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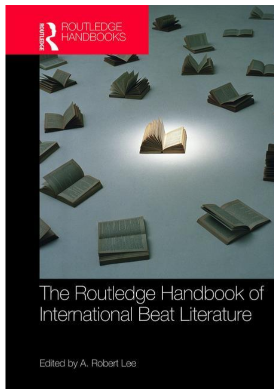

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Moroccan Beat Writers

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21

MOROCCAN BEAT WRITERS

Mrabet, Choukri, Layachi

El Habib Louai

The so-called Beat Generation was a whole bunch of people, of all different nationalities, who came to the conclusion that society sucked.[1]

Morocco, and especially its cities of Tangier and Marrakesh, has long featured in Beat mythology. Paul and Jane Bowles, Burroughs, Brion Gysin, the visits of Ginsberg, Kerouac, and others, all have contributed, each in their own way, to the establishment of a lively and fascinating body of cultural capital. But what about Moroccan writers, those who themselves can lay claim to being thought Beat—albeit on their own cultural and literary terms? They have been sidelined for quite a long time for no clear reason other than belonging to assumed geographies of backwardness, which is hardly grounds for disregarding their formidable creative and artistic legacy. Fresh attention should indeed be given to those Moroccan writers, of whom Mohamed Choukri (1935–2003), Larbi Layachi (1937–1986) and Mohammed Mrabet (1936–) are examples; all three met America's own Beats, and all explored shared questions of self and society.

Scholarship on the US Beats confirms that they were always interested in other traditions and availed themselves of the cultural capital of those traditions by including them in their narratives and lifestyles. In this context, Nancy Grace and Jennie Skerl contend that the Beats borrowed and blended "various traditions from other Western and non-Western cultures such as Buddhism, pan-cultural hallucinogenic practices, and European surrealism and romanticism."[2] Likewise Beat travel within the United States and other places around the globe contributed to the broadening of their literary imagination, creativity, and life experience. Undoubtedly, with their plethora of languages, customs, traditions and new styles of expression, these travels enhanced their interaction with other nationals and helped to open their eyes to a different reality. William Burroughs, Ted Joans, and Harold Norse, notably, lived outside of the United States for extended periods of time. They did not think of their travels in terms of casual tourist adventure in the exotic territories of Greece, North Africa or Sub-Saharan Africa, but rather as the enriching experience of serious writers "interacting with writers and artists outside the United States and often making concerted efforts to live as members of the local community."[3]

This vision that the Beats had of travel as a continuing adventure to explore and make sense of life in its incommensurable totality reflects the migratory character of the Beat movement, and in turn had its influence on the writers and cultures of those territories. This was the case in Morocco, with its complex wave of literary-cultural influence, especially in the late 1950s and 1960s. Contrary to the Moroccan nationalist writers of the 1940s and early 1950s, whose preoccupations were legitimately focused on the injustices of colonialism, cultural identity, and the confrontation between tradition

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and modernity, the post-independence writers (Morocco became independent in 1956) gave voice to new literary sensibilities in their transgressive thematic choices. The era's important writers include Ghallab (1919–2017), Ahmad Sefrioui (1915–2004), and Driss Chraibi (1926–2007), whose novel *The Simple Past* (*Le Passé Simple*) (1954) had "the audacity to attack both Moroccan patriarchal society and French colonial rule."[4] By taking advantage of the technical flexibility of the novel as a European genre, these nationalist writers focused mainly on voicing their anti-colonial positions through the colonizer's language and later on raised questions of postcolonial nature. Eventually, this domination of the nationalist aspect in Moroccan literature would change with the birth of a new literary ethos triggered by the cultural encounter between the Beats and Moroccan writers, mainly, Mohammed Mrabet, Larbi Layachi, Abdeslam Boulaich, Ahmed Yacoubi, and Mohamed Choukri, whose body of work has not only been considerable but also full of overlaps and fusions.

In *Al Mashaa*, a documentary produced in 2014 on by Al Jazeera on Tangier's peculiar status in cross-cultural encounters, the writer Mohammed Mrabet acknowledges how he indeed met some of the Beats, few more closely than William Burroughs. Mrabet's reminiscences reflect his familiarity with Burroughs's lifestyle as represented in his literary oeuvre. In one of the conversations in the documentary, Mrabet remembers that "Burroughs once came to visit Paul Bowles shaking all over like a bird who fell in water,"[5] and he also refers to Burroughs's drug use and his interest in gun culture with its fatal result in the death of Joan Vollmer. That encounter has its origins in Burroughs's decision to relocate to Tangier in 1953 after reading Paul Bowles' bestselling *The Sheltering Sky* (1949). Burroughs was quick to appreciate the cultural diversity of Tangier, its inclusiveness and in-betweenness as a space for literary creativity. He even had hopes of writing the equivalent of Bowles's *The Sheltering Sky*. That, to be sure, is not to overlook motivations relating to drugs and sex, preoccupations also implicated in the emergence of a Beat Moroccan authorship. American Beat influence was both explicit and tacit, if sometimes directly acknowledged then also filtered, sometimes almost unknowingly, into the writings.

Even so, for writers like Mrabet, Layachi, and Choukri, together with Boulaich, contributor to the story collection *Five Eyes* (1979), the Beats would offer a literary experience unknown to previous generations. In them, and a few others, begins what has indeed come to be dubbed Moroccan Beat literature. In order to share their experience of the cultural struggles of their time in Tangier, these storytellers had recourse to a more transgressive turn than had been customary in past Moroccan tradition. This was to implicate them in sexually explicit writing, supposed obscenity, and other forms of challenge and shock tactics to received canons of taste. Like their Beat compeers, these Moroccan writers and artists fought unrelentingly to demolish symbolic or physical representations of old conventions through open and striking use of profanity or even blasphemy. They could hardly not expect estrangement, exclusion, and neglect, even from their closest friends or family members. Here, as for the first time, was authorship within an Islamic tradition willing to tackle taboo subjects and confront those issues like the Beats who "worked on a very particular range of margins."[6]

The aforementioned group of Moroccan writers adhere to the same standpoints and assumptions as those of the American Beats. The distinctiveness of the Beat generation movement can be attributed to the fact that its pioneers "openly addressed homosexuality, bisexuality, and masturbation in their work, declassifying the secrets of the male body, making sexuality as complex as individual identity and pushing their chosen forms to new limits in the process."[7] Allen Ginsberg, for instance, is indeed an outstanding poet who wrote transgressive poems and he was ahead of his time because he directly spoke to his audience without screening or hiding his emotions. "Howl" represents that kind of transgressive writing because it depicts the poet's dissatisfaction with and dislike of mainstream culture as well as emphasize the counterculture, an issue that these Moroccan writers stressed, consciously or unconsciously, in their own fictional works. Accordingly, one can contend that the influence the Beats had on their Moroccan counterparts figures essentially in the themes and issues with which they engage.

Just like Ginsberg's epic poem "Howl" and Burroughs's first two novels *Junky* and its sequel *Queer*, Mohammed Mrabet's *Love with a Few Hairs* (1969), a City Lights publication in its English version,

tackles a number of subjects that resulted, like some of the Beats' works, in seizure by the official authorities in Tangier. Paul Bowles accounts for the circumstances surrounding this seizure in one of his letters:

> Today I am posting a copy of Love with a Few Hairs, before it becomes impossible to send it through the mails. (It's under consideration now at the police headquarters; there's always a whiff of apprehension in the atmosphere. One can never relax and know that everything's all right in this place; Big Brother is so prone to misunderstand and decide that one really meant to insult the country.) For this reason Mrabet grows glum from time to time, being certain they will throw him into jail for having dared to write a book.[8]

Not the least of these sensitive subjects revolves around gay love, an "identity not in line with those constructed by the State."[9] With no reservation, Mrabet tells the story of Mohammed, a young Moroccan servant torn between his love for the girl Mina and his desire for the English homosexual, Mr. David, who "owned a small hotel near the beach."[10] *Love With A Few Hairs* echoes the Beat preoccupation with issues of sexuality in post-World War II America, especially the quest for and struggle to affirm one's homosexual orientation which was socially proscribed as aberrant at the time. As readers of his poetry can easily observe, Ginsberg openly deploys homosexual jargon and vocabulary throughout his poetry, but most conspicuously in "Howl" and "On Neal's Ashes." Burroughs could be equally uninhibited in exploring homosexuality, as *Junky* and *Queer* confirm—especially the latter with the quest of its principal character Lee for homosexual partners in South America and its apotheosis in the relationship with a recently discharged American Navy serviceman called Allerton. While it was relatively easier for Western Beat writers to engage with homosexual issues, Mrabet, Choukri, and Layachi have been quite reticent to do so because of the social and cultural conventions imposed by an Islamic historical context.

This self-imposed reticence is shown in the striking ambivalence of Mrabet's character Mohammed, in choosing between his English lover, Mr. David, and the pursuit of the heterosexual love he nurtures for his charming neighbor Mina. Even while narrating his story about the homosexual relationship existing between Mohammed and Mr. David, Mrabet holds back from calling things by their proper names. He simply falters and hides behind linguistic terms without giving clear and detailed descriptions of this homosexual love. He simply uses words and expressions such as "sleep," "kiss," "stay with," "we never have any fun together," and "I'd just like to see more of you." Not just a sexual but also a linguistic evasiveness comes into play: "Most of the nights Mohammed slept with Mr. David at the hotel. But now and then he would begin to think about Mina, and the idea came to him that someone else might be around. Then he would go to spend a night in the house at Bnider."[11]

Such sexual ambivalence can be understood when we consider the imperatives of traditional Moroccan society. It has never been easy for any Moroccan writer to speak openly about sexual relationships that do not subscribe to prescribed heterosexual norms within Muslim society. The collective unconscious of the Moroccan individual is largely controlled by the teachings and regulations of religious law based on Islamic tradition. However, the presence of and encounter with an international community of writers and tourists who poured into Tangiers' interzone aroused the hidden sexual preoccupations of these Moroccan Beat writers. Gradually, queer sexuality has become part of the creative terrain of new Moroccan writers who refuse to turn a blind eye on the issue of queerness and the existence of homosexuals obliged to live covertly.

Another issue which conspicuously denotes a Beat character in the writings of Mrabet, Choukri, and Layachi has to do with the celebration, supply, and management of different kinds of narcotics. These are largely not seen as harmful substances, but rather as useful, even necessary, for normal functioning and entertainment. The three writers reflect a Beat ethos in their refusal to treat alcohol

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and narcotics, especially hashish and kif, as commodities to be avoided or banned. Indulging themselves in drugs or alcohol, moreover, is not merely a component of their fiction, but rather a serious habitual lifestyle kept up across many years. As was the case for the Beats, narcotics and alcohol helped Mrabet and his likes to broaden their consciousness and produce creative work that appeals to the Western reader. In one of his letters to Irving Stettner, Mrabet confides: "I can't even write to you unless I'm kiffed. If it weren't for kif I'd be an old man in a corner if I didn't smoke."[12] The fiction of Mrabet, as of Choukri and Layachi, addresses what it is to use hashish or kif as a way of confronting poverty or family tension, not to say relishing simple self-enjoyment.

Like Burroughs's *Junky*, Mrabet's *M'Hashish* (1969) offers stories of Beat-like characters who cannot do their work or function in their society without using narcotics. To battle social norms and fight poverty, the principal characters in *M'Hashish* deliberately disconnect from their immediate reality through loaded spliffs of cannabis and alcohol, which they share with their companions or with the prostitutes to whom they resort to assuage their troubled sexual desires. Narcotics and alcohol are indulged in by most of the characters in Mrabet and Choukri and Layachi's fiction in order to replace a world where reality does not meet their expectations with a world where they can relieve themselves through hallucinations and dreams. *M'Hashish*, for instance, contains several entertaining and funny stories that depict the results of being under the effect of hashish and how narcotics can be used to alter one's consciousness so as to more easily internalize a deplorable reality of deprivation and frustration. This belief in the ability of drugs to inspire and suggest new visions and ways of dealing with reality is shown in the story "The Datura Trees,"[13] where Hamed suddenly imagines a woman in the garden telling him how to mend the psychological damage his friend Abdeslam's insults have caused, or in "the Sea in the Street,"[14] which tells the story of a shop owner who, under the effect of kif, takes off his clothes and jumps into an imaginary sea in the street.

Another literary work which hugely reflects Beat influence is Mohamed Choukri's *For Bread Alone* (1973). Choukri indeed met Burroughs and other writers such as Jean Genet, Tennessee Williams, and Paul Bowles—authors whose literary careers incorporated experiences from American and North African terrains. Choukri's autobiography, *For Bread Alone*, brings to mind Burroughs's *magnum opus Naked Lunch*. If we invoke Julia Kristeva's theories about intertextuality, we can undoubtedly see that Choukri's masterpiece follows in the footsteps of *Naked Lunch*, and that the title makes use of similar terms and words alluding to nourishment and sustenance. Kristeva argues that "[A]ny text, is constructed of a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another."[15] Although it is impossible to argue that Choukri quotes verbatim from Burroughs, one can still find grounds for influence and similarity.

Both *For Bread Alone* and *Naked Lunch* take inspiration from Tangier, its interstitial spatiality, along with an assortment of off-center characters. The point of view at play is the one of the outsider, be it that of resident Moroccan or American expatriate, and Tangier itself as reality yet also terrain bordering on the fantastical. It would be hard to miss the intertextual link, be it the sense of place or the subject position of margin and transgression. Choukri's *For Bread Alone*, for all its own distinct characteristics, is unmistakably a text that unfolds with the ghost of Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* looming large over it: two transgressive works allied yet separate.

Choukri's life bears more than a passing resemblance to that of certain Beats like Herbert Huncke's or the early one of Corso and Cassady. He came from a poor family who migrated from the Rif mountains to the city of Tangier due to a serious famine which struck the whole Rif region in the 1940s. As an individual Choukri always lived and co-existed with what he calls "the beaten," by which he specifically means thieves, prostitutes, and beggars. His experiences were mostly inspired and nurtured by the hard knocks in the life of a deprived boy who had to flee from his home in Tétouan due to an abusive father who killed one of his brothers. The intensity of these incidents resounds with some of the Beats' own family experiences: Ginsberg, for instance, who had to deal with a sick mother and take care of her when she was confined to a mental institution, or, again, Corso who at age sixteen was sentenced to a three-year jail sentence for theft. Additionally,

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the fact that Choukri grew up lacking in formal education—he did not learn how to write and read until late in his twenties—can suggest other resemblances with Beats who grew up under rough conditions. As a result of debilitating poverty, Choukri never thought of taking up writing as a profession, let alone enrolling in courses of creative writing. However, his intelligence and creative flair flourished once he met Paul Bowles, who encouraged him to write his autobiography, which saw publication by Peter Owen in 1973.[16]

As to locale, both *For Bread Alone* and *Naked Lunch* blend actual Tangier, its historical and socioeconomic reality as an international zone, into their otherwise fictional narratives. But while Choukri grew up running around Tangier and its environs in search of job opportunities, Burroughs traveled to Tangier from another world with different aspirations ranging from drugs and sex to mere travel and creative writing. The fact that both these writers lived and wrote about Tangier is itself a meaningful coincidence. In a way similar to Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, Choukri's *For Bread Alone* is an autobiography that fractures the jaded foundations of a traditional and conformist society. It deals with sexuality and sexual abuse in all its forms, a reality that Choukri met with early in his childhood. Because of the sexual abuse of the figure of Yazidi that he directly witnessed during his work at the bakery, he realized how afraid he was of rape and why he preferred to sleep in cemeteries where human monsters are afraid to tread in search of beautiful boys with nice butts.

Gradually, Choukri explores his sexuality while doing his best to assuage sexual desire by any means available. Sometimes he watches the orchard owner's daughter Ayesha while she swims. At other times, however, he goes to brothels with his friend Tafersiti to savor the flesh of the most famous prostitute in the area, Lalla Harouda. The scene that Choukri describes when he first meets Lalla Harouda is very much reminiscent of a Beat scene in Jack Kerouac's *Tristessa* (1960). Choukri beautifully draws the picture for us:

> she began to take off her clothes, a cigarette hanging from her fleshy lips. The smoke curled upward and made her squint. She turned to me. Open your mouth, she said. She smiled and thrust the cigarette between my lips. Then she turned her back on me and I unbuttoned her brassiere, my eyes on the sparse hairs in the furrow between her buttocks. She faced me still smiling, the brassiere dangling from her hand, and took the cigarette from my mouth. I smiled back at her thinking: she used my lips as an ashtray.[17]

This scene reflects the tragic reality of a boy left on his own to experiment with a reality where monsters mercilessly feed on each other for a handful of pennies. This scene illustrates the heroic audacity of a Beat character who has no other choice than to let life unfold and flow while trying to survive its tribulations. Just like Burroughs, Choukri also mentions intense recurring sexual fantasies, the urge to sexual activity with non-humans, involving bestiality or zoophilia. He cannot resist having sexual intercourse with animals and he confesses that

> each day the sight of certain living creatures produced great excitement in me: hens, goats, dogs and calves. Many hens died as a result of my experiments. I would have to muzzle a dog, or tie up a calf, but there was no need to take such precautions with a goat or a hen, and these were more satisfactory.[18]

Clearly, a deep sense of deprivation and frustration has led Choukri to look for strange sexual partners. Later, he lingers on a striking depiction of his sexual intimacy:

> I am bothered everyday by my sex. I scratch it slowly with my fingers as if it were a pimple not yet ready to burst. Then it fills and grows hard, until it is sweating and panting. Unless I reach pleasure during my reverie, I feel pain like two stones.[19]

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Choukri's unease here is partly aggravated by his unfulfilled sexual urges in a society where natural sexual behavior is considered a taboo. Instead of openly discussing sexuality as part of normal child development, Choukri's character is left to his own devices, and he might end up suffering from sexual problems that could affect his psychology.

Coupled with his struggle to survive in a hostile colonized territory, this early awareness of his sexual frustration led Choukri to try different means of relief. One gratification of his desire is depicted in his encounter with an old Spanish man who gives him oral sex in his car for payment in pesetas. In Choukri's words:

> with a caressing movement he runs his hand over my fly … Button by button, very slowly, he unfastened the trousers, and my sex felt the warmth of his breath. I did not dare look at his face or even at his hand, whose warm pressure had my sex rise up.[20]

Later, Choukri starts to inquire into the sexuality of the Westerners who came to Tangier and the genuine reasons behind their infatuation with the city.

But instead of philosophizing about his own sexual orientation, he simply looks at the oral sex encounter in terms of economic imperative as "a new profession to add to begging and stealing."[21] Another sexual object for Choukri's fantasies is the attractive Spanish woman, Madame Segundi, for whom he works when his family goes to Oran. He contends that "[I] enjoyed working for her, and [I] used her as a dream object whenever I felt excited."[22] Thus, it seems that Choukri and his characters, like the Beats, do not impose definite and restrictive norms on sexual orientation or presuppose a specific kind of sex for the gratification of sexual desire. There is, however, also the sense of economic imperative behind sexual relationships, a viewpoint shared in any number of writings by both the American and Moroccan Beats.

Narcotics and alcohol constitute another essential theme that Choukri shares with Burroughs, who was dubbed a pioneer in addiction. As Oliver Harris states in his Introduction to *Junky*, Burroughs lived through the entire era of illicit heroin use in America starting with the Harrison Act of 1914. Both *Queer* and *Junky*, the latter which has for its subtitle *Confessions of an Unredeemed Drug Addict*, narrate the story of his involvement in drug dealing and experiments with different kinds of junk which he designates a "generic term for opium and/or derivatives including all synthetics from demerol to palfium."[23] Unlike Burroughs, however, who consumed and experimented with heroin, morphine, amphetamine, methadone, Dilaudid, and opium, which he used to shed his conventional white middle class upbringing, Choukri was not a user of heavy drugs. Rather he was interested in the lesser narcotics available in Tangier at the time, mainly hashish, majoun, and kif or marijuana, very much the drugs grown by Burroughs while living in East Texas and Louisiana. They each figure in Choukri's writings as an escape from deprivation and indeed as an attempt to survive in a socially, economically, and politically fissured reality. With a great deal of awareness, Choukri slowly gets into the habit of experimenting with these different kinds of narcotics. The following depicts what might be called the beginning of a serious addiction:

> I smoked in secret. The first time I ate a piece of majoun I fainted. Later I vomited what looked like moss. I went on being sick for several days, and life looked strangely different during that time. Illness makes one more alone. I understood that I was only I, face to face with myself.[24]

Seemingly, all kinds of junkies, no matter what age they are, become overwhelmingly self-absorbed and tend to focus on the psychological and physical metamorphosis their addiction causes, which for writers also becomes a major source of material. That especially holds when the user lives at the margins of society, economically down-and-out or desperate. The addict, as both Burroughs and

Choukri show, always seeks out the company of other junkies to supply him with junk—the upshot being both addiction and subsequent manipulation by the supplier/pusher. Choukri contends

> the men in the café encouraged me to smoke kif and eat majoun. Daytimes it was kif and work, but at night it was majoun and fun. One of them said: it's only the first time you take it that you throw up. He was right. I never felt sick again.[25]

Naturally, alcohol and narcotics become in Burroughs and Choukri a relentless pathway into introspection.

A further key Beat influence on Moroccan storytellers and writers has to do with hoboism and vagrancy, in particular when it comes to the overlaps between Kerouac's *On the Road* and *Desolation Angels* and Choukri's *For Bread Alone* and Layachi's *Life Full of Holes*. In a famous article entitled "The Vanishing American Hobo," published in *Lonesome Traveler*, Jack Kerouac reflects on the demise of a once popular, and often necessary, means of mobility for those in search of work or adventure. The perspective that Kerouac adopts stems from his own experience as an adventurer constantly on the road, since he admits that he never saw himself as an actual hobo. With suspicion and a great deal of humility, he contends that "I myself was a hobo but only of sorts, as you see, because I knew someday my literary efforts would be rewarded by social protection."[26]

Under these auspices, one can argue that almost all of Kerouac's literary works are forms of hobo fiction, each, however, as a primer in how to attain spiritual growth. *On the Road*, for instance, can be understood as depicting Sal Paradise as one hobo alongside Dean Moriarty as another with the road as a sort of life playground.[27] Kerouac bemoans the fact that "the American hobo has a hard time hoboing nowadays due to the increase in police surveillance of highways, railroad yards, sea shores, river bottoms, embankments and the thousand-and-one hiding holes of industrial night" (*Lonesome Traveler*, 172). This state of affairs, in Kerouac's view, is connected to the threatening effect that industrialism and urbanism have on hoboism. When one considers the condition of a vagabond, one discovers that it is usually produced by economic need. Conversely, very few people attribute their sense of vagabonding to urgent spiritual vocations that are associated with the freedom of nomadism and roaming. However, hoboism for Kerouac is a sublime experience since it allows for that spiritual and sentimental state where he can enjoy solitude and "just stop the machine of 'thinking' and 'enjoying' what they call "living", he just wanted to lie in the grass and look at the clouds" (*Lonesome Traveler*, 118). Despite its standing as existential and spiritual quest, however, the phenomenon of hoboism and vagrancy is far more associated with economic need in the writings of Choukri and Layachi.

In *For Bread Alone*, the reader is introduced to Choukri as a child hobo who has been forced to flee the family house because of an abusive father. The journey that he embarks on fleeing his native Tetuan is very much reminiscent of a hobo's adventure in *On the Road* or *The Dharma Bums*. Choukri spent a great deal of his life wandering through the streets of different Moroccan cities, specifically Tetuan, Tangier, and Oran. His main destination, however, was Tangier, whose byways he inhabited looking for a job or a shelter where he could lie down until daybreak. He recounts that when he first got to Tangier, he went to the cinema to kill time and think about a place to sleep. Unfortunately, he was not lucky enough, as he ended up on a stone bench at the Feddane where he also found "men from other cities who were passing through, and people who merely did not want to sleep at home, like [him]" (*For Bread Alone*, 86). Fortunately, he was not the only one and it seems that a hobo always finds company:

> Boys, youths and old men were sleeping all over the ground and on the benches like fish stranded on a beach. Every little while another arrived and lay down. He would move about for a bit in the spot he had chosen, getting himself comfortable, and then he would be quiet.
>
> *For Bread Alone*, 86

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On other occasions, he sleeps in parks or graveyards in the Bou Araqia neighborhood on a pile of flattened cardboard boxes with other new friends. Not the least of his stopping-off places are the cemeteries also mentioned as safety and final resort by Kerouac:

> the hobos of America who can still travel in a healthy way are still in good shape, they can go hide in cemeteries and drink wine under cemetery groves of trees and micturate and sleep on cardboards and smash bottles on tombstones.
>
> *Lonesome Traveler*, 182

The following conversation between Choukri and his friend illustrates the dangers of leading a hobo life:

> I awoke in a fright. The boy was shaking me by the shoulder and talking to me. Get up! Get up! A raid! The police are coming.
>
> I felt in my back trousers pockets. The sixty pesetas were gone. As we ran, I said: they stole the money.
>
> How much was it?
>
> Sixty pesetas.
>
> We slowed down. You're lucky, he said.
>
> We were both panting. What do you mean, lucky?
>
> They didn't rape you. When there are two or three of them, if they don't find anything on you, they rape you.
>
> *For Bread Alone*, 89

This excerpt runs close to the point made by Kerouac when he denounces the growing authoritarianism which paralyzes the hobo mobility: "Today the hobo has to hide, he has fewer places to hide, the cops are all looking for him, calling all cars, calling all cars, hobos seen in the vicinity of Bird-in-Hand–" (*Lonesome Traveler*, 176). What is more shocking, according to Choukri's autobiography, is that instead of protecting the drifters and down-and-outs the police get involved in crimes of rape and sexual abuse.

Another work of fiction that reflects Beat characteristics is Larbi Layachi's *A Life Full of Holes* (1964), published under his pen name of Driss ben Hamed Charhadi. Like Mohamed Choukri's *For Bread Alone*, Ginsberg's "Howl" and Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, Layachi's *A Life Full of Holes* caused a great deal of trouble for its author. He became, in Paul Bowles's words,

> increasingly nervous about the possible official reactions to the French edition of his book, which Gallimard was publishing shortly. His anxiety, continually expressed, communicated itself to me, and I too began to think it would be better if he were out of the way. I got him a visa for the United States; he left with Bill Burroughs on *the Independence* and has never returned to Morocco.[28]

Eventually, *A Life Full of Holes* was seized by the Moroccan authorities, an event fully documented in Michelle Green's book.[29] *A Life Full of Holes* is an autobiography that tells without any unnecessary embellishments the truth about a wretched life under the writ of colonialization. The fact that the narrator is the same as the author gives the story more credibility in the reader's mind through simple declarative sentences and gives it a resemblance to the type of confessional styling widely used by the Beats.

Layachi's *A Life Full of Holes* recounts the story of a Moroccan boy named Ahmed (who might prove to be Charhadi himself) who from early childhood onwards has had to struggle for survival against poverty, abuse, and exploitation in all its forms. The story begins with the marriage of Ahmed's widowed mother to a soldier who has refused to support another man's child. This rejection from which Ahmed cannot possibly heal while still in his own family home, contributes to what might be called his life on the margin, a circumstance which becomes all the more acute when his

stepbrother is born. Coupled with extreme poverty, Ahmed's feelings of deprivation are intensified by his stepfather who does not have any use for him: "Unless he works to bring money into the house I see no reason to feed or clothe him."[30] The first striking and significant mark of Ahmed's Beatness is illustrated by his determination to struggle for survival in a life full of tribulations and mistreatment. This Beatness is rendered more palpable by his decision at the age of eight to leave the family house in Tangier and wander around. Indeed, this could be the first sign of a hobo vocation that Ahmed shares with the other journeyers who populate Beat fiction.

In his own words, Ahmed confesses:

> we had been living there three or four months. One day I went out of the house by myself. I did not know the houses or the people in the quarter. I went out and started to walk along, and I kept walking, walking, until I was far away, up on the Boulevard. And night came and I began to cry.[31]

This incident marks the beginning of Ahmed's life as a marginalized and unwanted son who detaches himself from any enforced control or parental supervision. Familial control ends when Ahmed stumbles upon a group of other destitute and rejected boys, the outcasts at Fondeq en Nedjar. It is interesting how Ahmed, like his predecessor Beat hobos, finds a welcoming and consoling company outside the family niche which is supposed to provide unconditional care, love, and compassion.

A further Beat characteristic in Layachi's *A Life Full Of Holes* consists in Ahmed's celebration of rebellion once he comes to realize the widespread injustices of his society. In behavior and action, Ahmed refuses to succumb to the discipline of a conformist society; he represents the prototype of the outlaw hero in his oppressive environment. Such rebellious dissidence is given in the opening chapter, "The Wire," with its account of Ahmed's arrest and imprisonment for stealing rolls of copper wire from a warehouse. He spends ten months in jail, where he lives with eighty men in one half of a cell while the prisoner-in-charge occupies the other half just by himself. The guards excessively beat and mistreat the inmates just because they dared to complain about the scarcity of soap to a government inspector. Later, Ahmed is put in solitary confinement, where he survives only on bread and has to take his drinking water from the latrine. It seems that the experience of prison only gives Ahmed an excuse to continue his fall into a life of crime in a world governed by power and control.

Gradually, Ahmed embarks upon the Beat lifestyle of an outlaw by frequenting and mingling with narcotics users. On being caught for possessing and selling hash, his jail sentence is decided upon by the government representative of the tobacco industry who, corruptly, seeks to deter people from smoking hashish or kif by making them turn to tobacco. This is done through pressure on judges to pass disproportionate sentences against kif users. Ahmed also ponders the role that French-European colonizers have played in perpetuating all forms of control and persecution for the sole purpose of pushing people to buy their products. Here again, questions are raised about economic exploitation as reoccurring capitalist policy in colonized territories. Yet despite conditions that work against his own interests, Ahmed maintains human compassion, befriending and protecting an old Jewish prisoner in a similar way to the Beat characters who accept all differences and fight against all forms of segregation. The following passage, for instance, mirrors the Beats' re-invention of spiritual simplicity and universal kindness.

> In the morning after the prisoners had gone to work, the men from Mrrakch stayed behind because they had not been given work clothes. At breakfast that Jew had no sugar or anything. I made him a glass of tea and gave it to him. After that he got his clothes and went out to work. When he came back at noon he told me: This work I'm doing is too much for me. It's going to kill me. I told him: Be patient. Where have they put you?

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In the quarry where Messaoud is, he said.

I'll talk with him when I see him, and say a word for you. I'll give him a pack or two. Maybe he'll keep away from you.

Many thanks, he said. May Allah repay you.[32]

Another important theme that figures in Charhadi's book, which reflects a Beat influence, relates to sexuality, especial the queer side of it. The theme of queer sexuality is dealt with in the final chapters devoted to Ahmed's work as houseboy at the house of a French expatriate named François. Here, Charhadi depicts in detail the life of a French homosexual who descends slowly but surely into hell. This chapter exposes the abrupt decay, both physical and emotional, that can turn upside down the life of a homosexual if he or she does not have total control of his/her needs. Queer relationships in a colonized territory are not governed by the degree of emotional attachment, but rather by the amount of capital invested in them. When Ahmed first starts working for François, he is struck by his wealth and success as a businessman—but having become fascinated by a Moslem boy, whom he allows to rule him completely, he loses everything. Although Ahmed witnesses the gradual downfall of François, he chooses to remain neutral and refrains from judgment. Rather, his interests lie in the 500 francs per day he receives for his work and he believes that "Everyone does what he pleases in life."[33]

After having worked at different odd jobs as shepherd, baker's helper, watchman, housekeeper for a European homosexual, and finally buyer and seller of drugs, with a couple of months in prison for theft, Ahmed's story finishes with him around the age of twenty. Judging by his young age, Ahmed has indeed gone through a breadth of experience, a character-building (and Beat-like) apprenticeship in the ways of the world. Like other Beat protagonists who are born to be wild and embrace life in all its challenges and appetites, he opts for a different path:

> When a man goes out of jail it is the happiest day of his life. His heart is open and he is not afraid of anything. I said to myself: I'm going home and see my mother. When I got there she said: How are you? Have you really finished this time? Not just escaped? This time I've finished it. Another time you won't try to sell kif? Never again in my life! I told her.[34]

This, however, seems more a momentary pause than some final point of arrival. The close of *A Life Full of Holes* encapsulates Ahmed's view of his hard luck in life. His misfortunes have also been complicated by his sense of fatality, which he summarizes in the attribution of everything to Allah and the repetition of *inshallah*. His bad luck, in fact, has been unrelenting, not least, ironically, in the firing by François, given that he has been the Frenchman's most honest employee. Feeling wholly alone, he is moved to confess his unbearable sadness to his friend Mustapha:

> I was thinking: Look at all the work I did for that Nazarene. And when it ended, he cursed me and threw me out. But that's all right. The stork has to wait a long time for the locusts to come. Then he eats.[35]

The reader is left at the beginning of another phase where Ahmed is not one franc further away from starvation than when his story began. There is little hope that he will ever be rich. But whatever the future, he remains welcome to rejoin his bohemian group who offer support, kindness, and shelter from a life full of holes.

Both the American Beat writers and their Moroccan counterparts, those they actually met and those they read, share affinities, especially those of life experienced at the margins. The underlying assumption that this chapter tries to emphasize is that previous Moroccan literature did not have the courage to defy the traditional conventions of Arab and Muslim society. This challenge to received standpoints about identity, sexuality, religion, and the role of the individual in contributing to the development of society found inspiration in the presence of the Beats most especially in the

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early post-independence decades. The upshot was a willingness to confront the themes of drug use, queerdom, alcohol, prostitution, and sexual abuse. Undoubtedly, the encounter and influence of the American Beats on their Moroccan counterparts helped considerably to wrench Moroccan literature and aesthetics out of the grip of a homogeneity informed by archaic religious authority and sustained by a blind belief in superstition and mythological thinking. Most notably this influence contributes to the political consciousness which underwrites the work of Mohammed Mrabet, Larbi Layachi, and Mohamed Choukri, their critique of colonial legacy in Morocco, and thereafter, of the governing regimes of the post-independence era.

Notes

1 Amiri Baraka quoted in Chuck Workman (Dir.) "The Source." Episode #3. *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*. Oct. 14. 1999. Television.
2 Nancy M. Grace and Jennie Skerl, "Introduction to Transnational Beat: Global Poetics in a Postmodern World," in *The Transnational Beat Generation*, ed. Nancy M. Grace and Jennie Skerl, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 1.
3 Ibid., 1.
4 Simon Gikandi, *Encyclopedia of African Literature*, New York: Routledge, 2003, 536.
5 Jamal Al Aardaoui, *Al Machaa: Tangier…Naked Apples*, Doha: Al Jazeera Arabic, 2014.
6 Harris Oliver, "Queer Shoulders, Queer Wheel: Homosexuality and Beat Textual Politics," in C. Van Minnen et al, in *Beat Culture: The 1950s America and Beyond*, Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1999, 222.226.
7 Ann Charters, *Beat Down to Your Soul*, New York: Penguin Books, 2001, 148.
8 Paul Bowles, *In Touch: The Letters of Paul Bowles*, ed. Jeffrey Miller, New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1994, 401.
9 Steve Weber, "Paul Bowles and the Problem of Postmodernity Within the Colonized World," in *Wretched Refuge: Immigrants and Itinerants in the Postmodern*, ed. Jessica Datema and Diane Krumrey, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010, 51.
10 Mohammed Mrabet, *Love With A Few Hairs*, San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1969, 1. This novel focuses on other marginalized issues in a colonized Moroccan society, mainly sexual identity, social conventionalism, and queer love between local citizens and foreign residents of Tangier as an international zone. It also points to the repercussions of a homosexual relationship that is controlled by the financial needs of one of its partners. Additionally, Mrabet's work treats issues of alcoholism as a reaction to forced sexual orientations in a society governed by rigid traditions and archaic conventions. These issues are clarified in Mohammed's relationship with the English expatriate, Mr. David, his ambivalence between a straight love for Mina and his need for financial support.
11 Ibid., 99.
12 Mohammed Mrabet, *With Much Fire in the Heart: Letters of Mohammed Mrabet to Irving Stettner*, trans., Paul Bowles, La Vergne: Lightning Source, an INGRAM Company, 2011, 53.
13 "Datura Trees" is a tale by Mohammed Mrabet published in his *M'Hashish*. It tells the story of two friends named Mustafa and Hamed who live in the same house in Tangier. Once Mustafa receives a letter from Casablancan friend Abdeslam, who informs him that he would like to visit him. Unfortunately, it turns out that Abdeslam was rude to Hamed, who eventually thinks about taking revenge on him for what he did. Upon a visit to his American friends, Hamed takes some flowers from the Datura trees back home and boils them in coffee which he administers to Mustafa and his friend. Once Abdeslam falls asleep under the effect of the concoction, Hamed takes off his trousers and has sexual intercourse with him, leaving him lying naked on the floor. This story shows that Arabs and Muslims would not mind engaging in homosexual acts in matters of honor. Anal sex is regarded as the most disgraceful treatment a proud man can be subjected to and it becomes a legitimate action to regain one's respect in a patriarchal society.
14 "The Sea in the Street" is a tale published in Mrabet's *M'Hashish*. It tells the story of a kif-smoker and his wife who asked him to buy some food to cook for lunch. While shopping, the husband stops by a fisherman's shop with whom he smokes some kif pipes before he decides it is getting late to take some fish home. When he returns home, his wife asks him to bring some oil for which he goes back to the market. At the grocer's, he smokes more kif to the extent that he cannot focus on filling the bottle with oil. After darkness falls, while on his way back home, he imagines that the whole ocean has come to the street and he takes off his clothes and starts to swim. He crawls on his hands and feet until he reaches his house. The tale emphasizes the effect of drugs on the consciousness of the individual and warns of the dangers of using kif.
15 Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue, and Novel," in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. T. Moi, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, 5.

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16 Mohamed Choukri's novel *For Bread Alone* is a strange case. *Al-Khubz Al-Hafi*, as it is entitled in Arabic, was first orally told to Bowles, who translated it and got it published in 1973. *For Bread Alone* circulated as "an exact" but "far from literal" translation of the original Arabic (*For Bread Alone*, 5). When the novelist Mohamed Barrada's wife visited New York, she came across *For Bread Alone* and recommended it for publication. Barrada recommended it to Tahar Ben Jelloun, who got in touch with Choukri, who in turn sat for the first time to write a classical Arabic version. *Al-Khubz Al-Hafi* was translated by Ben Jelloun and published in 1980 as *Le Pain Nu*. Choukri's attempts to publish *Al-Khubz Al-Hafi* were rejected by several publishers in the Arab world and it was only in 1982 that a Casablancan press printed it at the author's expense. The Arabic version was initially censored for reasons having to do with profanity, moral obscenity, and pornography. For more on this issue, see Nirvana Tanoukhi, "Rewriting Political Commitment for an International Canon: Paul Bowles's 'For Bread Alone' as Translation of Mohamed Choukri's 'Al-Khubz Al-Hafi'," *Research in African Literatures* 34, No. 2 (2003), 127–144.
17 *For Bread Alone*, 44.
18 Ibid., 32.
19 Ibid., 35.
20 Ibid., 98–99.
21 Ibid., 99.
22 Ibid., 57.
23 William Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, New York: Grove Press, 2009, 199.
24 Choukri 1979, 30.
25 Ibid., 30.
26 Jack Kerouac, *Lonesome Trav*eler, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960, 173.
27 Lars Erik Larson, "Freeways and Straight roads: The Interstates of Sal Paradise and 1950s America," in *What's Your Road, Man?* ed. Hillary Holladay and Robert Holton, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009, 42.
28 Paul Bowles, *Without Stopping: An Autobiography*, New York: HarperCollins, 2006, 355.
29 Michelle Green, *The Dream at the End of the World: Paul Bowles and the Literary Renegades in Tangier*, New York: HarperPerennial, 1992, 348.
30 Driss Ben Hamed Charhadi, *A Life Full of Holes*, trans., Paul Bowles, New York: HarperCollins, 2008, 34–35.
31 Ibid., 1.
32 Ibid., 148.
33 Ibid., 252.
34 Ibid., 118.
35 Ibid., 295.

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