

M'Barek Bouhchichi
LES POETES DE LA TERRE

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Memory into Matter – M'barek Bouhchichi's Conceptual Materialism

M'barek Bouhchichi once told me a haunting tale from Tinghir, a small town in the south east of Morocco. It is the story of a *khammas* [sharecropper] nicknamed Kizitt, who had vowed to remain celibate. When asked for his reasons, he had only one answer: "Sharecropper, son of a sharecropper, grandson of a sharecropper... I am putting an end to this lineage".

Etymology is hesitant when it comes to the *Haratin* (sing. *Hartani*). The term may describe a function (Arabic 'harrathine': land workers), a legal state (Arabic 'hurr thani': freed slave or second-order free man) or a skin color (Amazigh 'Ahardan': dark color). In the Drâa region a strict social and economic order has traditionally subordinated the black Haratine to other groups and banned them from land ownership. They toil on the properties of "white" landlords for one fifth of the yield.

Over time, the Haratin have developed advanced methods of agriculture and water management. Their story is one of persistence in the face of discrimination and recalcitrant land. M'barek Bouhchichi gives stark shapes to this persistence. For example, a series of oxidized metal rectangles, each symbolizing a piece of land, of which one fifth is cut out and covered in copper. The initial rectangles are identical but the cut-out fifths all have different shapes. In the face of unchanging oppression, resistance takes singular forms.

Out of a context of injustice and looming death, Bouhchichi's project produces an array of visual affirmations, a becoming-visible of minoritized existences. One such existence is that of M'barek Ben Zida (1925-1973), a black peasant poet from Tata, who occupies a remarkable position within the field of Ahwach—a form of oral poetry that is accompanied by music and often practiced in poetic battles. By insisting on exposing social and ethnic inequities, Ben Zida created a poetic dissonance within the ahwach tradition, which usually steers clear of explicit politics. By putting silenced realities into carefully crafted words, he uncovered a rich field of socio-aesthetic possibility.

Popular poetry in Morocco was always tightly linked to nature. In the words of Ahmed Bouanani, "some believe [the poet] is in touch with natural forces, that he can appease them or set them against an enemy, that he speaks the language of animals, plants, and insects. The world has no secrets for him."¹ True to tradition, Ben Zida employed natural metaphors as a primary tool. But in using them to protest the social condition of black Moroccans, he made the soil speak a language it had never spoken.

Deleuze and Guattari remind us that there is also a fundamental link between soil and metallurgy. "The metallurgist is the first specialized artisan, whose sustenance is made possible by the formation of an agricultural surplus. The relation of the smith to agriculture has to do not only with the tools smiths manufacture but also with the food they take or receive."² Not to mention that the metal they

¹ A. Bouanani, "Introduction à la poésie populaire marocaine", *Souffles* #3, 1966.

² G. Deleuze & F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, U. of Minnesota Press, 1987, p. 412.

work with is itself extracted from underneath the soil. For Bouhchichi, southern smiths, who like the khammasa are most often black-skinned, are poets in their own right. In Greek *poiein* is to make, to create, to fabricate, to shape. Blacksmiths are magical forgers of form. They breathe new life into matter. With fire and metal, they make, unmake, and remake forms by melting and shaping and welding. Their work is a constant reminder that nothing is definitive or unchangeable.

By shedding new light on activities and patterns traditionally associated with blacks in the Moroccan south, M'barek Bouhchichi symbolically unsettles the existing divisions of space and labor. He samples social observations and converts them into physical forms. This could be called a conceptual materialism. Bouhchichi's work displays a belief in matter—earth, soil, wood, metal—, a belief that matter, in its quality of presence and its shape-shiftiness, holds a potential for redemption.

Les poètes de la terre brings together soil (agriculture), metallurgy (craft), and poetry (protest, worldmaking). It relies on a crude, primitive-looking aesthetics that keeps it close to the earth. Bouhchichi's work stages an interplay between the physical and the intangible. The very word "terre", referring both to material soil and emotional land, refuses the neat division between materiality and affect. It is through this subtle wavering that Bouhchichi is able to open up the question of representation. The objects he makes aim less at explicit social commentary than at being implicit portraits of a people.

There is an air of modernist seriality to this show, which comes just as surely from Bouhchichi's interest in traditional craft and its appreciation of subtle variation within repetition. Of this, traditional Berber poetry offers another illustration. Its very name, *tandamt*, carries the notion of order and pattern, which regular prosody embodies. The greatest poets, however, are those who consistently surprise their listeners from within the established system. Ben Zida was one such wordsmith. He exemplifies the possibility of singularity emerging from an overdetermined social space. He has known famine and exile, as well as humiliation on the part of white men³. He offers a model of liberation, albeit in a tragic key. For M'barek Bouhchichi, Ben Zida is a predecessor, but also a companion, an ally in the struggle for self-affirmation: a witness to Bouhchichi's witnessing of a people and a culture.

Alas, the traces Ben Zida left are but faint burrows in barren soil. They have barely reached out of his native territory and onto national consciousness. His distant voice has no face. Hence Bouhchichi's desire to sculpt the poet's bust, and to sculpt it repeatedly. In order to build your future you must—literally—recognize your past, and recognize yourself in it. Generally speaking, this work expresses a need for body, for *giving body*. Giving tangible substance to fading legend. Etching memory into matter. Bouhchichi chisels Ben Zida's words on metal sticks. He commits oral poetry to physical permanence by paradoxically carving it into a material symbol of transience: the itinerant poet's stick. Similarly, *Haratin's Garden* takes inspiration from Mesopotamian representation of the "tree of life". It appropriates a traditional symbol of immortality in order to assert the Haratin's indisputable presence in the face of uncertainty and fragmentation. At once delicate and threatening, these sculptures seem to be telling us: "I am here. I am still here."⁴

In his poem "Digging", Seamus Heaney remembers his father's and grandfather's ability to work the soil, to handle a spade. "But I've no spade to follow men like them. / Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests. / I'll dig with it." Heaney takes stock of an irremediable generational break between poetry and soil, yet resolves to find his own way, as a poet, of honoring the ancestors' memory. M'barek Bouhchichi locates a "poetry of earth" in the under-acknowledged black cultures and crafts of the Drâa Valley, and wonders to what extent his art can bear witness to these long-despised modes of living and making. His point is not so much to dig with his own tools, as it is to dig up the forgotten elders and learn about them and from them. Now can visual language make up for linguistic erasures and absences? Can patient observation remedy breaks in transmission? Can art do away with social hierarchies? These are some of the questions that Bouhchichi's work asks us in its characteristically discreet but insistent way.

³ "Whenever I am tempted to curse the whites / a crave for dates befalls me and commands I keep my mouth shut / the whites don't like to see the Issoukins rise / they'd rather see them living a low humiliated life"

⁴ Arthur Rimbaud, "Qu'est-ce pour nous, mon cœur".