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Hiddleston, Jane and Khalid Lyamlahy, eds., *Abdelkébir Khatibi: Postcolonialism, Transnationalism, and Culture in the Maghreb and Beyond*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020. xii + 401 pp. Illustrations, notes on contributors, bibliography, and index. \$130.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-78962-233-1.

Review by Imane Terhmina, Cornell University.

This edited volume is a stunning collection of thirteen essays that introduces a wider anglophone audience to the monumental oeuvre of Abdelkébir Khatibi, a key Moroccan philosopher who, as Jane Hiddleston and Khalid Lyamlahy point out in their introduction, has stayed on the relative margins of Western scholarship. The editors start by offering a biographical overview of Khatibi's life, highlighting the uneven nature of his legacy. While the thinker gathered a wide audience in the Arab world, they argue, the unavailability of English translations of his works constitutes both a symptom and a cause of his lack of recognition, an ironic fact given that Khatibi's work "inspires a conception of writing itself as translation, as an attentive process of listening as well as recreation" (p. 23). This volume offers a corrective by including, alongside the scholarly essays divided into three parts, a fourth section that features an original English translation of two excerpts from Khatibi's key works, *La Blessure du nom propre* (1974) and *Le Même livre* (1985). Yet this volume also succeeds as a work of cultural translation, one that renders Khatibi's theoretical insights legible to a contemporary audience unfamiliar with the philosopher's work.

Abdelkébir Khatibi, the bard of paradox, remains elusive to any category that seeks to lay claim on his thought: while he remained a fierce anti-colonial thinker, he also sought to transcend (post)colonial double binds, whether philosophically through his key concept of *double-critique* or formally through his aesthetic experiments that have created an oeuvre in which the boundaries between philosophical essay and poetic prose are blurred. [1] The eclectic nature of these essays is a testimony to a thinker marked by a conflicted multicultural heritage. In this regard, the title of the volume, *Abdelkébir Khatibi: Postcolonialism, Transnationalism, and Culture in the Maghreb and Beyond*, judiciously articulates the task at hand. As Lyamlahy and Hiddleston suggest, while Khatibi himself never defined his oeuvre within postcolonialism or transnationalism, it performed both paradigms to a large extent, while also highlighting their productive tensions and respective limits.

The first part features five essays that explore how Khatibi's aesthetic experimentation performs an anti-colonial process, one that seeks to transcend western categories of political belonging and the linguistic fractures they have produced. In the opening essay, Andy Stafford takes up

Khatibi's concept of the *souverainement orphelin*, which Stafford defines as a refusal to serve as the uncritical heir to either Western or Arab philosophical traditions and to seek, instead, an intellectual path that deconstructs both. Specifically, the concept is applied to Khatibi's early, leftist sociological writings. He delineates Khatibi's experimentation with both literary form and disciplinary thinking as a quest for "intellectual decolonization" (p. 53), a search for a new, emancipatory language and methodology that sought to decolonize, from within, the French sociological training he received in the early 1960s at the Sorbonne. In chapter two, Alison Rice mobilizes his concept of *l'étranger professionnel* in order to explore Khatibi's relationship to his own multilingual heritage. Rice argues that for Khatibi, language is an inherently plural construct, the product of a long historical process that integrates a culture's multiple encounters with foreign influences. This necessary, constitutive otherness that conditions the evolution of any language, allows him to transcend the conventional paradigm of the colonized intellectual that traditionally inhabits a liminal space, doubly estranged from both his native language and that of the colonizer. Instead, Khatibi sees in his multilinguistic condition an emancipatory potential, a positive errantry that culminates with his claim to define himself as a traveler who lives "a trans migratory life" (p. 69), one that remains hospitable to otherness.

In the third essay, Edwige Tamalet Talbayev delves further into Khatibi's celebration of linguistic plurality in order to excavate its Mediterranean resonance. Khatibi, she argues, has always defined the Maghreb through its historical (dis)connections with its Western counterpart, a long and ancient history that predates European colonialism. Against Derrida's exploration of his own linguistic condition, which he sees as stemming from a singular, foundational historical event (French imperialism), Khatibi emphasizes the cultural syncretism inherent in any Maghrebian language, having been constructed through its incessant contact with, and partial absorption of, multiple foreign tongues, dating back to the Roman period. His linguistic condition, then, is defined by what Talbayev terms the "fundamental, historical hybridity of Maghrebian culture" (p. 100). In chapter four, Assia Belhabib investigates Khatibi's relationship to language through the emergent globalizing forces he was faced with (which drove art production to be irremediably conditioned by market forces), reflecting on the ways the Moroccan philosopher contended with a controversial universalism. Although his strategic choice of language (French) may have optimized his visibility on the global stage, his syntactical choices and poetic images anchored him in a multicultural heritage that, at times, rendered him illegible. But this very illegibility constitutes an invitation for the reader to think through difference. Lastly, in chapter five, Alfonso de Toro reflects on the Moroccan philosopher's idiosyncratic "epistemological accent," a way of inhabiting otherness and positing it as a pre-discursive, co-constitutive element of the self. As de Toro argues, Khatibi finds "his own cultural location...[in] *translatio*" (p. 133), an act of displacement and relocation that unsettles both Western and Islamic modes of knowledge production, yielding an oeuvre that de Toro qualifies as a form of "cosmo-humanism" (p. 136).

In the second part of the volume, four essays explore crucial encounters with foreign cultures or key figures that have led the Moroccan thinker to produce a transcultural oeuvre that has attempted to think through and with otherness. In chapter six, Olivia C. Harrison illuminates Khatibi's continuous engagement with Palestine throughout his oeuvre as an example of a transcolonial praxis. For Harrison, *Vomito blanco*, his 1974 polemical essay, exemplifies his "double critique of neocolonialism and nativism" (p. 157), challenging both Zionism and Arab ethno-nationalism. Furthermore, Harrison demonstrates that through the concept of *bi-langue*, Khatibi does not just theorize his liminal linguistic position between classical Arabic, the

Moroccan dialect, and French, but also claims Hebrew, and what he deems his latent Jewishness, as part of the linguistic landscape that structures his cultural imaginary. As Harrison points out, Khatibi is “rejecting a dualistic understanding of the Israeli-Arab conflict...in favor of a deconstructive approach to the ‘madness’ of identity” (p. 161). In chapter seven, Charles Forsdick demonstrates how Khatibi paradoxically draws on Victor Ségalen, a French writer and ethnographer, in order to mediate his own thinking on difference. Khatibi’s reading of Ségalen is “sympathetic but far from sycophantic” (p. 186), as he critically engages the colonial context of Ségalen’s writings. Forsdick thus points out that Khatibi’s convergence with Ségalen operates precisely from the French writer’s own sense of alienation vis-à-vis his native French culture. Ségalen’s key concept of *l’exote*, he argues, becomes foundational to Khatibi’s concept of *l’étranger professionnel*, allowing him to define the modern function of literature as a decentering force, one that opposes official colonial histories.

In chapter eight, Combe explores the interpenetration of Khatibi and Derrida’s respective oeuvres, from their initial meeting in 1974 at the Quartier Latin in Paris to the long intellectual dialogue that gave rise to both *Amour bilingue* (1983) and *Monolingualisme de l’autre* (1996). Specifically, Combe takes up Derrida’s distinction between the *franco-maghrébin* (such as Algerian Jews), whose linguistic condition is characterized by a substitution of French to a native tongue that was lost in the experience of French colonialism, and the *écrivain maghrébin francophone*, such as Khatibi himself, who is diglossic or polyglottic, living in the interstices of dialectical Darija, classical Arabic and French. While Combe carefully investigates the respective historical conditions that gave rise to this distinction, he also contends that they converge in a paradigmatic Franco-Maghrebian figure, characterized in both cases by a foundational linguistic loss. Combe thus echoes, indirectly, Harrison’s reading of Khatibian thought as chiefly concerned with deconstructing the Jewish and Arab identitarian deadlock, offering a theoretical concept that unites them both in the French postcolonial context. Finally, in chapter nine, Nao Sawada analyses two brief texts by Khatibi on the Japanese writer Jun’ichirō Tanizaki: *Ombres japonaises* (1988) and “Tanizaki revisité,” published in volume III of *Oeuvres de Abdelkébir Khatibi* (2008). Here again, Nao Sawada shows how Khatibi engages modes of encounters with otherness that reject exoticization, and suggests that the Japanese “play of shadow and light” (p. 224) inspired Khatibi’s notion of *enténébrement*, which seeks to challenge the systematic association, in the Western tradition, of light with positive moral values and epistemologies.

Part three of this volume features four essays that highlight Khatibi’s exploration of Berber practices, Islamic motifs, and Eastern philosophies in his oeuvre, in order to rethink the nature and function of the sign. In chapter ten, Rim Feriani, Jasmina Bolfeck-Radovani and Debra Kelly take up Khatibi’s concept of intersemiotics, the “migrant signs which move between one sign system and another” (pp. 237-238). Specifically, they evoke the ways in which he draws on two motifs, Berber tattoos and the function of visions in Sufi mysticism in his early autobiographical work, *La Mémoire tatouée* (1971), and reinscribes them. Fundamentally, they argue, Khatibi’s notion of a “semiotic wandering” (p. 243) resists a structuralist approach that privileges a fixed, overdetermined reading of signs, in favor of a new theory that emphasizes the sign’s prismatic nature, its ability to shift meaning as it is refracted through different sign systems. In chapter eleven, Lucy Stone McNeece references Lewis Carroll’s dreamworld, the “other side of the mirror,” in order to tease out the “uncanny intuition” that drives Khatibi’s writing (p. 267), as well as “the subversive epistemological games and reversals” that govern his aesthetics (p. 262). Specifically, she traces the way Khatibi draws on esoteric, Asian (Tao and Buddhist), and mystical traditions in order to interrogate various concepts that have founded the Western approach to

literature, such as authorship, the relationship between the subject and its other, the cyclical nature of History, and the cognitive, cultural, and narrative functions of memory. Fundamentally, the author argues that Khatibi's relationship to the sign, be it written, ideographic, architectural, or decorative, echoes "traditions in which the sign retains its spiritual redolence and polysemic force" (p. 269).

In chapter twelve, Khalid Lyamlahy offers us a fascinating study of Khatibi's treatment of a paradigmatic Moroccan cultural artefact: the traditional carpet. Drawing primarily from Khatibi's art book collaboration with Moroccan anthropologist Ali Amahan, *Du signe à l'image: le tapis marocain* (1995), Lyamlahy explores first how the Moroccan carpet becomes, for Khatibi, the starting point of a decolonial praxis, a will to "restore [the] theoretical dignity" of ancestral indigenous practices (pp. 281-282). Most crucially, Lyamlahy argues that weaving acquires a semiotic and epistemological status in Khatibian thought: on the one hand, the palimpsestic character of the Moroccan carpet, he argues, exemplifies Khatibi's concept of the "intersemiotic surface," the ability of an aesthetic object (in this case, the carpet) to borrow and juxtapose different cultural motifs in order to create a hybrid system of signs. In this case, the carpet borrows both Berber pictograms, such as traditional tattoos, and Arabic symbols that co-inhabit in the carpet's design. On the other hand, the material, cultural and symbolic syncretism displayed by Moroccan rugs becomes a fitting metaphor for Khatibi's genre-bending, multicultural and pluralistic oeuvre. Last but not least, in the closing essay, Jane Hiddleston analyzes one of Khatibi's last works, *Pèlerinage d'un artiste amoureux* (2003). Harnessing the thematic recurrence of the traveler in Khatibi's oeuvre, Hiddleston points to the ways in which signs themselves become a journey that unravels meaning, allowing Khatibi to continuously defamiliarize the sign in order to awaken its potentialities of signification. He severs a sign from its habitual referent in order to awaken its potentialities of signification, for instance, by employing it in ways that contradict its original meaning or are removed from its habitual cultural context. For Hiddleston, the figure of the traveler allows a transcultural ethics to emerge, one she sees at play in his correspondence with Egyptian Jewish psychoanalyst Jacques Hassoun, published as *Le Même livre* (1985). She reads their interfaith dialogue as a testimony to Khatibi's lifelong commitment to illuminate the cultural and historical affinity between Islam and Judaism, an anti-colonial project that attempts to re-establish an ancient, intercultural exchange interrupted by European colonialism.

This edited volume, which rehabilitates Abdelkébir Khatibi on the international stage, also fuels a growing body of scholarship which has sought to illuminate the circle of Moroccan poets and writers that formed an aesthetic-political avant-garde in the 1960s, at a time when the newly-independent country was still negotiating its nation-building myths. Figures such as Abdellatif Laâbi and Mohammed Khair-Eddine, famously known for founding the left-leaning experimental review *Souffles/Anfas* in 1966, have since largely been forgotten, until the recent wave of translations has sought to restore them to their rightful place in the literary canon.^[2] Furthermore, this collection contributes to a broader effort to reassess Maghrebi literature and culture beyond the postcolonial turn, in order to interrogate the historical construction of the Maghreb as an identarian, geopolitical, and cultural category.

In particular, a number of scholars are challenging narrow approaches that have tended to consider European colonization as the main foundational event in the region's history, one that still divides the Maghreb between a pre- and post-colonial region, between "tradition" and "modernity," between a Western and an Oriental binary. Instead, recent studies have sought to

uncover the multi-layered histories of political conquests, cultural influences, and commercial trading routes that have shaped the region's rich heritage. Achille Mbembe, for instance, reinscribes it within a vision of the African continent as a forum of commercial and cultural exchanges, leading him to assert Afropolitanism as a constitutive historical process, rather than an effect of postcolonial globalizing forces.[3] M'hamed Oualdi, among others, highlights the legacy of the trans-Saharan slave trade in defining the region, therefore drawing attention to the play of alliances and violence that reestablish the Maghreb within its continental history.[4] Edwige Tamalet Talbayev's body of work considers how the region is reinscribed within the broader Mediterranean, understood both as a material and an imaginary space that de-centers national forms of belonging.[5] Finally, the emerging body of scholarship on Indian Ocean literature and culture reminds us of the complex transcontinental history of exchanges that generated unstable, transregional maps of identity, thereby interrogating the systematic association of Islam, the Maghreb, and Arabness.[6] Reading Abdelkébir Khatibi in this global context becomes particularly pertinent, since he constituted a prophetic voice that championed a multi-directional and polycentric history of the region, as he sought, in the words of Hiddleston and Lyamlahy, to "ope[n] the Maghrebian self to a strategic and shifting dialogue with difference" (p. 12).

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“Excerpts from Abdelkébir Khatibi and Jacques Hassoun, *Le Même livre*” (Paris: Editions de l’Eclat, 1985)

NOTES

[1] “*Double-critique*” is Khatibi’s attempt to be critical of both western neo-imperialism and claims to an “authentic” pre-colonial identity, thus transcending postcolonial dualities.

[2] See, for instance, the English translations of Abdellatif Laâbi’s works: *The Rule of Barbarism*, trans. by André Naffis-Sahely (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Archipelago books, 2012); *The Bottom of the Jar*, trans. by André Naffis-Sahely (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Archipelago Books, 2013); and *In Praise of Defeat: Selected Poems*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Archipelago Books, 2016). See also the English translations of Mohammed Khaïr-Eddine’s works: *Scorpionic Sun*, trans. by Conor Bracken (Cleveland, Ohio: Cleveland State University Poetry Center, 2019); and *Agadir*, trans. by Pierre Joris and Jake Syersak (Columbia, S.C.: Diálogos, 2020). Finally, see: Olivia C. Harrison and Teresa Villa-Ignacio, eds. *Souffles-Anfas: A Critical Anthology from the Moroccan Journal of Culture and Politics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).

[3] Achille Mbembe, “Afropolitanisme,” *Africultures* 66 (2006): 9-15.

[4] M’hamed Oualdi, *A Slave between Empires: A Transimperial History of North Africa* (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 2020).

[5] Edwige Tamalet Talbayev, *The Transcontinental Maghreb: Francophone Literature across the Mediterranean*, (New York, N.Y.: Fordham University Press, 2017).

[6] Peter Hawkins, *The Other Hybrid Archipelago: Introduction to the Literatures and Cultures of the Francophone Indian Ocean: A Brief History with Documents* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2007); Omar H. Ali, *Islam in the Indian Ocean World* (Boston, Mass.: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2016); Michael

C. Low, *Imperial Mecca: Ottoman Arabia and the Indian Ocean Hajj* (New York, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 2020).

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