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Listening in Khaled Mattawa's *Zodiac of Echoes*

Zodiac of Echoes (2003), Khaled Mattawa's second poetry collection, opens with the poem "Echo & Elixir 1" which presents a speaker violently assailed by a physical and emotional sense of dislocation, one that positions him "somewhere" between memory and oblivion, and makes him unable to resonate within himself and with the world: "City without words. Night without night. / Somewhere I remember / these clothes are not my clothes. / These bones are not my bones. / I forget and remember again. / Ships in the harbor which is the sea / which is the journey / that awakens a light inside my chest" (1).

Zodiac of Echoes is a meditation on diaspora, the complex dynamics of living between cultures and on the related themes of loss, grief, memory, and identity. These issues are articulated by the speakers of the poems calling forth all the senses, but most of all listening – as a form of self-reflection, as drawing near other sounding bodies whose resonances both penetrate and envelope the listener, and enable him to listen to resonances of meaning yet to emerge. It is the privileged means through which the diasporic subjectivities of the poems try to find their "place" in the world.

The title of the collection itself highlights the acoustic element with its reference to the reverberations of sound, and it stands out as a call to listen. In a note at the end of the book, Mattawa explains that he found information on the Zodiac of Echoes in *A Concise Treatise on the Laws of the Stars* by Mana Ibn Shaqlouf (1156-1201), a North African scholar who was a judge in both the Maliki and Hanafi traditions, and who eventually became interested in astrology and postulated the existence of alternative astrological systems that differ both from the Greek-Egyptian horoscope system, known in the West, and the Indian one. The Zodiac of Echoes is a system of divination based on a single galaxy of five planets that

rotate around a speckled sun, named Matahat Al-Amal (the labyrinth of yearnings). According to this tradition, the speckles on the sun are prayers unable to advance higher into the heavens, but cling to the sun that attracts them like a magnet. Since the whole zodiac is in constant motion, and this sun constantly spins about its orbit, some prayers become detached. Unable to resume their original ascent to the highest tiers, the prayers spin about the zodiac filling it with their echoes. It is the mingled sounds of these unanswerable prayers that give the name to this zodiac. Like this zodiac too, Mattawa's collection *Zodiac of Echoes* resounds with voices and yearning, and is at the same time permeated with a feeling of being entrapped and dislocated, as the following verses from "Echo & Elixir 7" tellingly express: "It is not why / [...] / I feel that somewhere else / in the infinite bent below the horizon / better things are happening, / events and lives that pertain to me" (83).

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the acoustic element in *Zodiac of Echoes*, in particular its relation to diasporic subjectivity, faith, and translation starting from the premises of the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy in *À L'Écoute* (2002) / *Listening* (2007). Nancy's starting point is the challenging question if philosophy, given the supremacy of the visual paradigm in Western thought, is capable of listening: "Isn't the philosopher someone who always hears, but who cannot listen, or who, more precisely, neutralizes listening within himself, so that he can philosophize?" (1) In a movement against the dominant mode of scientific thought based on visual conceptualization, Nancy explores what it means "to exist according to listening, for it and through it, what part of experience and truth is put into play" (5). In other words, he evaluates the possibility of an ontology and epistemology based on listening "as a mode of attending to the resonances that penetrate, reverberate between, compose and decompose, self and world, the psychic and the bodily, the intellectual and the sensual" (Janus 185).

It is not a question of reversing the traditional sensual hierarchy, that is, of replacing conceptual thought, based on vision, with sensual perception limited to audition, because listening, for Nancy, is "the sense that touches upon and stimulates at once all bodily senses, as well as that other sense-making faculty that has been variously called 'mind,' 'spirit,' or 'soul'" (Janus

189). According to the French philosopher, to be listening will always mean to be straining toward or finding access to the self: “not, it should be emphasized, a relationship to ‘me’ (the supposedly given subject), or to the ‘self’ of the other (the speaker, the musician, also supposedly given, with his subjectivity), but to the *relationship in self*, so to speak, as it forms a ‘self’ or a ‘to itself’ in general, and if something like that ever does reach the end of its formation” (12). For this reason, listening is by no means a metaphor of gaining access to the I, but the reality of this access. Since sound essentially arrives and expands, or is deferred and transferred, the sonorous present is the result of space-time. To listen, therefore, is “to enter that spatiality by which, at the same time, I am penetrated, for it opens up in me as well as around me, and from me, as well as toward me; it is through such opening that a ‘self’ can take place” (14).

Zodiac of Echoes is this space/time where the diasporic subjectivity of the poems lends an ear to the reverberations between the I and the world in a process of ongoing definition and redefinition of the self. In the critical discourse on diaspora, as well as in diasporic literature, the main focus has been on spatiality, the affective and social experience of space, and on the impact of the processes of space production; space has been used to articulate issues of cultural memory, personal identity, national belonging, class, ethnicity and race. In *Zodiac of Echoes* Mattawa favors the acoustic dimension (and the sensorial one in general) to pursue the same objectives. While the speakers of the poems search for their identities and place in the world immersing themselves in an acoustic dimension, the readers likewise, in many cases unable to access the spatial-temporal nexus of the poems, are not asked to look for a path on the map of the poem but to listen to their interior resonances, to become themselves resonant subjects, that “intensive spacing of a rebound that does not end in any return to self without immediately relaunching, as an echo, a call to that same self” (Nancy 21). Like Nancy, Mattawa seems to consider resonance as “a foundation, as the first or last profundity of ‘sense’ itself” (6).

Khaled Mattawa is a poet, translator, and essayist. Born in Libya and emigrated to the United States at the age of 14 in 1979, he has spent his life fostering a cultural mediation between the Arab and the Western world and has received many awards for his engagement.¹ His recent collection

of essays on contemporary American poetry, *How Long Have You Been with Us?*, also sheds light on his development as a translator and a poet. Here one realizes that right from the start of his experience in the United States, listening has become a way of transcending alienation, and his quest for an interior resonance is the means whereby to find his cultural position. Translating emerges as a vehicle to overcome his sense of otherness. As he states in the essay “Identity, Power, and a Prayer to Repatriation”: “I was a foreigner and knew that alterity would stay with me for some time. I felt that foreignness when I first read Walt Whitman. His America just did not speak to me then. I needed something in English but that was also in my ‘language.’ Translating Arab poets offered me a chance to experiment with sensibilities similar to mine (using familiar images, symbols, and motifs) in English” (*How Long*, 25-26).

The negotiation of differences involved in the act of translation allows for the emotional and intellectual passage and exchange needed to bridge cultural divides. Translation, which is always an experience of exile, has been the way Mattawa learned to come to terms with his exile. As the psychoanalyst Paul-Laurent Assoun has argued, translating is mourning an initial imaginary identity as well as one of arrival and learning to live in the transit. Likewise, Janine Altounian contends that translating implies approving the violent breach of exile; the exiled not only has to mourn the field of his initial investments but, in order not to lose them completely, must take charge of the sorrow just as excruciating of reinvesting clandestinely, like a *traitor*, the primary signifiers in the words and in the values of the second language.

Translation, while helped Mattawa to overcome alienation, taught him to look at poetry from inside, providing a path towards his poetic activity. Immersed in linguistic, cultural, and emotional echoes and resonances coming from different authors and languages, Mattawa started to write poems, urged by “a sense of political grievance, anger at feeling trapped, along with a desire to preserve something which was about to be lost”; he was writing in English, but was aware that his sensitivity was “rooted in a vision that needed to be translated” (26).

Zodiac of Echoes encompasses all these reverberations, creating an acoustic structure from which a self can emerge.

The echo of travel

The strongest echo of the collection, of which all others are in a sense a reflection, is “the echo of travel” (*Zodiac of Echoes* 83) that surrounds the speaker, with its inner and outer resonances, producing a diasporic subjectivity and impacting on his way *to live* space and time. It is the representation of an internal distance – “the distance the body must travel to speak to itself” (*Amorisco*, 2) – and, at the same time, a halo enveloping him, signaling his foreignness – “So one enters a room alone./ People there and they see the dust/ and they hear the echo of travel. /[...] / They see windstorms and sandstorms,/ ghost towns and custom shacks” (83).

To cope with the loss of the homeland, the family, and the native language, the diasporic subject uses memory to create attachment patterns through time and space, weaving threads of continuity. As Edward Said has argued, for an exile “habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus, both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally” (186). The poems of *Zodiac of Echoes* present a mixture of overlapping places, times, faces, and voices that echo each other forming a complex pattern. The copresence of “here” and “there” is articulated with an antiteological temporality. As James Clifford has argued, in diaspora linear history is broken, “the present constantly shadowed by a past that is also a desired, but obstructed, future: a renewed, painful yearning” (318). This feeling pervades numerous poems, and it is well expressed by the lyrical I of “Echo & Elixir 7” who lives the present as “a blockade on / the intersection of the future and the past” (*Zodiac of Echoes* 83).

In her study of the spatio-temporal dimension of diaspora Esther Pereen, employing Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope, views diaspora as a dwelling-in-dischronotopicality. She underlines how in diaspora the affective associations or memories attributed to the lost time-space of the home mingle with the often contrastive affective associations and memories of the time-space of displacement. This double interpellation occasions the production of multiple systems of norms and values for diasporas, and the consequent effort of negotiation. The chronotope emphasizes that spatial

displacement is always also temporal displacement: “In diaspora, the homeland is not only *distant*; it is also *past* or *passed*, left behind in space and in time” (72), and as such it is not recoverable by a simple return to a location on the map.

This feeling is expressed by the speaker of “Echo & Elixir 3,” whose absence from the native land still echoes when he returns home: “People do not ask how long you’ve been away, / but what have you brought? / and being away is all you bring” (13). Nonetheless returning home allows him to reconcile body and soul and achieve an adherence with the world, via sensual perceptions, that previously could only be imagined or desired: “And the life in the hands you shake, / the poetry in the sand more than the poetry in poetry” (13). The poem ends in highlighting the role of the imagination for the emotional survival of the diasporic subject: “Let me tell you a story now. / You see a city in the clouds/ and give it a woman’s name, /always a woman’s name. / Let me tell you about my loved one’s hair. / You take a blade of grass/ and for a second/ you are a citizen of its taste” (13).

The poem in the collection whose texture most overlaps with a vibrational space in which the speaker, as a listening subject, attends to resonances of perception and sense yet to emerge, is “Rain Song.” It is the recreation in memory of multiple soundscapes that echo each other through the musicality of rain. “Rain Song” is after Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab’s poem of the same title. One of the major representatives of contemporary Arabic poetry, Badr Shakir Al-Sayyab wrote “Rain Song” when he was exiled in Kuwait, imbuing it with loss, pain, and hope, and composing it around the symbolism of rain. Mattawa’s “Rain Song” is also a meditation on loss and grief, as well as an attempt to find comfort in faith and make sense of them.

Natural sounds (often anthropomorphized) and human voices commingle, propagate and reverberate, penetrate and envelope, in a recreation in memory that moves through times and spaces. The beginning of the poem overlaps with the attack of an acoustic event (the sound of the rain and the music on the radio) opening the temporality of listening and making the speaker/listening subject draw towards the resonance of a possible sense, triggering in his memory the evocation of multiple soundscapes. The first memory is a childhood one: the rain on a morning

ride to school, his father driving, his eyes fixed on a world of credit and debt; on the radio, "devotion to / the lifter of harm from those who despair, knower of secrets with the knowledge of certainty" (9). The faith of those days is invoked in the present to relieve "the solitude of a man walking in the rain," the grief of a woman whose chest is "a sponge rain soaks with despair" (11).

Other childhood memories are evoked in a crescendo of sounds: children rising early in the morning, their songs like "the oars that broke in the first shadows /of dawn" (10-11). The sea is invoked to listen to "prayers on parched lips," while in the noise caused by the rain (the creaking ruts, the whistling pipes) "the chant of a thousand wailers" (11) resounds. The musicality of the verses drags us just like the liquid element of the rain into a dramatic crescendo that culminates in a flashflood storm in Nebraska where "darkness rushes / its black ambulance / shepherding dread" and "the self is lost" (10). On the one hand the opening of this listening space through memory is a way for the speaker to represent his grief, vulnerability, and loss, to find expression for them, and to draw towards the emerging of a sense that would make possible coming to terms with them. But, at the same time, it is also an attempt to recover an access to the self, via vibrations and reverberations with the world.

While rain is the natural element that unifies the places and times of the poem and is invoked in the end as a protection ("Bless me now pouring / rain as the world I know / leaves me"; 12), the sea signals a distance that can only be crossed by surrendering to a higher entity: "I pray because / there is no shelter from floating / on a sea of distances" (10). The causal link between prayer and distance in the quoted verses brings us to the correlation between diaspora and religion. As Seán McLoughlin has pointed out, although religions have a significant place in the history of diaspora and transnationalism, starting from "the prototypical Babylonian exile of the Jews and their desire to return to Zion" (125), the study of religions has been slow to acknowledge the significant role of religion in contemporary migration. And for their part diaspora and transnational studies have paid less theoretical attention to religion than to the other closely related notions of ethnicity, race, nation, and hybridity. Starting from the 1970s, scholars of diaspora and religion have emphasized the

complex continuities and transformations of religions when they adapt to new contexts. They have focused on what happens to their specific content in certain circumstances, and how religious traditions are transformed in new contexts.²

In *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (2006) Thomas A. Tweed, drawing from his research on a Cuban Catholic shrine in Miami, has conceptualized religion from the perspective of movement and place, defining religions as “confluences of organic-cultural flows that intensify joy and confront suffering by drawing on human and suprahuman forces to make homes and cross boundaries” (54). Religions can be understood as always-contested and ever-changing maps that orient devotees as they move spatially and temporally. Studying the religious life of transnational migrants, Tweed has analyzed how the disorientation of migration affects people’s attempts “to map, construct, and inhabit worlds of meaning” (Tweed 1997, 93). In this regard he has identified three types of spiritual cartographies: “*locative*, in which religion is associated with a homeland where the group now resides; *supralocative*, which names the inclination in later generations of some diasporic peoples to diminish or deny the significance of both homeland and the adopted land in their religious life; and *translocative*, which refers to the tendency among many first- and second-generation migrants to symbolically move between homeland and new land” (94-95).

As far as Islam in the West is concerned, many scholars have studied the impact of deterritorialization and deculturation on Muslims, noticing an “objectification” of Islam (Eickelman and Piscatori).³ No longer lived as an integral part of a practice and culture, Islam becomes an object of reflection, a self-contained system that its believers can describe, characterize, and distinguish from other belief systems: “Hence the recurrent question: What is Islam? The answer has to be individual, not so much in terms of elaborating new theoretical answers but in terms of self-appropriation of the answer” (Roy, 38) On the other hand, a common feature of “the return of the religious” involving Christianity and Islam is the internalization of religion under the category of faith; intellectual and theological debates give way to the expression of a personal relation to faith, deity, and knowledge. As Jocelyn Cesari has noted in her study of Islam in the West

and the emergence of “a new Muslim minority,” young Muslims exercise new levels of individual choice in the course of religious observances and experience religion first and foremost as a matter of spirituality and personal ethics.

In *Zodiac of Echoes* religion is not tied to places of worship or to rituals, but is expressed as faith, as a personal, intimate relationship, based on attending to resonances of sense, and as such it can be found as a subtext in many poems. On the other hand, if we consider the title of the collection, we find the suggestion of reading the poems as prayers. “Genealogy of Fire”, a homage of the poet to his family female members, can be read as a prayer fueled by the fear of losing his loved ones. The voices of his mother, sister, and niece are evoked in portions of recalled conversations that emerge like “arabesques of water” (52). The feared loss is expressed in terms of a soundscape that will no longer reverberate their voices: “and if she were, and if they were / to disappear like fog at sunrise / on crowded roads or dead gardens / and if her voice, and if their voices / were to be swallowed by the sounds of forests or shifting dunes, / how will I console the world?” (53). These lines are punctuated by verses from the Qu’ran which insert another Voice into the poem, one the speaker can listen to for sense and comfort. Sometimes the words of the unanswerable prayers of the zodiac express just a “homing desire” (Brah 180), that is a desire for home and belonging, for familiarity, continuity, and safety which is set against the lived experience of loss and exclusion.

The acoustic element, in expanding and withdrawing, stimulates profound experiences of presence and absence, an aspect analyzed by psychoanalysts interested in the musical dimension of the analytic encounter and in the relationship between music and psychoanalysis.⁴ Mauro Mancia and Antonio Di Benedetto have argued that music reawakens, in a sense, archaic experiences of object relation and loss. The temporality of the musical experience involves fragmentation of emotions, an unending series of “melancholic states” overcome and transformed by memory. While a work in the visual arts has an autonomous existence that lasts in time, evoking in the viewer a sense of eternity, the music listener is engaged in a subtle and incessant elaboration of mourning. At the same time acoustic stimuli amplify perceptive faculties, making mind work on

the representation of the invisible. In Mattawa's poems the recreation of soundscapes as space-time for the speakers to immerse themselves in and be enveloped by has this double function: by evoking absent presences they create the illusion of continuity while working through grief and loss, and concomitantly constitute the space-time for the ongoing definition and redefinition of the self. The poem "Cricket Mountain" provides another example of this through the evocation of a childhood memory permeated by a dreamlike dimension. The speaker is with his father, who is driving at night away from the city, the car's lights off. They cross a bridge and stop by a channel that carries "sea water to the salt field" (48). In the surrounding silence only the sound of crickets is audible; it "crawls like a creature wanting to be noticed, yet is quick to withdraw... Soon there is nothing in the world but the crickets' hum, an ordered machinery, a vibrating zone" (48). The speaker and his father are enveloped by the sound of crickets, and part of the vibrating zone, yet the sound is immediately defined as "a shroud": "You feel the air shiver around you, the sound wrapping you like a shroud" (48), lending a dramatic connotation to this outer and inner landscape and marking the distance of the speaker/listener from the world of the living. The fact that the poem ends with questions concerning identity – "Who was I then, and who was my father? / And what was the city that tangled us in its muddy streets?" (48) – indicates how the evocation of that memory is necessary to re-positioning the self in the present. In the physical and emotional disorientation of diaspora, in fact, home and identity are continually contested and reframed. The act of remembering is always contextual, a continuous process of recalling, interpreting, and reconstructing the past in terms of the present and in the light of an anticipated future. What is remembered of a prior home evolves in constant dialogue with new memories of other places and changing circumstances (Stock, 24). Physical places and remembered and imagined spaces commingle in a constant search for identity that emerges as a momentary positionality that is always already becoming.

"Cricket Mountain" can also be read as an act of translation as Bella Brodzki conceives it. The author of *Can These Bones Live? Translation, Survival, and Cultural Memory*, in embracing the metaphorical power of translation as travel between times, has argued that excavating or

unearthing burial sites or ruins in order to reconstruct traces of the physical and textual past in a new context is also a mode of translation, just as resurrecting a memory or interpreting a dream are acts of translation: “the original, also inaccessible, is no longer an original per se; it is a pretext whose identity has been redefined” (4). Following this interpretation, we can read the whole collection as an act of translation, that is, the place where, and the instrument through which Mattawa reclaims forms of human aliveness that the effects of the diasporic experience, so well expressed by the opening verses of the collection, have foreclosed to him.

In this sense the last lines of the collection are significant, also in relation to the opening ones. They describe the speaker's return home, albeit in his imagination, as a complete adherence, a total dissolving of distances and borders, a merging of I and you, and a reconquered ability to resonate with himself and the world: “This is how I carry myself / back to you. Under / porch lights you'll find / me tenuous as stardust / as I reach for the mist / of your breath to anchor me, / for the rub of your touch/ to render me mortal and resonant” (109). As Sara Ahmed has argued, the lived experience of being-at-home involves subjects being enveloped in a space which is not simply outside them: being-at-home suggests that “the subject and space leak into each other, inhabit each other” (89). It is like inhabiting a second skin, a skin which does not simply contain the homely subject, but which allows the subject to be touched and to touch the world.

Mattawa's actual return home is described in the essay “Identity, Power, and a Prayer for Repatriation,” in which the poet acknowledges that translation has so much imbued his life that it has become for him “a kind of existential state, a form of identity”; as it helped him to find his way into American culture, so it was the means through which he “began to seek [his] return, [his] place at home” (*How Long* 27). The latter, in fact, is reconquered through listening, in that intensive spacing of rebound between sound and sense, Arab and English, that goes beyond sense as meaning, and makes of the poet “a resonant body” (Nancy, 8) opened to a simultaneous listening to a self and to a world that are both in resonance:

At home in Libya after many years of living away, and in the enigmatic state of arrival, I spent my first day in the banal world of funeral wakes, where

customary words such as *'Azzana wabid* are exchanged among the attendees. *'Azzana wabid*. The phrase is repeated a thousand times, its meaning buried in the automatic perception of ritualized utterance where heartfelt sentiment dies. *'Azzana wabid* means “our grief is one.” Our... grief... is... one... During the noisy nonchalant gatherings of my father’s funeral in Libya, only in translation, in my English, did the words “our grief is one” mean anything to me. I culled that solace from mouths that did not mean to touch me so deeply, and it was translation that allowed me to enter like an endoscope lens into the mourners’ hearts to retrieve the comfort I needed [...]. That effort in reading the words beyond the words people said, the quiet probing of what my countrymen were trying to really tell me and my need to translate them, was how I began to seek my return, my place at home. (*How Long* 27)

Notes

¹ Khaled Mattawa has published several collections of poetry, including *Fugitive Atlas* (2020), *Mare Nostrum* (2019), *Tocqueville* (2010), *Amorisco* (2008), and *Ismailia Eclipse* (1995). He has translated numerous volumes of contemporary Arabic poetry, including Adonis’s *Concerto al-Quds* (2017), *Shepherd of Solitude: Selected Poems of Amjad Nasser* (2009), and *Miracle Maker: Selected Poems of Fadbil Al-Azzawi* (2004). He is the recipient of numerous awards including the Academy of American Poets Fellowship Prize, the PEN Award for Poetry in Translation, and a MacArthur Fellowship.

² For a survey of how the field of “diaspora religion” has evolved and developed within comparative religion, the history of religion and religious studies, see McLoughlin 2005.

³ According to Eickelman and Piscatori three facets of objectification are noteworthy. First, distinctive to the modern era is that discourse and debate about Muslim tradition involves people on a massive scale. It also necessarily involves an awareness of other Muslim and non-Muslim traditions. A second facet is that authoritative religious discourse, once the monopoly of religious scholars who have mastered recognized religious texts, is replaced by direct and broader access to the printed word. More and more Muslims take it upon themselves to interpret the textual sources, classical or modern, of Islam. Third, objectification reconfigures the symbolic production of Muslim politics. The state, the ulama, and the “new” religious intellectuals all compete to gain ascendancy as the arbiters of Islamic practice.

⁴ Scholarship on music and psychoanalysis has worked on the musical dimension of the analytical encounter referring to a conception of music as a language

sui generis, whose symbolic structure is isomorphic with that of our emotional and affective world. This dimension facilitates the transferential metaphor, beyond the content of narrative, of affective, emotional, and cognitive (traumatic) experiences of the patient which have shaped the implicit model of the patient's mind.

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