

French Figs or Figues de Barbarie: Hybridity in the *Beur* Imaginary

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Hoy todas las culturas son de frontera.
Néstor García Canclini: *Culturas hibridas*.

The title refers to the tell-tale contradiction surrounding the prickly pear (*opuntia ficus-indica*), in French ‘figue de barbarie’, which in the colloquial Arabic (*derja*) of Algeria is called the ‘French fig’. I will make use of the irony that lies in the names of this fruit for the exploration of the hybrid identity represented by *Beur*¹ authors (Leila Sebbar, Azouz Begag, Leila Houari, Farida Belghoul). I will center my claim of hybridity on the border as an imaginary and narrative construct.

The borderland in the postcolonial imaginary challenges the binary classification deployed in the construction of the Other.² Contesting culture's equation with a location of an identity leads to the recognition of the validity and uniqueness of hybrid cultures. The disjunction between the nation state and the location of (its) culture is not simply displayed in the forms of cultural resistance, or in the presence of counter-cultural elements, but it requires a deeper scrutiny of the interaction between culture and nation, that is to say, the role of nation in shaping the culture and the role of culture in sustaining the nation-state. This relationship is not ‘natural’ neither ‘neutral’, it does not emerge by accident, but it is historically produced and traceable in the cultural practices of the population.

My scrutiny of the multiple meanings of the border as a textual construct in *Beur* writing traces the collective identity of this group defined by migration and cultural hybridity. I will follow the transformation of fixed notions of identity into a set of complex cultural loyalties that unite and also divide local communities.

Exploring the cultural hybridity in the European “contact-zone” (Pratt) may yield some important keys in the scrutiny of the border as a uniquely postcolonial space, for hybridity –as a cultural concept- not only refers the genealogy of multiple (in this case, cultural) origins, but it

¹ *Beur*: People of North African origin living in Europe, most often it refers to the second generation. (Mehrez 29.)

² The notion of otherness has been challenged by those who suggest that the discourse of alterity is rearticulating discourses of the center and periphery by distinguishing between the self (the center) and the other.

may also be used to subvert discourses of dominance. To experience an identity constantly challenged in the intersection of histories and memories (individual and collective), to live simultaneously in the interior and the exterior requires the revision and reexamination of that identity by subscribing to discourses based on sporadic historical inheritances and a heterogeneous present (cf. Chambers). Hybrid cultures, as García Canclini points out, are consequences of the economic restructuration, caused by new global patrons of production, distribution, consumption and communication, as well as migration processes that produce new social configurations. The textual traces of these new social configurations will be examined in this article.

1. Border

*Entre tu pueblo y el mío hay un punto y una raya.
La raya dice no hay paso, el punto, vías cerradas
y así, entre todos los pueblos raya y punto, punto y raya.
Con tantas rayas y puntos el mapa es un telegrama.
Caminando por el mundo se ven ríos y montañas,
se ven selvas y desiertos, pero no puntos ni rayas.
porque estas cosas no existen, sino que fueron trazadas
para que mi hambre y la tuya estén siempre separadas.*
Aníbal Nazoa - Juan Carlos Núñez: “Punto y raya”
quoted in Abdelkebir Khatibi’s *Amour Bilingue*

A point and a line drawn, “un punto y una raya” to quote the song above, a border marks the place where adjacent state jurisdictions meet as a consequence of the states attributing to themselves a right to property (Balibar 72). But as a consequence of globalization the functions of the nation-state are more and more troubled, its primary functions regarding borders shifted from the control of its territory (whether it be national or colonial) from an outside enemy in time of war to the self-protection from mass migration of what is perceived as economically inferior crowds. Migration (legal or illegal) produced racial, economic and cultural hybridity, due to which border society is “an abstract [yet palpable] concept compounded of ideas about the sovereignty of nation-states, the intensification of commerce, and strategies of cultural representation” (Cadaval). Yet border society does not exist merely on and around the borders, it manifests itself in metropolitan centers, in airports and other spaces of transition, as Stuart Hall puts it Paris is French with a difference, otherness is forever inscribed in French identity as a consequence of colonization.

2. Home

The territorial expansion of colonialism is now countered by a reversed flow of deterritorialized human masses driven by economic or political necessity. Even though the displacement of humans has reached extremes never seen before, the phenomena is nothing new. Todorov reconstructs the genealogy of the exile³, one of the most common forms of displacement, in *The conquest of America*:

Today it is the exile who best embodies, turning aside from its original meaning, the ideal of Hugo de San Victor, who formulated it in the following way in the 12th century: ‘The man who finds that his own homeland is sweet is nothing more than a soft novice; for him who finds that each soil is like his own is already strong; but the perfect man is he who finds that the entire world is like a foreign country’ (I, who am Bulgarian and live in France, take this quote from Edward Said, a Palestinian who lives in the United States, who had found it from Erich Auerbach, German, an exile in Turkey) (259).

Among the reasons for all migration (exile, diaspora, displacement) Abril Trigo mentions “the unequal socioeconomic development within the interrelated geographical zones between complex regimes of expulsion and attraction” (273). It should be added that this unequal development has been a direct consequence of mostly (although not exclusively)⁴ European colonization and attempts at neocolonization.

Thus, the question of migrancy may be approached from a postcolonial perspective that identifies colonialism as one the root causes of migration. Various authors, who think of themselves as migrant beings, and as such, consider their experience as representative (or similar to that) of the exile, assume this postcolonial framework and propose the reevaluation of categories used by the language of modernity that fueled the colonizing ideology and categorized the colonial enterprise as the “civilizing mission”. Salman Rushdie, for example, in *Imaginary Homelands* positions himself as a Muslim Indian who emigrated to England and despite the scandal stemmed from the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, he still considers himself a Muslim, although not a believer. In many of his works he assumes a so-called Western position that emphasizes individualism and exceptionality “as the greatest and most heroic of values”

³ I am not making a difference between self-exile and forced exile, because it is such a complex issue that its discussion does not fit within the limits of this paper.

⁴ Indonesian invasion of East Timor and Ache are examples of non-European colonization efforts.

(Rushdie, 425), but –considering the whole of his works- irony should not be excluded as his motivation for doing so. Rushdie states that migratory experience is a fundamental part in the formation of his frontier identity⁵ (as he puts it), that permits him to circulate in cultural terms, although not physical⁶, between the East and West. Gayatri Spivak also claims to have a ‘frontier identity’ which she defines as non-fixed and constructed from various elements in dynamic interaction and constant movement. (Spivak 67-94).

Behind all migrancy there is the idea of home (be it in the physical or in the cultural sense), the origin, from where one parts, and which is impossible to reencounter as Martin Heidegger suggests in his essay about Hölderlin’s poetry, “Return to the homeland”. He claims that we are all transients with no primary home, an idea that is perhaps echoed in Rushdie’s “Imaginary Homeland”. The primary home would be a place where one can “return to selfhood” by means of a dialogic encounter of a language that expresses the sense of ego. That is why for Heidegger displacement is not possible, or rather; continual displacement is the only possible way to conceive existence.

Heidegger’s idea of home is described in psychological terms, but for the purpose of this piece a geographic dimension should be added whereby home can be (re)defined as constituted by hybrid, and even contradictory signs, the physical home on the one hand, and the articulation of the idea of home – origin⁷, on the other. The displacement is more obvious in the borderline where identity – which is intimately related to origin and language -- is highly problematic.

Beurs form the cultural entity on which I intend to focus, without creating a direct link between culture and a specific space, because this would manifest the essentialism that I am trying to avoid. “Challenging culture’s equation with a location of an identity may enable us to think about the possibilities of politics which recognizes the positivity or singularity of the other” (Grossberg 169). However, the idea of a home is essential for the formation of one’s identity, as

⁵ Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf sees hybrid identity as the only solution to the contradictory relationship between East and West in his essay, *Les identités meurtrières*, particularly in the chapter entitled “Apprivoiser la panthère.”

⁶ The *fatwa* (religious decree) pronounced by the Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 against Rushdie accuses him of having purposely committed desecration of the *Qur'an* in his book, *The Satanic Verses*. As a consequence of the *fatwa* Rushdie’s life was in danger until 1998 when –after Khomeini’s death- the Iranian government stopped perusing the *fatwa*, although it could not be officially revoked because it “would be an insult to the memory of Khomeini.” (BBC News, Internet)

⁷ The idea of the origin is discussed by Derrida in *Monolingualism of the Other* in terms of the language that reveals the complex interplay of psychological factors that provides the subject with an identity, with the desire to recover a “lost” language of origin. In the context of writing the notion of origin, and ultimately that of identity is challenged as “simple”, a “trace” that is neither entirely present, nor absent.

complex and fragmented as it may be. According to Daphne McConnell, *Beur* writers (specifically Tassadit Imache and Farida Belghoul) represent “the protagonists’ need to reconnect with their parents’ culture and history and to redefine “home” and “family” in order to arrive at an understanding of their own identity” (253). Exploring the cultural hybridity in the European “contact-zone” may yield some important keys in the scrutiny of the border as a postcolonial space that houses hybridity, which shows not only the genealogy of cultural origins, but it may also serve as a theoretical device to subvert the discourses of dominance.

3. Hybridity and Heterogeneity

*L’identité n’est pas donnée un fois pour toutes,
elle se construit et se transforme tout au long de l’existence.
Amin Maalouf: Les identités meurtrières.*

In his discussion of hybridity Homi Bhabha suggests that it is articulated by what he calls the “third space” of enunciation manifest within cultural systems exposed to foreign influence (37). In this way hybrid (or nomad)⁸ cultural identity materializes in this ambivalent and contradictory space that, according to Bhabha, is instrumental in the elimination of cultural exoticism. Hybridity, where new meaning is located, emerges in cultural crossroads, such as the borderland, emanating from this “third” space that opens up in the dynamic interaction of cultural contacts based on difference. Many critics utilize the concept of the “third space”, or similar ones: “in-between-ness” (Rosaldo), “contact zone” (Pratt) in order to deconstruct the prescribed notions of culture. In this heterogeneous space *Beurs* can recuperate their agency affected by the shared memory with the Maghreb, and by the continuous cultural influence of France and by extension, Europe. Many critics (Saldívar, Rosaldo, Gómez-Peña) theorize about the hybrid zone as a place of “cultural visibility and cultural invisibility” (Gómez Peña, “Danger Zone” 176). However, Saldívar adds that in the global borderlands “composed of historically connected postcolonial spaces” (153) it is difficult to scrutinize frontier identity, because theories today is not conceived from a “critical distance” but from a similarly ‘in-between’ space where subjectivity is being created as a form of resistance.

The quest for an idea that expresses this “third space” of enunciation that would be able to circumvent the stalemate of binary oppositions is embodied in the idea of hybridity, a form of

⁸ Christopher Miller equates hybridity and “nomadology,” as he calls it (4).

resistance to the homogenizing forces of colonialism, and to the equally Eurocentric ideologies of the nation-state.

4. Deterritorialization within Europe: The *Beur*

Cultural hybridity manifest in *Beur* narrative evolves around the exploration of the incertitude originating from the cultural transplant, according to the critics (Hargreaves, Bonn). One of the fundamental questions Beur authors (Belghoul, Houari, Begag, Sebbar) face is the subaltern re-writing of history, in other words, the narrative treatment of the particular strategies of resistance.

Deterritorialization⁹ of the Maghreb began after the French left the North African territories, and North Africans migrated to France (even before the end of the French colonial empire) looking for opportunities they did not have in countries destroyed on one hand by colonialism and on the other, by a long bloody liberation war (as it was the case of Algeria, 1954-1962). In France the Maghrebi population was still regarded as colonial subjects, openly treated as second class citizens. It is well-known that North African immigrants experience “dépaysement” a type of defamiliarization, alienation¹⁰, as a consequence of living in a hybrid cultural environment that contains contradictory, even mutually exclusive elements between the culture of their origin, and that of their residence. Julia Kristeva treats this aspect of the immigrants’ psyche in her book, *Étrangers à nous-même*, but she, very *sui generis*, depoliticizes the issue by introducing the notion of “citoyen-individu” and the idea of ‘civilized’ cohabitation.

Perhaps by subverting this modern individualism, or from the moment when the “citoyen-individu” no longer considers himself as united and glorious, but discovers his incoherencies and his failures, in sum, his strangeness, is that the question may again be asked: it is not about the welcoming of the foreigner into a system that does not recognize him, but about the cohabitation of those strangers that we all recognize ourselves to be.¹¹

⁹ Here I am using the term in its literal sense, but I will also take into account what Deleuze and Guattari meant by it, namely, the capacity of language of the so-called “minor literatures” to remain ambiguous and open to new interpretations.

¹⁰ Tahar Ben Jelloun gave a harrowing account of some aspects of solitude and alienation Maghrebi immigrants face in France in *Le plus haute des solitudes* which was his doctoral thesis in 1977 and was published in 1998 and 2006.

¹¹ « Mais c'est peut-être à partir de la subversion de cet individualisme moderne, à partir de moment où le citoyen-individu cesse de se considérer comme uni et glorieux, mais découvre ses incohérences et ses abîmes, ses

Julia Kristeva, more than confident in the “citoyen-individu” ethic, tries to include all foreigners, exiles or not, under the same idea of “cohabitation.” This type of elitist exoticism is refuted by Samia Mehrez, for the reason that “it eclipses the real struggle against exile and nomadism, which even as it deterritorializes the dominant, seeks to acquire and legitimate territory for itself” (27), and also by Abdelmalek Sayad, who suggests that the situation of the North African immigrant in France is a reproduction of the colonial condition, especially in view of the relation between the immigrants and the French society, where the communities “coexist” but don’t “cohabit” (209).

North African immigration in France started at the end of the Second World War, caused by the economic boom at the time. The children of the immigrants¹², the *Beurs*, as they are frequently referred to¹³ often do not relate intimately to any other country but France. The country of origin of their family is a mythical country, constructed in their minds based on the stories of relatives. (Cf. Sebbar, *Parle mon fils...*) Consequently, one of the distinct characteristics of this group is alienation caused by living in an ambiguous space that contains conflicting cultural signs. Even though many *Beurs* travel to their parents’ country of origin, the stigma of not being “authentic” is placed on them everywhere. In France they are called “les sales Arabes” (dirty Arabs) and in the Maghreb they are called “les Arabes de la France” (the Arabs from France) (Mehrez 29). Their hybrid identity nourished by different cultural heritages is neither Maghrebi nor French, while either one of these cultural components should be considered as homogeneous. However, it is safe to say that Maghrebi social codes determined mostly by the Muslim religion (regardless of individual religious practices) differ greatly from those of France that serves as a cultural medium (the school, the mass media, particularly the television) for *Beurs* who live in a continuous cultural split. This explains a certain degree of rejection towards both cultures and their determination to find something “authentic” that can

étrangetés en somme, que la question se pose à nouveau : non plus l'accueil de l'étranger a l'intérieur d'un système qui l'annule, mais de la cohabitation de ces étrangers que nous reconnaissons tous être. »

¹² Tahar Ben Jelloun refers to the first generation of immigrants as “la génération du silence” and to the second one as “la génération de la parole,” for more than one reason, but chiefly because the first generation was often analphabet, especially in French, but the second generation was schooled.

¹³ In this way, the expression *beur* is a term that was used by the dominant society, as derogatory, to refer to the second generation of North African immigrants, who eventually appropriated the term thus empowering themselves. On the other hand, *beur* also designates class, according to Ben Jelloun: “... ‘beur’ est quelque chose de très particulier. Ce sont des enfants de ce sous-prolétariat de travailleurs immigrés et travailleurs manuels qui ont été élevés ici. ... ‘Beur’ désigne automatiquement la banlieue, la galère, les problèmes d'insertion, etc. (Ben Jelloun 90)

define them¹⁴.

4. Reterritorialization by means of literature

Deleuze and Guattari's "minor literatures" is a problematic term, because it does not specify when resistance writing becomes part of the 'great literature'. Because 'great literature' and 'minor literature' are inherently universal in their view, it must be concluded that Europe is the center and minor literature emerges from the peripheries (even from within Europe). This Eurocentrism places resistance into a dichotomy scheme that does not allow for a more nuanced view of the interplay of unequal power relationships. Samia Mehrez in her article about *Beur* literature also disapproves of this concept and argues for the necessity of the reterritorialization in the post-colonial 'minor literature': "Our critical investigation should never stop at deterritorialization, because postcolonial "minor" literature, rather than glorifying exile, seeks to acquire and legitimate territory" at the same time deterritorializing the dominant" (27-28). Anne Donnadey goes beyond this idea by suggesting that writers must create their own space of difference by a strategic use of their language and culture. However, she adds, "the difference in power position between the French (authors) and exiles or immigrants, especially the Beurs in France, is too easily erased by Deleuze and Guattari and Kristeva." (269)

According to Alec G. Hargreaves, the *Beur* represent a generation characterized by insecurity and by a continuous identity crisis, and one of the motivations for the *Beur* writing is to resolve these problems: "the exploration of that uncertainty is the central dynamic which informs most *Beur* writing" (661). I must add that, in Hargreaves' article, despite being undoubtedly informative, the paternal(ist) perspective from which he approaches the subject presents a problem. In a rather essentialist proposition he comments on the *Beurs'* economic situation as tied to the possibility of their intellectual development: "their material deprivation slow[s] their progress through the French educational system, and has sometimes provoked

¹⁴ In this sense, the *Beurs'* search for cultural authenticity is very similar to that of the Chicanos in the U.S. that also live in a continuous cultural crossroads. In spite of the undoubted achievements of the civil rights movement, are still subject to diverse forms of marginalization in the U.S., and also rejected, called 'Pochos' in Mexico. In this junction multiculturalism is not a possibility, because it is rejected by both the intransigence of the culture of origin and by the cultural and racial intolerance of the place of residence. One of the most powerful manifestations of the search for resolving this conflict is the creation of an active subject position of agency embodied in the *Pachuco* who (with his clothing, language, etc.) personifies difference from both cultural entities, while belonging to neither. This identity is articulated from the "third space" where the "others" are able to engage in a dialogue with the "us," in order to affirm "their" presence as members of a community. The *Pachuco* manifests the cultural hybridity of the borderland by its mere existence. (Nagy-Zekmi, "Postcolonial..." 7-8.)

serious behavioral problems.” This may be true in some, or even many cases, however, the *Beurs*, particularly today, are not a homogeneous group. Hargreaves does not seem to include in his discussion of the *Beurs* the fundamental role of racism that affects them, along other issues such as the cultural split and mandatory (and simultaneous) adherence to differing, or even conflicting values. The critic characterizes Leïla Houari, daughter of Moroccan immigrants in Belgium, as a hysterical woman who suffers from “full-brown identity crisis, nervous breakdowns and suicide attempts” and besides reporting this fact does not comment on any of her novels, *Zeïda de nulle part* (1985), *Quand tu verras la mer* (1988). The collected stories in *Quand tu verras la mer* represent conflicts caused by the ambiguity of values *Beurs’* lives, the “double rupture fondatrice” (Bonn 101) on one side, with the identity of the culture of “origin” (of the parents, in reality) and on the other, with the culture of the place of residence.

Various novels written by *Beur* authors deal with childhood and represent the tensions between home and school, two decisive spaces that are culturally conflicting. It is possible that the authors thus exorcise their own demons through the narration of (their?) childhood. The formative years of a girl of Berber origin¹⁵ serve as the theme for *Georgette!* by Farida Belghoul¹⁶ who lives with her parents and siblings in Paris. With profound sensibility, the author represents the growing crisis in the life of this seven-year old girl who is learning to write in school. As Mireille Rosello points out, “l’enfant se trouve confrontée à toutes sortes de discours qui tiennent à lui imposer une identité complexe et problématique” (35). But the most important of these discourses are those of the father and the teacher, situated in two diametrically opposed ideological poles. More important than the linguistic diversity and the ethnic complexity of the Maghreb (the heroine being a non-Arab Berber girl) is the contradiction presented between the parents’ oral culture, and the written culture of France that opens doors, but also closes them, because the oral cultural coordinates that govern the world of her parents will be out of the girl’s reach forever.

The cultural “in-between-ness” seems to be the principal motive in the novels of Leila Sebbar as well. The protagonists (youths, in their majority) respond to this crisis, fleeing, running, escaping, looking obsessively for a model that includes and corresponds to the cultural

¹⁵ The Berbers (who include a series of non-Arab minority groups) are found in all North African countries and are considered descendants of inhabitants that lived there prior to the Arab invasion.

¹⁶ Until the publication of *Georgette!*, her first novel, Belghoul was known in France as an activist as well as film critic and director of the movie *Le départ du père* (Rosello 35).

and linguistic hybridity that characterizes them. In *Le Chinois vert de L'Afrique* each one of the seven units (there aren't any indicated chapters) are initiated by a small epigraphic passage that starts with the same word: "Il court" (he runs). In this way Sebbar creates for her protagonists the "third space" that is anchored nowhere, and where the "other" of North Africa is able to engage in a dialogue with the "us" of France in order to affirm a presence as citizens in the country of their ex-colonizers (Orlando 19). This "third space" is an exile of all cultures and places, it is found outside of the family (that imposes the Muslim morals and a Maghrebi language) and outside of French society (that imposes its racism and colonialist mentality) it is the only one that offers the possibility of articulating identities far from the intrusion of either culture, that (in spite of what Kristeva says) cannot be reconciled or harmoniously coexist in a person. Sebbar's protagonists cannot be integrated into French society today, nor can they (re)encounter the signs of their lost origin (Vergano 224). For Sebbar writing is, in effect, a form of reterritorialization, her purpose is to give the children of immigrants (her protagonists) "a territory in literature" (Laronde 88). Applying a hybrid textuality Sebbar attempts reterritorialization, but not at the national level (as many others propose it), but by creating "imaginary communities" (Anderson) that aren't based on a common mythical past, but on a hybrid present. In an interview with Monique Hugon, Sebbar states that what she seeks is to write about the French reality that isn't all French and, at the same time, to give a legitimate space of representations to the Arabs within the confines of French Literature (37).

The territories on one side of the border in the postcolonial imaginary offer the security of the homogeneous, but as Said comments: "can also become prisons and are often defended beyond reason or necessity" (365). To experience an identity constantly challenged at the crossroads of histories and memories (individual and collective), to live simultaneously in the interior and the exterior requires from those who live in a border reality the relentless revision and reexamination of that identity and to take part in a continuous discussion (and negotiation?) based on sporadic historical inheritances and a heterogeneous present (cf. Chambers 6). The hybrid cultures, as García Canclini points out, are consequences of economic de/restructuration, the new global patrons of production, distribution, consumption and communication, as well as migration processes that produce new social configurations.

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