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Alexandra Gueydan-Turek

Swarthmore College, agueyda1@swarthmore.edu

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FIGURE OF AN ANARTIST: KEEPING LOCAL FRANCOPHONE LITERATURE ENGAGED WITH MUSTAPHA BENFODIL'S LITERATURE-ACTION

Alexandra Gueydan-Turek

Alexandra Gueydan-Turek is an Associate professor of Francophone Studies at Swarthmore College. Her work examines the production and consumption of Algerian Francophone literature at the turn of the twenty-first century, with particular attention to the varying degrees of complicity between local oppositional discourses and the global late-capitalist system that helps transform such discourses into a valuable intellectual commodity.

Institutional Address

Swarthmore College
Department of Modern Languages and Literatures
500 College Avenue
Swarthmore, PA 19081

Office: 610.328.8309

agueyda1@swarthmore.edu

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Alexandra Gueydan-Turek
Swarthmore College

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(179 words)

At a time when the Algerian Francophone publishing market remains dominated by Paris and the readership of French is said to be dwindling in Algeria, the future of Algeria's Francophone literary culture appears bleak. Through the writings of Mustapha Benfodil, perhaps the most unavoidable author from the post-Civil War generation, this article analyzes the ways in which contemporary Algerian literature asserts its autonomy from the Parisian "center" and redefines the literary sphere as a cornerstone of social change in Algeria.

Paying particular attention to the figure of the "anartiste" first described in *Archéologie du chaos (amoureux)* (Barzakh, 2007), and later realized in the public collective "Bezzze" (Benfodil, "Cherche"), I argue that Benfodil's artistic endeavor moves beyond the sphere of literary experimentation into that of social action. By writing novels that double as aesthetic manifestos and social pamphlets, and bringing them to life through public performances, Benfodil creates new artistic processes designed to renew the cultural field. The tangible materiality of this literature-action, I contend, serves an essential role in illustrating how *Algerian* francophone literature connects with its society and "becomes" Algerian.

Despite the rapid growth of the book market in Algeria since the early 2000s (Graba; Madi), Francophone Algerian literature remains dominated by works published in Paris by expatriate writers, anointed by Hexagonal media and critics. Perhaps this was most explicitly noted by Sofiane Hadjadj, co-founder of Algiers's publishing house Barzakh, who explicitly described the state of Algerian literature in these terms:

[I]l n'existe pas de littérature algérienne au sens propre du mot, qui se constitue sur une cinquantaine d'années, avec des auteurs phares, avec des écoles, des tendances, une critique, un lectorat qu'on peut cibler (...) la seule littérature qui soit en train de se constituer est une littérature de type Francophone, à partir de Paris, éditée par des maisons d'édition parisiennes ou par un ou deux éditeurs algériens installés à Paris, et qui privilégient des auteurs Francophones d'une certaine tendance.(Hadjadj, 2010)

[Algerian literature *per se*, that has been forming over the past fifty years, with key authors, aesthetic schools, movements, critical apparatus, and a specific readership does not exist ... The only literary corpus that is being formed is Francophone: it comes from Paris, is published by Parisian publishing companies or by one or two Algerian editors living in Paris who privilege Francophone writers of a certain inclination.]

According to Hadjadj, the interplay between "local" and "Hexagonal" literature is governed by a foundational inequality in the material production and constitution of Algeria's literary patrimony whereby the 'national' corpus has little to do with the local experience and is inevitably tainted by an outsider perspective. In other words, the agency and cultural productions of Algerian writers are always already the products of distortions.

Although Hadjadj's diagnosis about Algeria's literary patrimony seems exceedingly bleak, it forces us to reconsider academe's critical inattentiveness to local literary production. In turn, this raises a series of questions regarding the implications of locally published literature outside of the Parisian publishing realm: what strategies have local authors commonly deployed so as to strengthen their position? What status have these innovative literary productions come to occupy within the realm of local cultural productions? Through Mustapha Benfodil's work, I will discuss the innovative formats that local literature can adopt when no longer constrained by the expectations of the Parisian publishing market. Developing a cross-genre narrative—borrowing from novel, manifestos, and theatrical performances—I will show how Benfodil forces us to reconsider the understanding of Algerian Francophone literature not so much as an archive of Franco-Algerian (post)colonial struggles, but rather as an interventionist strategy, a literature-action, that connects with its society thus “becoming” Algerian.

Perhaps the most unavoidable figure from the new literary generation that emerged from the 1990s Civil War, Mustapha Benfodil is renowned for both his fictional and journalistic pieces: the Arabophone newspaper *El-Khabar* awarded him the International Omar Ouartilane Prize for Press Freedom in 2008, and his second novel, *Les Bavardages du Seul* (2003), received the prize for the Best Algerian novel awarded by local librarians, went out of print within a year, and was subsequently circulated in photocopied versions by students.

For the discussion at hand, I would like to pay particular attention to his third novel, *Archéologie du chaos (amoureux)* [Archeology of Chaos (in Love)], which was first published in Algiers in 2007 and then republished in 2010 with the French publishing house Al Dante. *Archéologie* is a curious text, a carefully crafted (yet seemingly chaotic) assemblage of diverse forms of media—a notebook, a fragmented novel, an email, a police investigation, and a

manifesto—that collectively brings the reader through the writing of a book, before it is abruptly cut short by the death of its author. The novel’s central *mise en abîme* revolves around the life of Yacine Nabolci, an intelligent, young, misogynistic male protagonist with the stated aim of destabilizing the regime by impregnating daughters of the elite. This manuscript, in turn, is written by Marwan K., a tortured figure who refers to himself as MK2. Confronted with the demands of his craft, MK2 suffers from the “blank page syndrome” and recognizes that writing will ultimately cost him his life. When it eventually does, MK2’s abrupt, unexplained disappearance leaves behind the unfinished manuscript alongside a curious political manifesto. The book continues with an investigation of the author’s death by an inspector, who performs a kind of literary autopsy of both the novel and its writer’s life.

A *roman à tiroirs* par excellence, *Archéologie* weaves together the stories with a complex interplay of nested fictions. The underlying plot is at times difficult to follow and, to some extent, does not appear to matter. From within layers of counterpoints and mirrors, protagonists echo each other: Marwan is as ugly as Yacine is attractive; Marwan is alone in life, Yacine coveted by many. The layers blur further when Marwan is referred to, by secondary characters, as the author of Benfodil’s earlier plays and a mathematician in training, not unlike his own creator (146, 174). Ultimately, it becomes unclear which text is nested inside the other, and which figure is more compelling as the author or protagonist.

From these choices, we can infer that Benfodil finds the medium of the realist novel to be exhausted. Yet, *Archéologie* moves beyond its violent deconstruction of the narrative-driven realist novel, and aims to “déconstruire l’ordre narratif national” [deconstruct the national narrative order] (118), as if the referential reality was to be directly affected by his aesthetic choices. In place of transparent referentiality, Benfodil outlines a discourse on creative

intervention that brings together local fictional production and auctorial self-fashioning into a gesture that explicitly challenges Algeria's social and cultural order. This is nowhere more visible than in Benfodil's appeals to fellow local writers and artists to forge a revolutionary consciousness to transform the system of cultural relations and artistic practices:

Les *Anartistes* doivent agir par actions commando. Il faut un commando culturel (...) Il faut surprendre l'opinion publique par du spectaculaire. De l'événementiel. Il faut faire de l'activisme artistique un happening événementiel. Il faut ranimer la société aux électrochocs. (136-137; 246)

Anartists must act as a commando. A cultural commando... We must shock public opinion through dramatic actions. Through an event. We must perform artistic activism, an event-based performance. We must revive society through some kind of shock treatment.

Recalling Marcel Duchamp's famous phrase ("an anti-artist is just as much an artist as the other artist. Anartist would have been better (...) Anartist, meaning no artist at all" (1959)), Benfodil's employs the portmanteaus "Anartistes" [anarchist-artists] (118; 136) and "Agit'auteurs" [Agitprop-authors] (Benfodil, "Cherche) to emphasize the self-conscious performance of an artistic self that refrains from any pro/anti dialectic and actively resists any ideological identification. His new ethos of public artistic activism is envisioned as a rupture from so-called intellectualism, which he construes to be complicit with the official order. In contrast, Benfodil idealizes counter-hegemonic cultural engagement, where artists produce works designed to renew creative stances and offer viable models of oppositional social practice.

The manifesto that serves as the closing chapter explicitly delineates how artists should bring this about:

Il faut occuper esthétiquement le territoire.

(...)

Il faut des happenings qui prennent d'assaut les plateaux de télévisions.

(...)

Il faut ouvrir un maquis littéraire sur Internet.

Il faut multiplier les blogs subversifs.

Bloggers du Monde Unissez-vous! (246-247)

[We must occupy the territory on an aesthetical level.

(...)

We must attack Television studios with public performances.

(...)

We must create a literary resistance online.

We must multiply subversive blogs.

Bloggers of the World, Unite!]

In a pastiche of Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* (recalling the last verse, "Workers of the World, unite!"), the Manifesto articulates—at a metatextual level—the artistic praxis that Benfodil believes could ultimately foster an aesthetic renewal capable of engaging Algerian culture and changing Algerian reality. Rooted in participatory performances, the art that Benfodil envisions is directed towards the ultimate end of personal and social change. Read in this

context, *Archéologie*, which defies the limits of conventional artistic forms, is to be understood as a performative iteration of this precise revolutionary ethos.

Both Benfodil's message and his mode of artistic creation reject convention and strive for a type of artistic novelty; they do so, however, in a manner that differs from analogous European movements. Perhaps this is best seen through the movements to whom Benfodil acknowledges his artistic debt: In addition to a few well-known "mainstream" countercultural movements—Dadaism, the Beat Movement, and the New Wave—Benfodil also recognizes two "peripheral" avant-garde movements that appear closer to his positioning: the CoBra Movement¹ and the Aouchem Group² (131), respectively from Northern Europe and from Algeria.

The CoBra movement was a 1948 offshoot of Surrealism which notably attacked mainstream surrealists through a parody of the manifesto "La Cause est entendue" [The Case is Heard] entitled "La Cause était entendue" [The Case was Heard]. For Benfodil, CoBra primarily appealed as a fringe movement, which was autonomous from and in discordance with the cultural temple of Paris. In the same spirit, Benfodil also references the Aouchem Group, the first Algerian 'indigenous' movement to sever ties with the ex-colonial capital and proclaim literary independence. Aouchem artists explicitly defined themselves in their manifesto, *Aouchem 1967*, as a group designed to reclaim "an [indigeneous] popular culture" for Algeria, directly drawing on the pre-colonial and local cultural heritage. In works that differed from Western figurative art as much as they did from Orientalism, Aouchem tried to recover an "authentic tradition of the sign." Drawing the name of the movement from the Arabic word for "tattoo," Aouchem artists saw their work as signifying, but nonfigurative: "we want to redefine the true totems and the true arabesques capable of expressing the world we live." Many of the materials incorporated in their work recalled "themes inherited from Algerian history ... plastic elements invented ... by the

civilizations of the Third World that were crushed yesterday and that are coming back to life today” (*Aouchem* 1967).

The specific fashion in which the Aouchem artists declared their independence from France implicitly recognized the work that remains for Algerian artists if their cultural productions are to be fully decolonized. Benfodil clearly draws this understanding from their influence: His writing outside of the narrative traditions typical of Paris-published Algerian novels makes a comparable gesture towards a similar kind of independence. Benfodil’s art bears marks of its aesthetic inheritance from Aouchem, as well: interspersed throughout *Archéologie*, we find “poor” art represented in a fashion similar to what the Aouchem might produce, and handwritten key terms inked on the page – disrupting the narrative continuity with precisely the sort of signifying (but nonrepresentative) graphic elements that the Aouchem would privilege.

Taken together, these literary predecessors help us understand both the ends to which Benfodil aspired, and the aesthetic strategies that he drew from as he tried, in *Archéologie*, to re-envision Algeria’s national cultural field. His ultimate vision, developed with artist Amina Menia (his life-long partner), is to bring Algerian cultural production—with its worldly histories and influences—to a local audience, and to give the Algerian public ownership of the literature globally ascribed to them. In service of this vision, Benfodil gained considerable renown in 2009 with a series of reading-performances in the streets of Algiers entitled “Pièces détachées—Lectures sauvages” (Spare Parts-Unauthorized Readings). Although Benfodil spoke of this as “street theater,” and generally refers to such efforts using theatrical terms, the performances were in substance more accurately situated at the crossroad of literature, performance art and spoken word; they served largely to disseminate excerpts from both his theatrical and more narrative texts.³

In the newspaper *El Watan*, Benfodil explains his motives for the project:

L'idée est simple: investir de nouveaux territoires pour y injecter un peu d'imagination par l'action artistique, sortir la littérature des livres et des lieux communs et la jeter dans la rue, affranchir le théâtre de la bureaucratie anti-créationnelle et donner à entendre des textes dramatiques dans des conditions minimales de représentation, des textes qui ont très peu de chance, on l'imagine, d'être joués dans les théâtres institutionnels.(2009)

Simply put, the idea is to enter new territories in order to introduce a bit of imagination through artistic action, to take the literature out of books, their *clichés* and conventional sites and to throw it into the street, to free drama from the bureaucracy that stiffens creativity and have these theatrical texts be heard in minimal representational conditions, texts that would otherwise have little chance to be, as you can imagine, played in institutional settings.

At the heart of his effort is an attempt to inject free intellectual speech into the Algerian public realm – a space that had been dominated, since the beginning of the decade-long civil war, by state and religious violence. By design, the readings appeared at random in diverse institutional, popular, and underground places; they attempted to evoke responses from those present with conflicting, and seemingly exclusive, voices.

The rapid success of Benfodil's performances (particularly relative to comparable printed efforts) can probably be attributed, at least in part, to their oral nature: Even in communities where literacy is low, and where French is oftentimes considered a second (or third) language, Benfodil was able to engage and speak directly to the population. Similarly, the potentially prohibitive cost of printed works posed no impediment: the "unauthorized readings" mediated

written accounts without demanding any material commitment from spectators other than their time. These means of dissemination also circumvented another typical problem for printed works: through it, Benfodil was able to disseminate oeuvres that might otherwise have difficulty entering the country.⁴

For the purposes of the present discussion, Benfodil's strategy is also of interest for its particular cultural positioning: Benfodil and his performers bypassed festivals, galleries and other "high culture" sites as performance venues. Instead of presenting in institutional cultural spaces which could appear to stifle voices, the readings were performed in the most incongruous places.⁵ By intentionally blurring the lines between the traditional publication circuit and its margins, Benfodil de-sacralised Literature and rejected the divide between appropriate and inappropriate cultural spaces. Instead, his performances embraced the constant reclaiming of the public sphere as a collective creative space.

Benfodil's strategy should also be recognized for the bridge it builds between different communities: Benfodil consciously targeted his message to a broad cross-section of society, ranging from bourgeois intellectuals to the lower-middle class and the working poor. This positioning demonstrates a broad set of altruistic motivations – a concern with (in)forming the Algerian public, without regard to social status or educational background, and a desire to reinvigorate public discourse. In so doing, it also qualifies Benfodil's performances as lectures (citoyennes or citizen readings) designed to bring together disparate groups within Algerian society that span the Arabo-Franco-phone divide.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Benfodil's *lectures sauvages* have proven controversial: 'artistic action' made into a very public (and in this case unauthorized) act is not without risk. Art critic

Nadira Laggoune-Aklouche suggests that such artistic productions can be conceived as a highly contentious form of social expression that nourishes people's affective and cerebral relation to the society (5-6). In other words, art has the potential to spark a revolution.

Clearly, part of the State's motivation behind the surveillance of artistic and literary creations is a residual fear left over after the decade-long strife of the 1990s, when cultural production was highly contested and the public sphere was marked by violence involving religious radicals who hunted down artists and government officials seeking to co-opt their messages (Laggoune-Aklouche 2002). Entering the new millennium, the State has curtailed the wide dissemination of cultural productions in the public realm, and still maintains a top-down policy for the promotion of events, including "licenses" to speak. When Benfodil takes back the public space without authorization or oversight—with messages that are extemporaneous and uncontrolled—his actions are destined to be conceived at best as contentious, and at worst as subversive or "*tahridh*" (literally "instigation to revenge"). It should not come as a surprise then that Benfodil's "unauthorized readings" resulted in his arrest (13 Aug. 2009).

These challenges, though, have energized Benfodil more than they have hindered him. In an article detailing one of his arrests, he proudly describes the police's failure to force a conclusion to his reading: he explains that his audience carried on with the event, even after he was forcibly removed ("Cherche"). Although public literary performances may appear "minor" to some, "wild readings" successfully engaged his audience in a communal public resistance to the police state, whereby affecting social practice.

Immediately following this experience, Benfodil joined three other leading 'local' writers (Chawki Amari, Kamel Daoud and Adlène Meddi) to create "Bezzef" [meaning "it's too

much!” in dialectal Arabic].⁶ A collective modeled after the description of “anartistes” from *Archéologie*, Bezzzef was designed to reclaim freedom of speech and to re-appropriate the public space, all in the larger service of a renewed cultural field, novel creative networks, and new artistic processes.⁷ This is best exemplified in Bezzzef’s inaugural action: a protest at the 2009 international book fair of Algiers (SILA) against the censorship of Mehdi El Djazaïri’s novel *Poutakhine* and other titles which were censored by the event in previous years.⁸ Brandishing a banner with the words of the Famous Algerian writer Kateb Yacine, “On ne sort pas d’une révolution pour fermer sa gueule” [you don’t win a revolution to shut your trap] (1985), “anartists” chanted: “Bezzzef el hogra. Bezzzef la censure. Bezzzef السرقة. ... BEZZZEF ...pour se réunir dans la même colère. Unis pour une même cause: dire NON. Quelques soient vos avis, vos orientations politiques, votre club de foot préféré... juste dire NON et BEZZZEF!!” [Too much injustice. Too much censorship. Too much thieving ... We are fed up ... Let’s unite in our shared anger. United for a single cause: to say NO. Whatever your beliefs, your political opinions, or your favorite football team...Just say NO and BEZZZEF!!] (Ibn Said). The group then performed a mock ceremony, awarding El Djazaïri’s censored novel an “unofficial” prize to honor freedom of speech. The gesture consciously sidestepped official gatekeepers and cultural institutions in order to publicly assert independence from political and legal literary constraints.

Although the actions of Bezzzef were short-lived and did not endure,⁹ such literature-action should be ultimately understood as an act of re-creation of subject-citizens, reminiscent of the role played by the world of letters in Jürgen Habermas’ public sphere (1991). According to Habermas, public discourse of precisely this sort is a necessary prefiguration to changes in the political public sphere. In other words, literary performances, as demonstrated by Bezzzef and Benfodil, are not so inconsequential; rather they help develop a political consciousness, remedy

social problems and reveal oppressive literary institutions and their norms. Still, as performed in Algeria, the popular inclinations of Benfodil and Bezzef introduce complexities not entertained by Habermas, who maintained a view of a predominantly bourgeois critical sphere: by contrast, Benfodil's career subverts any representation of the literary profession as restricted to print media and a bourgeois audience. Viewing Benfodil's radical literary intervention against the backdrop of Sofiane Hadjadj's initial reservations about the "Hexagonal" feel of Algerian literature written in French, furthermore, shows us the particular strategy that Benfodil has found to help an *Algerian* francophone literature to connect with its society and "become" Algerian. As a consequence of the material conditions of its largely French metropolitan production, it might otherwise appear impossible for Algerian literature to escape a certain degree of coercion by dominant discursive practices which, in turn, would raise suspicions and potentially even limit its oppositional potential. With Benfodil's engaged and ethical practice, however, Algerian literature can finally assert its autonomy from the Parisian "center" and redefine the literary sphere as a cornerstone of social change in Algeria.

Notes

¹ CoBra (an acronym from Copenhagen-Brussels-Amsterdam) was founded in 1948 by Asger Jorn, Christian Dotremont and Constant.

² Aouchem was co-founded in 1967 by Hamid Abdoun, Mustapha Akmoun, Baya, Denis Martinez, Choukri Mesli, Rezki Zérarti.

³ Although Benfodil refers often to his reading of his theatrical texts, I have also found mentions of excerpts from his novels, such as the last chapter from *Archéologie du chaos (amoureux)* being read at such events (Benfodil 2009).

⁴ Such is the case of Benfodil's plays, which have been played abroad, in Brussels, Paris, Limoges, even at the off festival of Avignon, but have not been played in Algeria.

⁵ Unauthorized readings-performance have occurred, for instance, in libraries, during the 2nd Panafrican Festival, in house in ruins at the periphery of Algiers, in an underground parking structure, or on the Roman ruins of Tipaza (Benfodil,"Cherche").

⁶ The group's name does not directly transcribe the word in Algerian dialect: A third 'z' was added to emphasize the feeling of despondency.

⁷ Similarly to Benfodil's readings, Bezzzeff's actions were construed as subversive by the authorities; it was not allowed to open an office and is confined to organizing in cyberspace.

⁸ Although censorship has mostly taken the indirect form of retention of imported books at customs (with, for instance, Boualem Sansal's *Le village de l'Allemand*), Mehdi El Djazaïri's case is unusual: His book had been published in Algeria, and issued an ISBN. When partisan newspapers condemned his work as an attack on Bouteflika's government, printing presses were stopped, all copies of the books seized, and electronic devices which may have contained a copy of the manuscript were confiscated.

⁹ In 2014, Benfodil carried new interventions in the streets of Algiers with "Barakat!" ("Enough!" in dialectal Arabic), a movement he cofounded with other writers, artists and intellectuals to oppose Abdelaziz Bouteflika's campaign for a 4th presidential term. Despite the failure of this attempt and the movement's particular political aim, Barakat! echoes Bezzzeff's strategic mode of intervention in the hope of creating a new kind of citizen.

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