries by adopting a forceful voice that merges personal experiences with sensitivity to deteriorated human conditions. Through this double vision and in an anglophone poetic voice, Mattawa is able to elevate in an international context the culture, history, and sociopolitical turmoil of his native country, the misery of refugees, and the human condition in general. The multicultural world in which he, as an immigrant, exists with all the complexities of the age, demands a development of a perspective that considers the whole planet. He follows, in his poetry, a strategy of developing contextual discourses that invite the engagement of his readers and listeners with such causes and expand their awareness of the *other's* culture and historical heritage, which could be designated as an act of resistance to the dominant culture of the host country. Special techniques of writing have been created, adopted, and/or modified by Mattawa to produce new innovative hybrid and dialogical forms and structures that accommodate and enhance his contextual discourses, through which he draws attention to the tension towards his double identity and experiences, which creates a conflicting sense of belonging and distancing.

It may be challenging for Mattawa to live in this conflicting state of in-betweenness with all these attempts of resisting and distancing, but as an authentic literary voice of his native country and its corollary geographical and historical dimensions, he bridges the gaps between nations and cultures and develops a mutual understanding that promotes new insights and appreciations of each other's culture. Through the polyphonic and heteroglossic participation of multiple speaking voices intermingling with the voice of the poetic persona to express their worldviews, the readers and listeners broaden their views and perception of the world outside their cultural boundaries. Developing texts that have words and names from Arabic, Mattawa's native language, and include the description of locale in the native country as well as features of landmarks in its surrounding space makes these places and names attainable to the reader and listener and arouses his/her curiosity for genuine comprehension. Adopting new forms and poetic structures from non-western traditions also enhances

the interconnectedness of Western forms with forms from the immigrant's literary heritage and encourage the participation in a creative and innovative approach for the development of hybrid and dialogical resonant poetry.

The voice of Mattawa and probably of other Libyan immigrant writers who adopt the English language as their medium of literary writing is expected to be addressed to the Western readers of and listeners who speak English and who will engage with their works of literature. However, the poet's voice as well as the cultural space that is provided through his poetry invites also his own people to whom Mattawa addresses most of his poetry. Unfortunately, the language barrier and the lack of direct access to Mattawa's books hinder the probability of having the people in Libya as readers or listeners to his work except, of course, a few. Actually, writing in English creates a far-reaching distance from his people. Mattawa has attempted to translate some of his poetry into Arabic as he does with the poetry collection of *Ismailia Eclipse*. If he does the same with the other collections either himself or through another translator, a dialogical space of cultural bridging may occur not only between Mattawa and his adopted country but between him, his adopted new culture, and the people in his own native country.

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