

# So Why Did I Defend Paul Bowles?

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*Constantin Joffé/Condé Nast via Getty Images*

*Paul Bowles, photographed for Vogue, Tangier, Morocco, 1946*

In the mid-1990s, I used to lead literary walking tours of “Paul Bowles’s Tangier” for friends or literary pilgrims visiting from the US. We would meet at Madame Porte, the famed tearoom downtown, where Jane Bowles and Tennessee Williams spent many a rainy afternoon writing in 1948. The place, crawling with Italian and German spies during World War II, is mentioned in *Let It Come Down*, Paul’s exquisite novel about 1950s Tangier. From there, we’d walk across to Paradise, the equally fabled bar where Jane once removed

the wig she wore in later life and began stripping. Then we'd walk to the Hotel Muniria, where Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg resided, and where, upstairs in Room 9, William Burroughs wrote *A Naked Lunch*. From there, we'd cross the boulevard to Café de Paris, a haunt of Jean Genet.

Next, we would turn right and head downhill to the Villa de France, where Henri Matisse painted *Window at Tangier* in 1912, and where Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas stayed in the 1920s in Matisse Room #35. Further below in the medina was the tiny Café Raqassa, where the novelist Mohammed Choukri would curl up on a banquette near the corner table and read the newspaper every morning. Then a fifteen-minute walk west to Merqala, the beach at the foot of the "English Mountain," then uphill to where Bowles first rented a home in 1931. Perched high on the cliffs sits the bungalow where he wrote his final novel, *Up Above the World* (1966). Finally, down the hill to the shrine of Ibn Batuta, the great explorer and Tangier's most well-known native son, and then to dinner at Hamadi's, my grandfather's restaurant, which opened in 1951 and remains the longest-standing restaurant in the city.

Since then, I have tried not to think too often about the long shadow that Paul Bowles casts over Tangier, but this year's multiple commemorations have made it hard to avoid: the twentieth anniversary of Bowles's death, the sixtieth of Tangier's incorporation into Morocco, and the seventieth of *The Sheltering Sky*'s publication. In Tangier, celebrations to mark this "existential masterpiece" are under way, including balls and masquerade parties. And so I've found myself again asking how this genteel American writer came to be so bound up with Morocco, and how, in recent years, he has become a figure of both nostalgia and contention.

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Long a sanctuary for Spanish and French writers, American writers began visiting Tangier in the late nineteenth century: Mark Twain on his way to Jerusalem in 1867, the painters Louis Comfort Tiffany and Henry Ossawa Tanner in 1910, and Edith Wharton in 1917. In 1931, when Bowles first visited, the American artists living in Tangier were primarily black: Claude McKay, Anita Reynolds, Juice Wilson, Josephine Baker. These African-Americans came to Morocco from Paris, where they had formed a community after World War I, and as the Harlem Renaissance spread to France. Upon arrival, Bowles began to socialize with both McKay and Anita Reynolds. Like the other Americans, he had also discovered North Africa through France. In high school, he had read Marcel Proust, Comte de Lautréamont, and André Gide—the latter's accounts, in particular, of his travels and sexual trysts in Algeria and Tunisia had conjured North Africa in Bowles's teenage imagination.

Bowles would settle in Tangier in 1947 and live there until his death in November 1999. It was where he felt most free, away from the constraints of American middle-class life and cold war hysteria. “Each day lived through on this side of the Atlantic,” he wrote in 1933, “was one day spent outside of prison.”

European powers and the Moroccan monarchy had long competed for control of Tangier. In November 1912, Spain and France negotiated a treaty that partitioned Morocco, turning their spheres of influence into formal protectorates. Tangier’s status was negotiated separately, and in December 1923, France, Spain, and the United Kingdom signed the Tangier Protocol in Paris, setting up a new administration and placing the city at the center of a 150-square mile International Zone overseen by a committee of eight Western powers. The city was henceforth governed by a court that included French, Spanish, and British judges, along with the *mendoub*, the Moroccan sultan’s representative. It is this international period, from 1923 to 1959, especially postwar, that has shaped the image of Tangier as a free port, a tax haven, and a place of international intrigue and excess. (Morocco had gained independence from Spain and France in 1956, but Tangier retained its status as an International Zone until 1960.)



Jack Birns/The LIFE Picture Collection via Getty Images

*The Gran Café de Paris, Tangier, Morocco, 1950*

When Bowles returned to Tangier in July 1947, the zone was still at the center of Great Power machinations, but had also become a focal point for the anticolonial movement in Morocco. Moroccan nationalists were playing the United States and the Arab East off against each other, but leaning toward the Arab League. In his journalism, for *The Nation* and *Harpers*, among other publications, Bowles chronicled the final years of the International Zone, reporting on the infighting among Moroccan leaders, the impact of the Algerian war on Tangier, and how nationalism was shaping the musical culture. He argued against Morocco's turn eastward, toward the Non-Aligned Movement, and called on the US to intervene. In his fiction, he probed America's encounter with the "primitive mind," as he described it for his readers.

His first novel, *The Sheltering Sky*, told the story of an American who flees the numbing modernity of New York and meanders through the Algerian desert, only to disintegrate psychologically. Published in the fall of 1949, it became a bestseller and made Bowles a household name. Three more novels and a handful of short stories set in Tangier followed.

*The Sheltering Sky* quickly gained cult status, particularly among a rising Beat movement that looked to the Near and Far East for ideas and inspiration. Bowles did not create the “myth of Tangier,” but he gave it a literary respectability and an American cast. New York poets and writers flocked to the “Interzone,” as Burroughs dubbed colonial Tangier, in search of a sex-and-drug-infused space of altered consciousness and release. In the early 1950s, Burroughs, Ginsberg, Kerouac, Bryon Gysin, Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, and Susan Sontag all gravitated to this “portal to the unknown,” as one author christened Tangier. So did European writers like Genet, Juan Goytisolo, and Joe Orton, but Bowles’s influence was not limited to the literary community. In later decades, his recordings and promotion of Moroccan music would draw producers and recording artists from Patti Smith to the Rolling Stones.

A paradox of Paul Bowles’s legacy is that after the city became part of Morocco, in 1959, he stopped writing fiction. Through the 1960s and 1970s, he focused instead on recording and translating from Moroccan Arabic (*darija*) the oral histories of men he met in Tangier’s cafés. By the time of his death, in 1999, the idea of Tangier as a place for self-discovery had become received wisdom in the West *and* the Arab world, and Bowles was established as a giant of American letters despite decades of silence.

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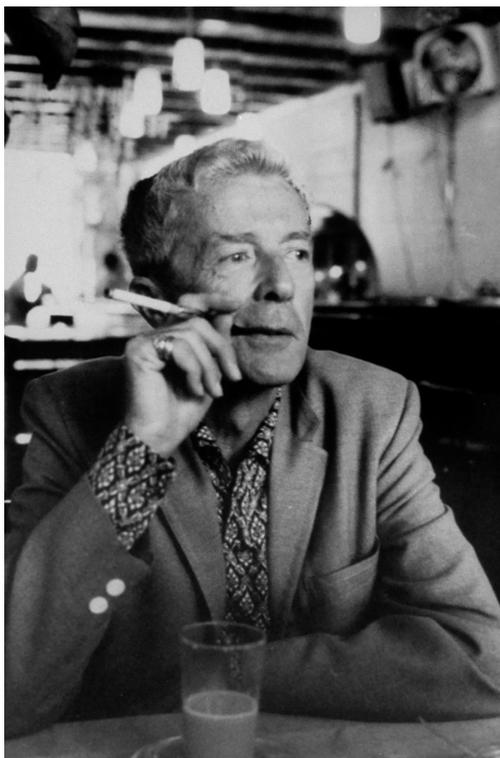
On May 24, 1993, I knocked on Paul Bowles’s apartment door at the Itesa, as his building was called. (He and Jane had lived in this building since the early 1960s. Reflecting their unconventional marriage, he resided on the fifth floor and Jane lived on the fourth, until her descent into mental illness and death in 1973.) I arrived with a copy of my undergraduate thesis, which was titled “Is Paul Bowles an Orientalist?” Abdelouahid, his driver, let me in.

Bowles was lying in bed, a napkin tucked in his collar, getting ready for his afternoon tea. I introduced myself as a local, a *Tanjawi*, albeit one who was then a twenty-year-old student in America. He apologized that he could not speak much, because he had just had tooth surgery. Nevertheless, we talked for twenty minutes, while he sipped tea from a bowl through a straw and nibbled on a slice of Gouda cheese, about how Tangier was changing, how even its colorful Hispano-Arabic vernacular—by then a creole spoken mostly by local women—was fading.

I asked if I could take a photograph with him. “Sure,” he smiled faintly. “I’m afraid, after surgery, I may look like a cat.”

I gave him a copy of my thesis. He looked up from the title page: “‘Orientalism’?—that’s a bad word, isn’t it?” Faux-naïveté, I would learn, was part of his manner. He told me to come back the following day.

He was feeling better the next day. “Well,” he said, sitting up, “you didn’t say I was innocent, but you judged me not guilty.” In my paper, I had scoured his novels and stories parsing his representations of Morocco, and concluded that although all the tropes of the Orientalist tradition—exotica, timelessness, barbarism—were there, Bowles should be spared the charge. Bowles, I argued, “places such an ironic twist on [Orientalist themes], essentially demonstrating their absurdity.” He “is out to study Moroccans as a people, not as remnants of a primitive past.”



Terence Spencer/The LIFE Picture Collection via Getty

Images

Bowles, Tangier, 1967

The American was pleased with my verdict. I was, he said, the first Moroccan researcher—a Tangier native, to boot—to defend him. He added his signature beneath my printed name. (A few weeks ago, I got goosebumps when I found the same copy that I gave him, albeit coffee-stained, in the archives at the University of Delaware’s Paul Bowles Collection.) Later, the thesis was included in a collection titled *Writing Tangier* (2004). I still see citations occasionally in student dissertations on Bowles noting that one *Tanjawi*, at least, did not regard him as an Orientalist.

I began leading my walking tours of Tangier that June. Three months later, when I arrived at Columbia as a graduate student, I obtained an appointment with Said himself to explain to him why Bowles was the Great Exception. I was briskly corrected.

“Bowles? He’s the worst,” said Said, making a brushing gesture. I mentioned “The Delicate Prey,” a particular short story by Bowles. Said interrupted, “Yes, the story about the linguist...” When I tried to continue, Said raised his hand: “Stop, why are you defending him? Just stop.”

I went on visiting Bowles regularly over the next five years. And he and I would chat—about graduate school, about New York, about Tangier’s decline, and so on.

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Tangier's collective memory is steeped in nostalgia and centered around the medina, the old city. The medina, the elders told us, was once the epicenter of the Islamic world: it was from the port where the medina meets the sea that Tariq ibn Ziyad had set sail and conquered Spain in 711. After the fall of Granada in 1492, it was to Tangier's medina that the Jews and Moriscos fled, settling in its alleyways, preserving the mosaic of Islamic Spain. From our French- and Spanish-language school teachers, we also learned that the medina had inspired masterpieces of Western art, including Eugène Delacroix's tableau, *Les Fanatiques de Tanger*, painted after witnessing members of the Issawa brotherhood dancing on Rue Es Siaghine. And the Zoco Chico, the plaza at the bottom of the medina, was hallowed literary space. Tennessee Williams wrote *Camino Real* at Café Fuentes, while across the plaza William Burroughs made Café Central, which Genet also frequented, the model for the Meet Café, with its clientele of pimps and hustlers, in *A Naked Lunch*.

The economic misery and political repression of the 1980s and 1990s made it hard to believe that the medina was ever a free space. Most locals had never heard of these famous writers. I only heard of Bowles when, in 1988, a film crew began working in front of our family restaurant at the entrance to the Kasbah as Bernardo Bertolucci began filming *The Sheltering Sky*. As teenagers, we came to wonder what truths the books from the Interzone contained, and if Tangier had indeed been better-off under Western rule, as the nostalgists, local and foreign, seemed to imply. Tangier's gradual incorporation into Morocco, starting in late 1959, had set in motion a decades-long process of economic and political decline. That year, an uprising erupted against the monarchy, as the Arab Nationalist Istiqlal party and the military tried to gain control of the Rif, the formerly Spanish-ruled northern Morocco. The crown prince put down the rebellion. Later, as King Hassan II, the diminutive sovereign proved vindictive, starving the region of investment and services. The narrative we learned at school was that the monarchy had liberated the north from colonial oppression. But what liberation did the regime (*makhzen*) bring? After independence, as a local intelligentsia began forming in Tangier, many came to see the American corpus of writings about 1950s Tangier as an invaluable record of a lost golden age.

When I came to the United States, I made a point of reading the American authors who had written about Tangier's Interzone. Besides Bowles, I was intrigued by the Beats, especially the Columbia University alums—Kerouac, Ginsberg, Lucien Carr—students of Lionel Trilling and fans of Arthur Rimbaud who had somehow mapped Greenwich Village onto Tangier, turning the Boulevard Pasteur into a “North African Bleecker Street.” But even as a college sophomore, I realized that their writings were more about the straitjacket of McCarthyite America that they were running from, rather than about Morocco as such.

The giddy, epicurean lifestyle these writers led—hopping from hashish-smoking session to masquerade parties—did not shock me. The extravagant soirées with dancers, acrobats,

and snake charmers hosted by expats at homes on the hill on the outskirts of town known as the English Mountain are part of Tangier's lore. These were the idling expats who described themselves as "Tangerines," and referred to their maids as "La Fatima" and drivers as "El Mohamito." It was even gratifying to see that Tangier, like Berlin, had played a significant role in launching a gay literary movement—in some ways ahead of the West, in having its finger on the "prognostic pulse of the world," as Burroughs called it. But what was startling was that, while these writers basked in the city's pleasures, they—with the exception of the Bowleses—didn't really like Tangier. The Beats had a casual disdain for the natives, invariably describing Moroccans as "rakish" or "raffish." Capote found Tangier too alien, describing the men as "noisy heathens" and the women as "anonymous bundles of laundry." He warned friends in New York about the "smell of the *arabe*." Burroughs referred to the locals as a "bunch of Ay-rabs," and in 1958 he pronounced: "Tanger [sic] is finished. The Arab dogs are among us."

Paul and Jane Bowles—in their genuine intellectual interest in Tangier's history and folk culture—stood above above the rest of the expat community. In essays written for the American press, Paul Bowles traced the history of the medina from the early 1930s to independence. He chronicled how the sultan's crackdown on Sufi practices ("the great puritanical purging") in central Morocco inched northward. The Istiqlal nationalists specifically targeted the Zoco Chico as a place of immorality. Bars near mosques were shut down, others were banned from serving Muslims. Women caught in bars had their heads and eyebrows shaved.

Amid this atmosphere, Bowles's defense of the Amazigh, or Berber, population was daringly transgressive. Morocco's culture "is not predominantly Arabic, but Berber," he insisted—in the face of Arab nationalists who acted as though they believed "Berbers have no culture at all," as they tried to drag the country into the Arab League. "The general opinion is that the autochthonous population must at all costs be Arabized if it is to share in the benefits of independence," he observed acidly. "No one seems to have conceived of the possibility of an independent Berber Morocco. In fact, to mention the Berbers at all qualifies one as a pro-French reactionary. At present, to become modern means to become Egyptian."

Reading these words in my dorm room in wintry Pennsylvania in 1992 was both thrilling and frightening. We as Moroccans—especially those of us from the northern Berber region—grew up in a climate of fear, and I had never heard or read anyone publicly criticize Arab nationalism, or speak so openly of the Moroccan hinterland's animus toward Fez, the city of the interior regarded as the seat of the monarchy. To hear this American writer openly excoriate the Moroccan ruling elite for its cruelty and skullduggery was exhilarating. Bowles helped make Tangier a counterweight to all this. Thanks to his influence, three English-language literary journals were launched there—*Antaeus*, *Gnaoua*, and *Zero*. Above all, Bowles was helping me think through my own identity: for

a Morocco caught between Western and Arab hegemony, was there an alternative? Which way should Morocco's Berber population turn?

Bowles prompted me to think beyond the binary of "Western" versus "Arab." And upon arriving in New York, I soon discovered a lively Moroccan-Beat cultural scene that had formed around Alan Ginsberg; the poet Ira Cohen; Ellen Stewart, the founder of La Mama Theatre, and her protégés; painter Ahmed Yacoubi; and Moroccan theater director Hasan Wakrim, who in the 1970s had founded of the Moroccan Berber Ballet Theatre Group. At La Mama and at cafés in the Village, Moroccan writers like the novelist Tahar Benjelloun would present their work to Cohen, Ginsberg, and the remaining Beats. All these figures had met in Tangier through Bowles.



*Jack Birns/The LIFE Picture Collection via Getty Images*

*Rooftop cocktails in the Casbah, Tangier, Morocco, 1950*

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The Moroccan reaction against Bowles began to take form in the early 1970s. His earliest critics were the philosopher Abdallah Laroui and Benjelloun, who both chided the American writer for promoting an image of the country as a land of primitivism, drugs, and unlimited sex. Laroui also lambasted the Moroccan bourgeoisie for buying into and reproducing Bowles's "folkloric" portrayal of their country. Benjelloun, writing in 1972,

accused the American of belittling the nation's literary patrimony. Bowles, in the mid-1960s, had begun translating the memoirs and stories of down-and-out illiterate youth in Tangier. (While he could not read Arabic, Bowles did understand *darija*, the spoken dialect.) The most prominent of these were Larbi Layachi's *A Life Full of Holes* (1966), about a petty thief and male prostitute and his experiences dodging police and servicing tourists (the book was made into a BBC film); *Look and Move On* (1967), the tales of Mohammed Mrabet, a hustler and golf caddie who worked for an American couple; and the best-known, Mohammed Choukri's *For Bread Alone* (1972), an account of his migration from the Rif to Tangier, his life as a street kid in the International Zone, and his becoming a schoolteacher, which he recounted to Bowles in Spanish.

These books were marketed in the West as "Moroccan literature," and for many in the Anglophone world, this was their introduction to it. To Bowles's critics, the interviews with street hustlers and pimps in effect erased an earlier literary tradition that had seen Moroccan writers published in French and Spanish since the 1930s, let alone the preceding centuries of poetry and other writing in Arabic. There was some justice in holding Bowles accountable: he had no desire to learn to read Arabic ("I had neither the time nor the desire") and was frankly dismissive of this patrimony. "In a land like [Morocco]," he wrote, "the production of written literature is of course negligible. On the other hand, the Moroccans have a magnificent and highly evolved sense of rhythm which manifests itself in the twin arts of music and dance."

In Tangier, though, Laroui and Benjelloun were both regarded as outsiders with their own agendas. Laroui acted as an adviser to the king and was a strong proponent of Arabization. Tangierians saw his attack on Bowles as another attempt by the Arab nationalist elite to subdue the "sin city." Benjelloun also had a complicated relationship to Tangier. The son of a Fassi merchant who settled in Tangier in the early 1960s, he had attended the French lycée and was seen as part of the new Francophone Fassi upper class—comprising the Alaoui, Alami, Benjelloun, Berrada, Omrani, and Tazi families—that had fanned out across the country as the French departed, assuming top government positions. Like Laroui, Benjelloun spoke neither of the two common local tongues of the north, Spanish and Tarifit (the Berber language). A paradox of Benjelloun's work, in particular, was that it often featured the very tropes of mysticism, violence, and sexual deviancy he denounced in Bowles's work. For his part, the American writer dismissed his Moroccan critics as "confirmed Marxists."

Tangier's literary elite stood by Bowles. His reputation in the city was in many ways linked to that of the American imperium: as long as America was seen as a political friend, Bowles was viewed favorably. Not surprisingly, after the Gulf war of 1990 and the release of Bertolucci's film of *The Sheltering Sky* that same year, more articles started to appear across the Middle East critiquing Bowles's representations of Morocco, accusing him of racism and Orientalism. At first, writers in Tangier came to his defense, praising him for

his love of Tangier and for championing the indigenous culture of the Rif. Though I didn't fully realize it at the time, I myself was part of this trend—defending Bowles against the Arab nationalists who were trying to tear him down and impose their political preferences on us. In his final interviews, when asked if he was an “Orientalist,” Bowles would often cite me, noting that a Tangier-born scholar now in America had judged him not to be.

But the solidarity did not last. Two books, in particular, prompted a reckoning: the publication of *In Touch: The Letters of Paul Bowles* (1994) aggravated a long-simmering conflict with Choukri, and in 1997, Bowles's most celebrated collaborator and protégé published *Paul Bowles and the Isolation of Tangier*. Although it acknowledged Bowles's contributions to Tanjawi culture, not to mention his making possible the publication of Choukri's own story, it took the American to task for a nostalgia for the backward Morocco of an oppressive colonial era, and for packaging the stories he heard in cafés as a type of literary mythology. But the sentence that resounded above all was this: “Paul Bowles loves Morocco, but does not really like Moroccans.” Choukri had some powerful evidence on his side. Over the decades, Bowles had made countless derogatory remarks, speaking of Moroccans as “childlike,” “purely predatory,” and “essentially barbarous.” He claimed also that Muslims aimed for world domination through “the sword and the bomb.”

Yet Bowles's view of Moroccans was more complicated, and he did not see them all in the same light. He was sympathetic to the Amazigh, whom he saw as the original inhabitants of North Africa, a fiercely independent people only “partially Islamicized.” This affection nevertheless rested on some unsettling ideas of racial hierarchy. Bowles was profoundly influenced by the “Hamitic hypothesis,” a late nineteenth-century anthropological theory that saw almost everything of value in Africa as imported by the Hamites, a branch of the Caucasian race, who were held as superior to the Negroid peoples. Berbers, whatever their actual skin tone—even the typically dark-skinned Tuareg—were for Bowles essentially a white “Mediterranean race.” The hypothesis runs through much of his travel writing: while Arabs were more civilized than the “infinitely less evolved Berbers,” they in turn ranked higher than the “negroids.”

The theory even influenced his music criticism. Andalusian (Arabic) music is “extremely dignified, never primitive,” while “Berber [melody] is of course utterly primitive, music from caves, much more shadowy and basic I think than negro music.” In Bowles's idiosyncratic hierarchy, it was Berber music that encapsulated Morocco's true African identity—and this cultural essence was threatened by the Arabs and their music. The recently released *Music of Morocco* collection reflects this bias, giving credence to Choukri's claim that Bowles deliberately misrepresented local culture to reflect his personal vision of Morocco.

The more I lived in America, the more I saw how much Bowles had shaped people's understanding of Morocco. I can't recall how many social gatherings I attended where,

upon learning I was from Tangier, someone would recite this dictum: “You tell me you are going to Fez. Now if you say you are going to Fez, that means you are not going to Fez. Why have you lied to me, you who are my friend?” This twaddle was supposedly based on a Moroccan proverb, but it was one that Bowles quoted often, for it ostensibly offered a window into the Moroccan mind. I began to realize that Bowles’s fondness for the Berbers and his animus toward Arabs was, in many ways, a reflection of French colonial policy. Although he was well aware of the violence of French imperialism, he enjoyed its amenities—“the old, easygoing, openly colonial life of Morocco”—and as early as the 1950s, Bowles began to lament the loss of “colonial Tangier.” Above all, he believed in the International Zone, seeing its “anarchy” and “freedom from bureaucratic intervention” as an extraordinary political experiment. But these liberties, which is what drew many of the Beats, were the privileges of Europeans and Americans—ones generally not enjoyed by the city’s Muslim and Jewish natives.

And what did it mean that Bowles refused to engage with Moroccan intellectuals, saying “thought is not a word one can use in connection with Morocco”? Street vagrants were often his only contact with Moroccan society—and provided fodder for his writing. “You need trouble, friction to write on a subject—otherwise no one will read it.” He often even admitted to deliberately fomenting “trouble” by juxtaposing a “primitive” native with a civilized setting. In 1931, for instance, Bowles purchased the freedom of Abdelkader (Cadour), a fifteen-year-old indentured to work at a French-owned motel in Marrakech; the proprietress agreed to the transaction, but warned Bowles not to attack the boy sexually. When Bowles then took him to Paris, the youth made one cultural *faux pas* after another, including thinking that the jelly on the brioches was congealed blood. Bowles, delighted by these missteps, would take Cadour to dine with Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas. Bowles’s idol, André Gide, seduced the boy, wooing him to his apartment for 50 francs. “My poor Arab,” Bowles would write, “whom I soignéed all the way from Marrakech through Spain to here, met the scoundrel [Gide] the other day in the street, and was invited to his house, where he was given silk robes, djellabas, etc. Fortunately the naïf child forgot the gifts when he left. But the scandal is rampant!”

Other such behavior would follow. In 1947, Bowles met sixteen-year-old Ahmed Yacoubi in Fez and similarly placed the “completely illiterate and medieval-minded Arab boy” in precarious cultural situations. In 1952 he took his game further: “I would drop Ahmed Yacoubi, from the medina of Fez, into the middle of India and see what happened.” Examples abound of this situational engineering. When the American novelist Alfred Chester came to Tangier, Bowles on a lark set him up with Dris, a neighborhood thug who had assaulted several European men.

In 1972, Tahar Benjelloun publicly accused Bowles (and the Beats) of exploiting illiterate, vulnerable youths in Tangier not just artistically but sexually. Choukri in 1997 would echo this charge, claiming Bowles suffered from a sexual illness. These allegations became

more commonly heard once Farrar, Straus and Giroux published Bowles's correspondence in 1994, although he expressed some reluctance about its release. The volume included letters in which he described the boys he slept with, in one letter even bragging about how cheap sex was in Algeria. "Where in this country [America] can I have thirty-five or forty people, and never risk seeing any of them again? Yet, in Algeria, it actually was the mean rate." (In the correspondence, he reminisced about how he "never had sexual relationships without paying," and viewed paying for sex as a form of "ownership.")

These letters formed the core of Choukri's case in the book that broke with Bowles. Although the letters simply lent credence to rumors long circulating in Tangier, Choukri and other Tanjawi writers were still shocked by them. The literary reaction in Morocco fed into a larger effort there by human rights activists campaigning against sex tourism and child prostitution. Whereas Bowles had always seemed more judicious and reputable than the Beats—in contrast, say, to Burroughs's open bragging about buying "pre-pubescent gooks" and Ginsberg's boasting about "paying young boys" for sex—it became increasingly difficult to defend him. For a man who had called Moroccans "purely predatory," his own behavior now appeared in rather grotesque relief.

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In 1993, I settled in New York. The more time I spent at the Schomburg Library in Harlem, the more I discovered an alternative American literature about Tangier. I stumbled upon Claude McKay's memoir *A Long Way from Home* about his time in Tangier in the late 1920s, where he completed his novel *Banjo*; the actress Anita Reynold's diary about life in the Interzone in the 1930s; Josephine Baker's papers, where she talks about filming *Princess Tam Tam* (1935) in Tangier, and jazz recordings produced by African-American musicians living in the International Zone. Although they had their own dreams about a "Mother Africa," the African-American writers did not see Tangier as a brothel, or its residents as primitives who needed to be contained or civilized. Most wrote and produced art in solidarity with the disenfranchised local population, connecting the civil rights struggle to North Africa's anticolonial movements.

The differences between the black and white American narratives were perhaps best captured by the antipathy between Bowles and McKay. A Trotskyite, McKay worried that Bowles would report him [[TO WHOM?]] for his leftist leanings. Bowles said of McKay: "His inner self is ten years old. That's why he is so happy there, year and year out with the Arabs."

In 1998, armed with this newfound knowledge, and as a conscious revision of my earlier guiding, I began giving walking tours of "Black Tangier." We would meet at Cinema Mauritania, the theater where Josephine Baker had performed many times, up until her last show there in 1970. She had lived in the International Zone, then joined the French

Liberation forces during the war, and later had an affair with the vice-caliph of Spanish Morocco. On the first floor of the Mauritania, pianist Randy Weston had once operated African Rhythms, a music spot that drew the likes of Max Roach and Ahmed Jamal. Then we'd walk down to the Fat Black Pussycat café where the poet Ted Joans, one of few black writers in the Beat movement, played trumpet and “blew” jazz poems.

Next, we'd hit Galerie Delacroix, where Joans once hosted a four-hour tribute to his mentor Langston Hughes, and had the late poet's verse read in Arabic, English, French, and Spanish. (In 1927, Hughes had visited Tangier and written a lovely poem about travel and unrequited longing, “I Thought It was Tangiers I Wanted.”) Then we'd walk to the majestic Teatro Cervantes built in 1913, where Weston had organized the first pan-African jazz festival in Morocco in June 1972 (revived in 2002), which brought Dexter Gordon, Odetta, Billy Harper, and Pucho and the Latin Soul Brothers to the city. Our last stop was the Hotel Chellah, where, as local legend had it, the Martinican anticolonial thinker Frantz Fanon stayed overnight on July 3, 1959, following a car crash on the Morocco–Algeria border rumored to be the handiwork of La Main Rouge, the paramilitary group run by French intelligence to assassinate leading supporters of Algerian independence. Fanon was flown to Rome the following day on a Moroccan passport.

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*Giorgio Lotti/Mondadori via Getty Images*

*Bowles with Moroccan women, Tangier, 1990*

Paul Bowles and King Hassan II died in 1999, a few months apart. The novelist and the tyrant who had towered over Tangier for generations had more in common than either would have admitted—and that in part explains the reverence Bowles still enjoys in official Morocco. To be sure, Bowles hated religion, while Hassan II claimed to be the “commander of the faithful” and mobilized political Islam to counter Berber movements. Bowles was a libertarian (more than, as often thought, an anarchist), while Hassan’s security services intruded into the most intimate aspects of people’s lives. Yet both shared a disdain for leftist, Third-Worldist politics. Both hated pan-Arabism, and loved Berber culture as long as it was “folkloric” and apolitical. They each thought Moroccans were congenitally ill-suited for democracy. As Bowles put it, “Democracy is an empty word to the average Moroccan; indeed by his temperament and conditions, he is more inclined to totalitarianism.” And perhaps most significantly, both Bowles and the monarch celebrated a “primitive,” mystical, unlettered, unfree Morocco, sharing a special appetite for the intoxicating rhythms of the Berbers. No wonder King Hassan II, who expelled numerous critics—from Arab intellectuals to French journalists and American professors—never bothered Bowles.

Yet, two decades after his death, Bowles has become newly fashionable among Morocco’s political elite, which has embraced the version of the country depicted by the “sage of Tangier,” as *The Washington Post* called him. Hardly a music festival or conference takes place without a mention of Bowles and how he helped preserve Morocco’s musical treasures, and his writings and recordings are seen as validation of the country’s cultural prowess. The Ministry of Culture, which almost blocked his recording project in 1959, published a remarkable essay in 2009 on the tenth anniversary of his death defending Bowles against criticism from Moroccan nationalist intellectuals, underscoring how he presciently warned of the threats that modernization posed to Morocco’s cultural and physical landscape. Government mouthpieces such as *Hespress* run flattering pieces about “the American who loved Morocco.”

The Morocco that Bowles dubbed a “land of magic” is one the Ministry of Tourism sells to the West. Beyond that, his emphasis on Morocco’s “African” essence suits the country’s recent geopolitical turn and reentry into the Africa Union. In the waning days of colonialism, Bowles thought an independent Morocco would be caught between what he derisively called two “civilizations,” the Western and the Arab-Islamic, but for all his misgivings about Western modernity, he thought Morocco as an African country would be better off attaching itself to the West. This is now the position of a significant segment of Morocco’s ruling elite.

The opposition to Bowles’s rehabilitation nevertheless remains strong, seeing his influence as a symptom of Morocco’s corruption and cultural vassalage. That the regime celebrates

Berber folklore and the oeuvre of a novelist who wanted an “independent Berber republic” even as it imprisons Berber activists across the country is evidence for many of the regime’s fraudulence and bad faith. In this respect, Bowles’s continuing eminence suggests how little has changed in the kingdom since the colonial era, with an authoritarian regime and repressive social order remaining largely intact.

In October 2000, Joseph McPhillips, a long-standing American resident of Tangier, executor of the Bowles estate, and my high school English teacher, invited me to a star-studded memorial for the writer at the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan. As much as I wanted to meet Debra Winger (of *Sheltering Sky* fame), I couldn’t bring myself to attend. I had stopped giving any tours of Tangier about a year earlier, more than a little embarrassed by my youthful defense of Bowles. In their modest way, my guided parties too had lent support to a repressive regime’s carefully curated image of the kingdom as tolerant and fun. Even a shift of focus toward the African-American and Latin American writers who had inhabited Tangier and may have been more sympathetic to my country and its peoples did not solve this problem—even their art was not immune to Orientalist distortions. More broadly, why the constant spotlight on the thought and experiences of expats in Morocco?

As for Bowles’s work, I had come to realize that it reflected poorly on Morocco *and* America. Yes, he had brought attention to the suppression of Berber history and made invaluable musical recordings, but decolonization was supposed to dismantle colonial representations, and the Moroccan regime was to validating and institutionalizing Bowles’s depictions of Morocco. For many years after his death, I decided that the best way for me not to feed the “myth of Tangier” was by not writing more about Paul Bowles. Thus, as some US journalists in the post-September 11 years [[SUCH AS TKTK]] rediscovered the novelist as some sort of guide to understanding Islam, I bit my tongue. Yet the myth lives on. And today, a new generation of Moroccan writers—among them secularists, Berber activists, music critics, and pan-Africanists—are claiming Bowles as an ally. And that is why I found myself writing about Bowles once more.

*December 18, 2019, 3:56 pm*

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