

CONFLUENCE
Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies

ISSN: 3085-5411
Journal Homepage: https://journals.imist.ma/index.php/confluence/index

Brion Gysin: Beat Outsider in Morocco

Allen Hibbard
Middle Tennessee State University

https://doi.org/10.34874/PRSM.cjms-vol2iss1.7690

Allen Hibbard, Professor Emeritus at Middle Tennessee State University, is the author of two books on Paul Bowles (*Paul Bowles: The Short Fiction* and *Paul Bowles, Magic & Morocco*) and edited *Conversations with William S. Burroughs*. His collection of short stories, *Al 'Abur ila Al- 'Abbassiya*, has been published in Arabic. His biography of Alfred Chester is under contract with Oxford University Press. He now lives in Taos, New Mexico, where he writes and watches the sun rise over the Sangre de Christo Mountains and set over the mesa.

allen.hibbard@mtsu.edu

Received: 17-09-2025 Accepted: 07-01-2026 Published: 19-01-2026

Brion Gysin: Beat Outsider in Morocco

Allen Hibbard
Middle Tennessee State University

ABSTRACT

A nomadic polymath who spent considerable time in Morocco and was a champion of Jajouka, Brion Gysin, this essay proposes, can be considered as "an outsider in a movement [the Beats] that defined itself by outsidedness." A survey of Gysin's wide range of production in diverse media and genres—painting, film, calligraphy, cut-ups, permutation poems, and novel (*The Process*)—reveals that his work participates in an esthetic and values associated with the Beats: Experimentation with new forms of expression, an iconoclastic spirit, and a firm commitment to radical freedom. While Gysin himself admitted that his inability to stick with just one mode of artistic production, his multifaceted and unrestrained talent remains a source of enduring fascination.

KEYWORDS

Gysin

Beats

Tangier

I, the Man from Nowhere, negotiated like a Tangier Space Draft on a Swiss bank.

Brion Gysin, *Minutes to Go*

There is a fairly well-known photograph of "William Burroughs and Friends [Orlovsky, Corso, Ansen, and Sommerville]," dated 1961, taken, according to the caption, at the Hotel Muniria in Tangier. (Figure 1)



Fig. 1 William Burroughs and Friends: Orlovsky, Corso, Ansen, and Sommerville at Hotel Muniria in 1961.

Contact ✉ allen.hibbard@mtsu.edu
© 2026

I have long seen the photo, with Paul Bowles seated a bit uncomfortably in front, as a visual depiction of Bowles's relationship to the Beats: He did not really fit into this group; still, they came to Tangier essentially because he was there. Until recently, while perusing *Ports of Entry: William S. Burroughs and the Arts*, which contains the photo, I had given no thought to the identity of the photographer. In a parenthetical phrase, Robert Sobieszik writes that the picture "most likely was shot by [Brion] Gysin but directed by Ginsberg" (33). Whether or not Sobieszik's conjecture is true, it is wonderfully suggestive, providing us with a figure that aptly characterizes Gysin's relationship to the Beats. He is there, present at the legendary scene in Tangier, memorialized by this photo; yet, he is elusive, not in the picture (unlike Bowles). Instead, he is snapping the shot, capturing the scene for posterity. Gysin thus can be thought of as an outsider in a movement that defined itself by its outsidedness. His sympathies, clearly, are with outsiders, "whether in the guise of artist, immigrant or heretic, not to mention the added markers of racial or sexual difference" (Weiss, x). When Gysin is associated with the Beats, it is generally due to his close relationship with William Burroughs and the legendary role he played in introducing Burroughs to the Cut-Up method at the Beat Hotel in Paris from 1960 to 1961. As Jason Weiss writes in his introduction to *Back in No Time: The Brion Gysin Reader*, Gysin has been "peripherally associated with the Beat Generation writers, mainly by intermittent points of convergence and especially his long friendship with [Burroughs]" (xix). This collaborative connection has eclipsed other fascinating dimensions of Gysin.

What happens when we turn the camera around, shifting our focus from the scene shown in this photo to the alleged photographer? What connections might we make between Gysin, the Beat Movement, and Beat Aesthetics, as inherently slippery as such terms are?



Fig. 2

Gysin was an amazingly talented man whose work resists and defies categorization, not fitting neatly within any movement, genre, or style. Even his nationality is difficult to pin down. (Figure 2) Of Swiss ancestry (a fact he often amplified), he was born in England in 1916 to parents with roots in Canada. His father died eight months after his birth, in the Battle of the Somme. Within a year or two, his mother returned to Canada. From the backwaters of Alberta, where he "lived on the reservations with the Indians,"[1] he headed off to boarding school at Downside, near Bath, in England, later spent time in France in the 30s, took refuge in New York City during WWII, then in 1950 migrated to Tangier, like many others, at the invitation of Paul Bowles, a year after the publication of Bowles's widely acclaimed first novel *The Sheltering Sky*. He had met Bowles (as well as Bowles's wife Jane) in Paris, in the summer of 1938. That move to Tangier, when he was in his mid-thirties, was central to Gysin's work and life: "I owe [Bowles] a tremendous amount, I owe him my years in Morocco, really. Because I wouldn't have gone there if he hadn't suggested it at that particular time."[2] Gysin landed in Morocco before the country's independence, before the hippies and beats had boarded the Marrakech Express and descended on the place. In December of 1950, he opened the 1001 Nights bar, which featured the Master Musicians of Jajouka, until it closed several years later. In Tangier, too, Gysin met Burroughs, an instance of "magical happenstance" that had a profound influence on both men. Gysin stayed in Morocco for the better part of 23 years. He died in Paris in 1986 at the age of seventy.

Not much constrained by social norms and expectations, Gysin produced varied, sometimes contradictory responses from those who encountered him. (Figure 3) A web search for Gysin, Beats, Tangier turns up an article with this blistering description: "He [Gysin] was . . . . a bad human being - he used to say that Man is a bad animal. Snobby, always on the financial hustle, disloyal to his most loyal supporters, inclined to run after a trend just when the trend was passing, divisive, right-wing, he was the very sort of mid-century fag that he despised."[3] His notorious misogyny alienated (potentially) half the human race. At the same time, some (one being Ira Cohen who held Gysin in the highest esteem) spoke of his generosity. In the opening paragraph of a review of books about Gysin, in *Beat Studies*, Jennie Skerl provides us with a condensed portrait of the artist, with all his contractions:



Fig. 3

> Brion Gysin was a many-faceted outsider personality whose artwork was also multi-faceted—literary, visual, electronic, musical, performance, and unclassifiable (the Dream Machine). The charming raconteur, wit, mythmaker, magician, influential multimedia avant-garde artist, and a friend of many other writers and artists was also paranoid, hypercritical, trouble-making, angry and bitter—bitter because his reputation and income did not match those less talented than he or that of his more successful friends such as William S. Burroughs and Paul Bowles. He was a misogynist and mother-hater, but also an enthusiastic participant in the "princess circuit" of wealthy women patrons and had a life-long close friendship with his "pseudo-sister" Felicity Mason. He was an inspiring friend, mentor, and lover, but also capable of sustained enmity and malicious games. William Burroughs famously said that Gysin was the only man he ever respected, but he also acknowledged that many people loathed him. (1)

This curated overview of Gysin's work begins with a brief consideration of his painting, an abiding passion throughout his life. When not yet 20, in 1935, he was invited to participate in a group show of surrealist painters in Paris. His work was removed from the show, apparently at the direction of André Breton, an outrage Gysin never forgot. Near his death, suffering from emphysema, relying on an oxygen bottle, he worked on "Calligrafitti of Fire," which he called "THE picture of my lifetime."[4] (Figure 4)
His art was exhibited in Paris, Tangier, Belgium,



Fig. 4 "Calligraffiti of Fire"

Rome, and London, alongside work by noted contemporaries Mark Tobey, Franz Kline, and Cy Twombly, winning admiration from many, including Alice B. Toklas. Andy Warhol, Keith Haring, and Roberto Matta.

For those not acquainted with Gysin's painting, I share just a few samples. Among my favorites (and pertinent to the focus of this paper) are his somewhat abstract representations of Moroccan scenes: "Jama al Fna" (Figure 5) and "Night in Marrakech." (Figure 6) Painters and artists, Gysin said in a *Rolling Stone* interview with Robert Palmer, should attempt to discover, reveal, represent, and challenge "fate in their lives and in their art."[5] A painting "must be all paint and all spirit," he wrote. "Both the surface and the depth must be so organized that the eye is seduced further and further into the picture then back in counterpoint to the rhythms of interest over the entire surface . . . I demand what might be called a spiritual dimension in painting."[6]

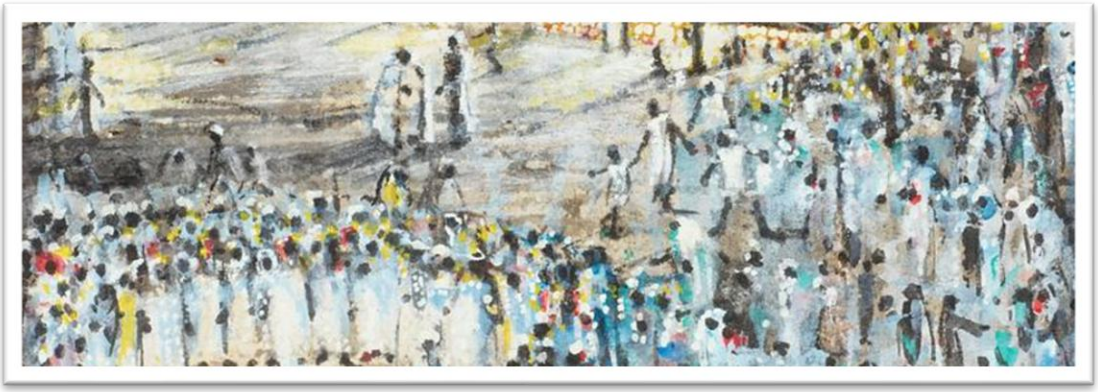


Fig. 5 *Jama al Fna*



Fig. 6 Night in Marrakech

Gysin's calligraphy is an important visual dimension of his artistic production, one that lies in the space between word and image. (Figure 7) No doubt his exposure to Arabic in Morocco was largely responsible for this direction of his artistic expression, which he began to explore in the late 1950s. *Art Voices* proclaimed that these innovative "texts" embodied "the same expressive quality as the masterpieces of Islamic calligraphy." While visual, these works also evoke the sense of writing, even though the calligraphic images contain no discernible meaning. Calligraphy, especially in Arabic and Chinese traditions, is viewed as a legitimate and vibrant art form.[7]



Fig. 7 Gysin Doing Calligraphy

Gysin's calligraphy was featured in early cut-up work, first in Minutes to Go (Figure 8), then as cover art for *The Exterminator* (Figure 9).

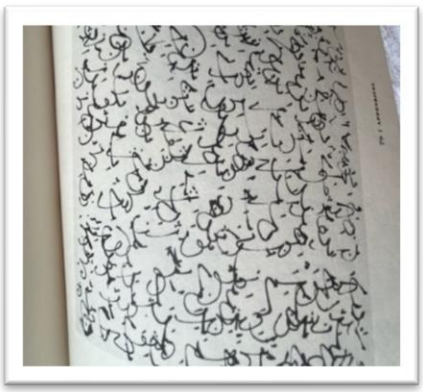


Fig. 8 Calligraphy-*Minutes to Go*

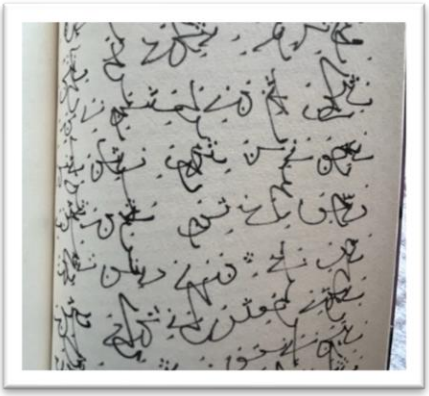


Figure 9 Cover- *The Exterminator*

The story of the Beat Hotel and cut-up is legendary. There are many descriptions of the cut-up technique. Here is Gysin's own description, from the opening pages of Minutes to Go.[8]

Pick a book, any book cut it
cut up
prose
poems
newspapers
magazines
the bible
the koran
the book of moroni
lao-tze
confucius
the bhagavad gita
anything
letters
business correspondence
ads
all the words

slice down the middle. Dice into the sections
according to taste
chop in some bible pour on some Madison Avenue
prose
shuffle like cards toss like confetti
taste it like piping hot alphabet soup. (2-3)

Rather than retell or critique that scene at the Beat Hotel (a huge task, one that many scholars have already taken on), my purpose here is to reflect on Gysin's relation to the Beats, as thescene moves from Tangier to Paris.[9] Briefly: The philosophy behind the cut-ups seems to coincide with Beat principles. That is, Burroughs and Gysin saw in the method a way to radically disrupt established narratives, subverting systems of power and control. Temporally, geographically (Paris, Beat Hotel), stylistically, and philosophically—the cut-ups surely belong within a Beat Context.

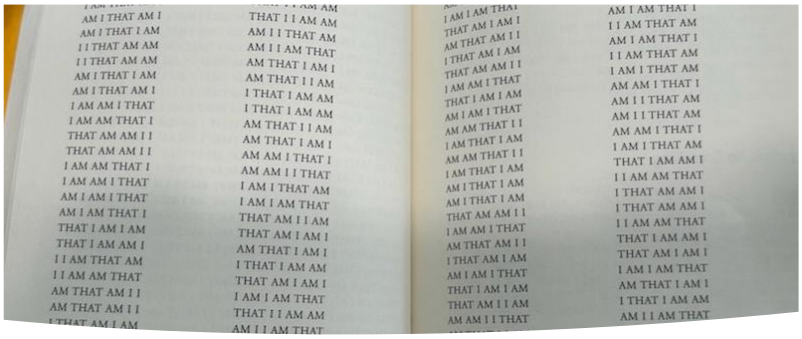


Fig. 10 "I am that I am"

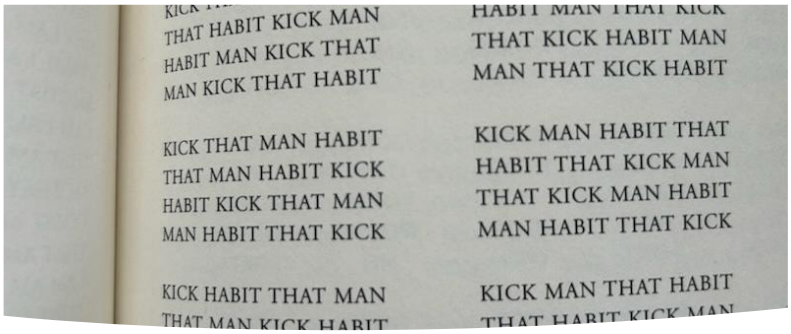


Fig. 11 "Kick that Habit Man"

Appearing first in *Minutes to Go*, Gysin's permutation poems, experimental and often witty, are yet another dimension of his creative output.[10] One of his best-known permutation poems is: I AM THAT I AM (from Exodus 3:14). [There are 605 permutations in the version in Weiss's collection.] Any alteration of the order of the words resulted in a different meaning. For example, I AM THAT[,] AM I becomes a question. (Figure 10) Other permutation poems: "Junk is no good baby," "No Poets Don't Own Words," and "Kick that habit man. (Figure 11)

KICK THAT HABIT MAN
THAT HABIT KICK MAN
HABIT MAN KICK THAT
MAN KICK THAT HABIT

KICK HABIT MAN THAT
HABIT MAN THAT KICK
THAT KICK HABIT MAN
MAN THAT KICK HABIT

KICK THAT MAN HABIT
THAT MAN HABIT KICK
HABIT KICK THAT MAN
KICK HABIT THAT MAN

KICK MAN HABIT THAT
HABIT THAT KICK MAN
THAT KICK MAN HABIT
MAN HABIT THAT KICK

KICK HABIT THAT MAN
THAT MAN KICK HABIT
HABIT THAT MAN KICK
MAN KICK HABIT THAT

KICK MAN THAT HABIT
THAT HABIT KICK MAN
HABIT KICK THAT MAN
MAN THAT HABIT KICK. (Weiss 89)

It has a kind of beat vibe.

The last work considered here is Gysin's novel *The Process*, written in Tangier in the 1960s, coincidentally around the same time Alfred Chester was writing his amazing novel *The Exquisite Corpse*, also in Tangier. Jimmy Fazzino's *World Beats: Beat Generation Writing and the Worlding of U.S. Literature* contains a rich and comprehensive discussion of the novel which rightly argues that the work challenges and unsettles geographic, gender, national, and racial boundaries. *The Process* is yet another example of Gysin's amazing vision, this time displayed in the form of a novel. Its scenes in the Algerian Sahara might make us think of Bowles's *The Sheltering Sky*. Its comic qualities call to mind works by Tom Robbins or Thomas Pynchon. Its zany deployment of African American motifs and themes is reminiscent of Ishmael Reed (*Mumbo Jumbo*). The convoluted plot has a global reach that takes us from Tangier, to Jajouka, home of the Master Musicians in the Rif, into the Sahara, to Cairo, Tunis, Switzerland, to Finland, to Malamut (a play on Alamut, site of Hassan I. Sabbah's medieval citadel in northern Iran) a fictional place on the Bulge of the west coast of Africa.

The novel features an assortment of characters. Our pot-smoking protagonist is an African American, Ulys. O. Hanson, III (or Hassan Merikani), of Ithaca, New York, whose North African ventures are sponsored by a foundation grant for a project titled "The Future of Slavery"; Hanson's intimate Moroccan pal Hamid (clearly based on Mohamed Hamri) who hails from Jajouka, accompanies him from beginning to end; Thay Himmer VII is "last White Rajah-Bishop of the Farout Islands" (124); Mya Strangleblood-Himmer, of the Barefoot Indian Tribe in Saskatoon, has inherited millions from her first husband and marries Thay, her seventh husband; there are Amos Africanus, manager of the Hotel Africanus (The Continental) in Tanja, and his twin sister Freeky Fard who wishes she had her brother's parts as well as her own; Prince Pio; Himmer's Swiss lawyer Rolf Ritterolf; and a Finn, Olaf Pesonius, Thay's Little White Reindeer. These characters relate their own stories, in their own voices, recorded on a UHER Tape recorder which Hanson (a.k.a. Hassan) carries around with him. The narrative includes parodies of Franz Fanon and Aldous Huxley, spoofs on Scientology (dubbed "grammatology"); a cameo by Gieseking, the famous pianist; mushroom-induced hallucinations; Sufi thikrs in the desert; and allusions to *The Odyssey* (Odysseus, Calypso). The narrative elements all are somehow related, it seems, to the Emerald seal of the Sahara, "Beginning and Ending of words," (126) handed over to Hanson by Himmer at the Café de Paris in Tangier bestowed on him by a sheikh in Cairo saying that it was to be given to a man not named Hassan.

The novel, which Gysin characterized as "intercultural contacts . . . and intercultural penetration" (Geiger, 228), is a fantasia of sorts, incorporating aspects of magical realism (Marquez and Rushdie) and postmodernism (along the lines of Brautigan, Pynchon, Reed, and Alfred Chester). Might it also be considered a beat novel? A less self-indulgent, funnier, more innovative version of *On the Road—On the Road in Morocco?*

In March of 1967, while Gysin was putting the final touches on *The Process*, his friend Robert Fraser showed up in Tangier with the Rolling Stones, who were enjoying immense popularity at the time. Gysin travelled with the group to Marrakech. He introduced Brian Jones of The Stones and then jazz musician Ornette Coleman to the master musicians of Jajouka. "[T]he initial promotion of their music," writes ethnomusicologist Philip Schuyler, "was, at bottom, a labor of love, the work of one man, Brion Gysin, with the help of Mohamed Hamri" (149). "Pipes of Pan" (a phrase that runs like a refrain through Burroughs' cut-up novels), Gysin's lyrical description of pagan, pre-Islamic rituals centered around the Goat god, appeared in the first issue of *Gnaoua* in 1964. The piece concludes:

> Pan leaps back on the gaggle of women with his flails. The women scream and deliver one tiny boy, wriggling and stumbling as he dances out in white drag and veil. Another bloodcurdling birth-yodel and they throw up another small boy. Pan flails them as they push out another and another until there are ten or more little boy-girls out there with Pan, shaking that thing in the moonlight. Bigger village dragstars slither out on the village green and shake it up night after night. Pan kings them all until dawn. He is the God Pan. (Weiss 124)

A kind of anthropologist, Gysin was drawn to, and at times participated in, traditional cultures that were threatened by modernity, recognizing that this music and practices accompanying it were in danger of becoming extinct.

Brion Gysin, immensely fascinating and talented, shared with the Beats a compulsion to experiment, an iconoclastic spirit, and a dedication to radical freedom. "The purpose of his art, from painting to *The Process*, was Liberation," writes Robert Palmer (Intro, *The Process* xx). Nomadic by nature, Gysin crossed borders, working in a range of media and genres, moving as he did from one mode of expression (painting) to another (writing). While we might now be in a position to recognize and appreciate his multifaceted interests—his unbridled pursuit of fresh impulses, emanating naturally from his being like spokes on a wheel, Gysin himself, especially toward the end of his life, looked back on his career with disappointment, seeing "a life of adventure, leading nowhere."[11] You should never do two things," he wrote. You should hammer one nail all your life, and I didn't do that; I hammered on a lot of nails like a xylophone."[12] In Gysin we see manifest both the perils and exhilarating possibilities of nomadism. At times, he stood in the spotlight, basking in the attention; other times he stood on the outside of the picture, looking in on the scene, snapping the shot, perhaps wishing he was visible, prominent, front and center.

Notes

1. Michael Zwerin, "Brion Gysin: The Dreamer and His Dream Machine. *Paris Metro*, Vol. 3, No. 17. August 16, 1979; cited in Geiger, p. 17.
2. Brion Gysin. *Brion Gysin/Terry Wilson, Here to Go. Planet R-101*. San Francisco: Re/Search, 1982, p. 26.

3. Joe Ambrose, "Outside Books #2, Tangier Beat Generation" https://outsideleft.com/main.php?updateID=354
4. Brion Gysin letter to W.S. Burroughs, August 28, 1985, Burroughs Communications; cited in Geiger, 305.
5. Gysin in Robert Palmer, "Rolling Stone Interviews William Burroughs," *Rolling Stone* May 11, 1972. In Allen Hibbard, *Conversations with William S. Burroughs*. Jackson: U of Mississippi Press, 1999, 67.
6. Brion Gysin, "On Painting, "Manuscript, Courtesy Theo Green/Inkblot; cited in Geiger, 123.
7. Quoted in Geiger, p. 127.
8. For a more in-depth discussion of the nature of representation in Islamic art, see Oliver Leasman, *Islamic Aesthetics: An Introduction*. Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame Press, 2004.
9. For another dovetailing account, see Burroughs' description of the method in William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, *The Third Mind*. New York: Viking, 1978. pp. 30-32)
10. In his section of *Two Assassins* (Moloko, 2023), the marvelous collaborative work with Farid Ghadami, Oliver Harris traces the deterioration of the collaborative relationship between Burroughs and Gysin from Burroughs' "Minutes to Go from Alamut" (1960) to Gysin's "A Quick Trip to Alamut" (1973). See also my discussion of the collaboration between Burroughs and Gysin in "The Collaborator: Intertextuality and Authorship," in *William S. Burroughs in Context*, ed. Oliver Harris, Davis Schneiderman and Alex Wermer-Colan. Cambridge U Press, forthcoming.
11. There exists, apparently, a 23-minute BBC recording of the poems, *The Permutation Poems of Brion Gysin*.
12. Brion Gysin. Scribbling Diary. April 7, 1985. OSU Libraries, Rare Books and Manuscripts, Burroughs Sealed Deposit; cited in Geiger 311.
13. Brion Gysin, Interview with Jean W. Ross. Nov. 9, 1984. In *Contemporary Authors.* Vol./ 117/ p.176; cited in Geiger, 311.

Works Cited

Beiles, Sinclair, et al. *Minutes to Go*. Edited with introduction by Oliver Harris. Moloko Print, 2020; originally published in 1960.

Fazzino, Jimmy. *World Beats: Beat Generation Writing and the Worlding of U.S. Literature*. Dartmouth College Press. 2016.

Geiger, John. *Nothing is True Everything is Permitted: The Life of Brion Gysin*. New York: Disinformation Co. Ltd. 2005.

Gysin, Brion. *The Process*. Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2005; first published 1967.

-----. "The Pipes of Pan," *Gnaoa*. No. 1. Issue #1. Tangier. Reprinted in Weiss, 122-124.

Palmer, Robert. "Forward," *The Process*; (vii-xxi)

-----. Rolling Stone Interview. In Allen Hibbard, ed. *Conversations with William S. Burroughs*. Jackson: U of Mississippi Press, 1999; 51-79.

Schuyler, Philip, "Joujouka/Jajouka/Zahjoukah," In *Mass Meditations: New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East and Beyond*, Ed. Walter Armbrust. Berkeley: UC Press, 2000; 146-160.

Skerl, Jennie. "Review of Books by and about Gysin." *The Beat Review*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2011, pp. 1-8.

Sobieszek, Robert A. *Ports of Entry: William S. Burroughs and the Arts*. L.A. County Museum of Art. Thames and Hudson, 1996.

Weiss. Jason, Intro. *Back in No Time: The Brion Gysin Reader*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan U Press, 2001.