

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Michael K. Walonen, *Writing Tangier in the Postcolonial Transition: Space and Power in Expatriate and North African Literature* (Ashgate, 2011)

Michael K. Walonen's *Writing Tangier in the Postcolonial Transition* takes as its subject the cultural dynamic of expatriate Tangier as identified through the writings of Paul Bowles, his wife Jane Bowles, William Burroughs, and the less well-known figures of Brion Gysin and Alfred Chester. Through their writings, Walonen seeks to situate the theoretical explorations of space and place once associated with Walter Benjamin and now identified with various areas of literary and cultural studies in the unique setting of post-war Tangier, which Walonen claims deserves the sort of attention given Los Angeles by Mike Davis in his acclaimed *City of Quartz*. Taking his argument beyond the confines of these celebrity expatriates, Walonen astutely extends his study beyond the obvious to include the works of Tahar Ben Jelloun and Anouar Majid. These perspectives on the community add a compelling dimension to this work.

Walonen's study focuses on Tangier at what he argues was a unique moment in its history just prior to the end of colonial rule. Tangier, especially after World War II, the author argues, drew a wide range of travellers whose motivations for staying on as expatriates may have grown out of the trauma of the War, and as a reaction to the uniquely oppressive atmosphere of the Cold War. This in part explains the prevailing psychological state of those who were drawn to the city's unique offerings, which included sexual freedoms unknown to most Americans of that time, including the Bowleses and Williams Burroughs. Ironically, the author points out, visitors seeking to escape conformist America often found Tangier, despite its active sex trade, a space where one 'fell prey to the weight of indolence' (23). This to some degree can be attributed to the idle lifestyle of the expat community, as many were independently wealthy, or at least had the means to support themselves without having to work.

Rightly, Walonen concentrates on the major works of Paul Bowles, offering a close and largely persuasive reading of *The Sheltering Sky*, *Let It Come Down*, and *The Spider's House*, not to mention his early and later shorter works. As insightful as his analysis is, I was struck by the juxtaposition of Bowles' perspective, as shown by Walonen, with that of his Moroccan contemporaries. To take but one critical difference in perspective, the author points out how the expatriates, including Bowles, tended to avoid making the sort of class distinctions in their work that were central to writers such as Ben Jelloun, who 'puts in evidence the manner in which Moroccans experience urban space differently according to their class position' (141). This, it seems to me, goes a long way toward explaining the underpinnings of Bowles' existentialism and the tendency among expatriate writers to seek 'out a place to achieve greater freedom in a location where such freedom only exists due to the oppression of the native population' (93).

Through his analysis of representative expatriate works, which include Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, 'Glory Hole' by Alfred Chester, Brion Gysin's neglected novel *The Process*, and a selection of short works by Jane Bowles, Walonen shows the ways expatriates experienced Tangier as a city undergoing profound transition. He makes clear that he is less interested in the observations of tourists such as Gore Vidal and Tennessee Williams, however gifted they might be, than he is the ways those who chose to make Tangier their home learned to cope with the social dynamics of independence, particularly as this transition

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affected the way expatriates themselves were treated. This study is especially insightful on how the independence movement affected sexual politics, especially as it pertained to the availability of sex workers and their relations with foreigners. The author is equally keen to show how expatriate writers bent on escaping Western decadence handled those modernising processes under way in Tangier that we have come to think of as Westernisation.

Although he restricts himself to just one city, the author shows how Tangier existed as does Los Angeles perhaps as a collection of interconnected but occasionally separate zones of influence. Depending on the political atmosphere, one was wise to keep to one's sphere. The entire issue of restriction and movement was informed by a complex of social, racial and gender politics that was constantly being revised. Orchestrating the complexity of issues is, according to Walonen, the subject of the fictions produced by the writers he considers. One senses that Paul Bowles was the only one who succeeded finally in navigating through the often treacherous registers of urban place that expats had to face. His wife was unable to do so. Jane, described here as having had to live 'not just as a female expatriate, but as a lesbian and a Jew as well,' seems to have intuited the limits of adjustment (73), while Burroughs, depicted here as an unattractive figure, who 'frankly was not interested in the indigenous culture or people' but only in the 'easy access to drugs and sex,' moved on as soon as the going got tough (83).

Writing Tangier in the Postcolonial Transition serves as a fine example of the sort of work the author's subject deserves. It is well-written, contains two very useful maps, and a helpful bibliography. My only complaint is that there is not more to consider. As thorough a piece as it is, I think it could easily be expanded to include among other things a more fully considered study of Moroccan writers, along with a possible exploration of some of the visiting writers mentioned but not analysed in depth. I found Walonen's brief comments on Tennessee Williams utterly fascinating and would very much like to read more of what he has to say about the impact Tangier had on the playwright.

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