

Tangier, emotional home of the beat generation

A conference in Tangier analyses the former presence of William S. Burroughs and his literary contemporaries in the Moroccan city.

Between 1925 and 1960 the city of Tangier was transformed into a notorious international zone, both politically neutral and economically open. Defined by Mohamed Choukri, unofficial chronicler of the Tangier underworld as “the most extraordinary and mysterious city in the world”, Tangier was the exotic destination *par excellence* for most of the European and North American intellectual elite of the era. The sexually permissive atmosphere, free access to soft drugs, the southern Mediterranean character and openness of the local people together with the promise of an easy and affordable lifestyle made it an irresistible magnet for artists such as Henri Matisse, Jean Genet, Paul and Jane Bowles, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Truman Capote and Tennessee Williams, amongst others. In turn they helped to create an extensive and discontinuous community of ex-patriots who contributed to the gradual growth of the legendary city and its conversion into a mythical, literary territory which still lives on today in the imagination of readers around the world.

This interest is evident in the recent series of conference talks organized in Tangier by the European Beat Studies Network (EBSN), an association that brings together scholars, artists and writers from across the world around this magnetic generation of writers. For Oliver Harris, Professor of American Literature at Keele University and president of the EBSN, organizing the third cycle of conferences in the city of Tangier has been an inescapable aspiration. “The reason why we are here today in Tangier”, Professor Harris confirms, “is to do with an event which I helped organize in 2009 in Paris on the 50th anniversary of the publication of *The Naked Lunch* by William Burroughs. It was a conference in which we wanted to bring together an unorthodox group of people from inside and outside the academic world, to contribute their personal vision on that work. It was a great success and whilst there we decided to create this society and to hold at least one conference event a year. The fact that the members of that generation were friends and (fellow) travellers led naturally to suggest the idea that we would get involved each year in a different location.”

This year is the celebration of the centenary of the birth of William S Burroughs, a writer who lived in Tangier intermittently between 1953 and 1961. These were decisive years in the production of his literature whilst staying in a bunch of small hotels and boarding houses in poor neighbourhoods, which gave birth to his magnum opus *The Naked Lunch*, the canonical and apparently chaotic text about Burroughs’ obsessions: drugs, death and decadence. Jack Kerouac, one of his friends who helped type the manuscript recalled the experience in an interview published in *The Paris Review* in 1967. “I typed up the first chapters. I had nightmares writing the

manuscript. I said 'Bill!' And he replied 'Keep typing. I bought you a goddamn kerosene lamp here in North Africa you know' and I carried on toktoktoktok and when I went to bed that night, these things kept coming out of my mouth."

For Oliver Harris, scholar of Burroughs' work, identifying the exact locations where this book was written is no minor issue since it allows him to compare different published versions and establish a theory of literary genealogy, with echoes of Raymond Chandler, Paul Bowles and Ernest Hemingway. "The incredible thing about Burroughs' work is that in practice it is vast. I am convinced that the confused structure of the Tangier medina – a place where you never know exactly where you are – but where miraculously you always end up finding the exit to Zoco Chico – helped Burroughs to break with linear narrative and embark on a literary journey in which the story and the way of telling it blended together."

However if the Beat spirit is still alive, it is not only due to the work and turns of events of the original group but also that their arrival inspired all kinds of writers. According to A. Robert Lee, emeritus professor of the Japanese university of Nihon and winner of the American Book Award in 2004 with his book *Multicultural American Literature: Comparative Black, Native, Latino/a and Asian American Fictions*, the key to the success of the beatniks beyond cultural barriers lies in the search for the sense of liberation, which emanates from the creations of the original beats. "It can be interesting to widen the search radius and fill in the story with secondary characters. The black beatnik *par excellence* is L. Roy Jones, later known as Baraka when he converted to Islam. On the other hand the figure of Oscar Zeta Acosta, who always wrote in English, appeared within the Mexican community. Other beat Jews - apart from Ginsberg - are Bob Kauffman, A. B. Spellman and Archie Shepp". Nevertheless Professor Lee attended the conference series with an essay on Nanao Sakaki, the Japanese beat. "Even today, after his death, the life and work of Sakaki continue to be controversial in Japan. He was one of the first to raise his voice against militarism after the second world war. He was a friend of Ginsberg and they worked together on the production of various poems and translations."

The work of the women beats deserves a separate chapter, given that at first impression it might seem that this generation was an exclusively masculine club. Estíbaliz Encaración Pinedo, Spanish specialist in the work of the women beats, dedicated her conference presentation to highlighting utopian, revolutionary and feminist elements in the letters of writer Diane di Prima, amongst those who most stand out in the movement. "In my opinion" confirms Pinedo "this writer was a feminist even though the term did not exist as such at the time. In her letters she openly rebels against the patriarchy and advocates complete sexual liberation. For her, any form of resistance is a victory".

Perhaps the most disturbing conference lecture to the minds of westerners present was the offering by Tangier born Anouar Majid. It unveiled the reasons why the presence of this heterogeneous group of ex-patriots scarcely made any impact on the lives of Tangier citizens. “The community of westerners practically did not leave their private spheres, never learned the language, and used the city as an exotic scenario for their first world preoccupations. Curiously, this is the same reproach that one hears against immigration in advanced countries.”

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