Theories and Methodologies

Postcolonial Tattoos as Mnemonic Inscriptions

CHARLES FORSDICK

On 23 April 2017, the first round of the French presidential election led to a run-off between Emmanuel Macron, leader of the centrist party La République En Marche!, and the far-right politician Marine Le Pen. In response on the following day, on 24 April, an actor walked around the Place de la République in Paris with his body covered in tattoos.[1] These depicted racist insults recorded by the Conseil Représentatif des Associations Noires de France, a group of associations in France representing people of African descent. This protest, entitled "the human billboard," deployed tattooed words and images as a way of reflecting on everyday racism in the country. Inscribed—albeit in this case temporarily—on an actor's skin, the tattoos revealed the ambivalent status of this ancient form of body modification when considered in a postcolonial frame. In the background of films that document this protest, council workers remove graffiti, both anti–Le Pen and anti-Macron, from the Monument à la République, which stands in the center of the square, a reminder of the extent to which the politically polarized context of the election—the so-called *lepénisation* of France—suggested the country's troubled and incomplete negotiation of its own postcoloniality. The tattoo is situated, as this intervention suggests, between the oppressive and the transgressive, the precolonial and the postcolonial, the aesthetic and the anthropological, the ancient and the hypercontemporary. Although the campaign was associated with a social media hashtag, #jeffaceleracisme ("#ieraseracism"), the tattoo lends itself also to discussions of the powerful persistence or even indelibility of traces of the past. The human billboard was a reminder of the ways in which tattooing, along with other forms of corporeal modification such as branding, was closely associated with the oppressively racialized practices of the transatlantic traffic in enslaved Africans. At the same time, however, the inscriptions on the actor's

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PMLA 137.2 (2022), doi:10.1632/S0030812922000219

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812922000219 Published online by Cambridge University Press

body clearly harnessed contemporary interest in skin art, a revisiting of precolonial practices, translated in particular from a South Pacific context, that have gained increasing popularity since the 1990s and have often recovered, as Margo DeMello makes clear in *Bodies of Inscription* (2000), their potential as a source of contestation.

In an article on tattooing and postcolonial critical practice, Mandy Treagus deploys Sia Fiegel's novel *They Who Do Not Grieve* (1999) and Lee Tamahori's film *Once Were Warriors* (1994) to discuss such questions of cultural persistence and resistance in contemporary indigenous societies in Samoa and New Zealand. In her analysis, the tattoo serves as a "model for viewing postcolonial culture that sees it as a dynamic living entity in which individuals encounter both oppression and agency" (185). As such, bridging precontact past and neocolonial present, tattooing becomes a means of deflecting essentializing efforts to project an "authentic" indigenous culture, urgent evidence in the process of an "assertion of agency which cultivates individual and community well-being and pride" (190). Discussing Polynesian tattoos, Julia Frengs similarly detects in the form symbolism of being "between two worlds" (164), historical as well as (in interarchipelagic and global terms) geocultural. She concludes, "[T]he tattoo, a fixed, permanent marking, inscribes not only an identity, but also an itinerary, a route, a journey, on its bearer" (164). Developing the work of the Samoan author Albert Wendt, Frengs understands francophone postcolonial literature from the Pacific as a form of "new tattoo" (165), culturally located but shaped by its multiple interconnections, offering the potential to "explore and reimagine Oceanian history, identities, and literatures outside of Western epistemological and theoretical parameters" (166).

Treagus and Frengs are notable critical exceptions to the tendency for postcolonialism to ignore tattooing as a form of writing or as a broader semiotic system that intersects with other types of inscription. The significance of tattoos is evident, however, in a francophone context across the work of Victor Segalen and Abdelkébir Khatibi. It might even be argued that the transhistorical dialogue linking their work is rooted from the outset in an interrogation of this cultural form, the importance of which is highlighted by their complex intertextual encounters. These connections illuminate the global dimensions of the tattoo, reflecting Western fascination with the practice (evident since James Cook first deployed the term *tatau* in his travel writing in the second half of the eighteenth century) and linking its manifestations in diverse contexts, notably Polynesia and the Maghreb. (Johann Reinhold Forster, who participated in Cook's second voyage, was the first to explore parallels between the Pacific and other cultural contexts.)[2]

The convergence between, on the one hand, the early-twentieth-century naval doctor and theorist of the exotic and, on the other, the Moroccan novelist and sociologist is an unexpected one, although Segalen features prominently among the substantial corpus of French writers with whom Khatibi engaged throughout his career. Segalen's *exote* is often seen as a precursor to the figure of the *étranger professionnel* ("professional stranger/foreigner") whom Khatibi explores through his novels and essays, and links between other concepts on which their respective oeuvres rest are clear.[3] In elaborating such a genealogy, *Figures de l'étranger dans la littérature française* (*Figures of the Stranger/Foreigner in French Literature* [1987]) constitutes a key intervention in which Khatibi draws on Segalen's wider oeuvre to demonstrate how his writings are precursory to literary modernity and the ambivalence of much postcolonial thought, evidence as such of a Western colonial solipsism that nevertheless "déstabilise cet européocentrisme et cette image d'autosuffisance" ("destabilizes this Eurocentrism and this image of self-sufficiency"; 158).[4] Although much of *Figures de l'étranger* focuses on Segalen's Chinese writings (notably *Équipée* [*Journey to the Land of the Real*] and *Stèles* [*Stelae*]), the essay also addresses the earlier Polynesian cycle of works and in particular the first text by Segalen that Khatibi read, in the 1950s, the 1907 ethnographic novel *Les immémoriaux* (*A Lapse of Memory*). Segalen's work is analyzed by Khatibi as an account of cultural forgetting, a critique of the myth of the noble savage that shows the

https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812922000219 Published online by Cambridge University Press

protagonist Térii becoming an ethnographer of the Western colonizer who then deploys the knowledge he acquires to negotiate his own place in post-impact society.

Khatibi's first encounter with the text is described in *La mémoire tatouée* (*Tattooed Memory* [1971]), specifically in an account of the narrator's experiences at the Lycée Lyautey in Casablanca, where his literature teacher hands him a copy of *Les immémoriaux*. Through engagement with the Tahitian novel, Khatibi focuses on his emerging consciousness of the cultural alienation his own colonial education triggers: "Le professeur de littérature devina le jeu. Il m'aida. Quand il expliquait Segalen en insistant sur la mort des cultures, je savais qu'il me donnait des armes" ("The literature professor figured out my game. He helped me. While he was explaining Segalen and insisting on the death of cultures, I knew he was arming me"; *La mémoire tatouée* 71; *Tattooed Memory* 91). The impact of this early-twentieth-century text on *La mémoire tatouée* is apparent, not least because the term *immémorial* recurs throughout Khatibi's novel as the work tracks the dynamics of remembering and forgetting in a Moroccan culture progressively subject to the violence of French colonial domination. Equally important, however, is the notion of "tattooed memory" foregrounded in its title, a clear allusion to a key element of *Les immémoriaux*—that is, the paradoxical role of tattoos as a repository of Polynesian culture and memory but also as a reflection of that culture's degradation in the wake of the violence of colonial contact. The role of tattooing in Segalen's novel was underlined in the 1956 Terre humaine republication of the work, which, unlike the original 1907 edition, featured extensive illustrations, a number of which show the diverse range of types of tattoos in Polynesian culture. The series editor, Jean Malaurie, actively located the work in an anthropological frame, which facilitated the decolonizing reading to which Khatibi himself alludes.

Following Khatibi's initial textual encounter with Segalen, the meanings of tattooing in Moroccan culture and beyond would become a recurrent reference in his work. The most sustained engagement occurs in his 1974 collection of essays on intersemiotic systems, *La blessure du nom propre* (*The Wound of the Proper Name*). In the book Khatibi focuses, in anthropological terms, on accumulated tattoos as biological markers or traces of passage rites, but his primary interest is in including tattoos in a series of cultural forms—textual, material, and intangible—that permit study of how signs move between systems to create multiple meanings. Such a notion of semiotic migration is central also to Segalen's reflection on Polynesian cultures in *Les immémoriaux*, in the case of which established indigenous sign systems are replaced by European writing (exemplified on this occasion by the Bible). As such, in a very clear example of what Khatibi would dub the "double critique" (*Maghreb pluriel*), Tahitian intersemiotics resonate with the aspects of Moroccan culture that he foregrounds: namely, the way in which calligraphy associated with Islamic decorative art—evidence of "la clôture logographique" ("logographic closure"; *La blessure* 20)—eclipses the semiologies of other, more popular, systems, including that of tattooing. In a context very different from the one described by Segalen, monotheism again marginalizes forms seen as more popular, with the result that Khatibi seeks to revalidate the practices of tattooing, especially in the chapter "Tatouage: Écriture en points" ("Tattooing: Text in Dots").[5] Here, as the title suggests, inking the body is presented as a form of writing in its own right, a rejection of graphocentric emphases that permits new understandings of signs in mobile, multimodal ways. In outlining this critique, Khatibi seeks to destabilize the cultural hierarchies in Morocco that have downgraded the significance of the tattoo, even associating it (as had been the case in Polynesia) with religious interdictions. Khatibi's interest is in the cultural practices (and perceptions of them) in postindependence Morocco, but *La blessure du nom propre* foregrounds the Polynesian etymology of *tatouage*, reminding its readers that the word is drawn from the Tahitian and Samoan term *tatau*, meaning a mark drawn on the skin (72). For Khatibi, tattooing is recovered from its association with humiliation, notably in the contexts of incarceration or

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deportation. His interest is in the anthropology of the practice, evident in his study of the subtle corporeality of tattooing, reflected in those personal and collective idiolects that locate the tattoo between the social and the aesthetic, but also in his emphasis on the overtly gendered nature of skin art in its Moroccan context.

Khatibi acknowledges the ways in which the religious disapproval of tattooing is complemented by the impact of Western colonization on the practice. The tattoo is thus seen as a firmly indigenous form, but one also located in a transnational network of practices of body modification. While the term's Polynesian roots are noted, these are primarily etymological, for tattooing takes multiple forms in multiple contexts. This reflects an interest in accessing nonverbal sign systems in cultures other than his own as Khatibi focuses, for instance, on the intersemiotic dimensions of the work of the Japanese writer Junichiró Tanizaki, with whom he shares a fascination with the tattoo.[6] *Irezumi* is the complex art of tattooing in Japan, the understanding of flesh as a form of canvas and skin art as a means of clothing the body (Brain 62–66). The practice, as in the Pacific, has in certain periods been subject to social prohibitions, with tattooed bodies associated with marginalized classes or seen as a mark of ostracism. In the essay "Tanizaki revisité" ("Tanizaki Revisted"), Khatibi explores one of his subject's short stories, "The Tattooer" (translated into French as "Le tatouage"), which allows him to reflect on the gendered nature of this form of body modification, the ways in which the skin can itself become a site of inscription, a "lieu de langage, trace et palimpseste" ("place of language, trace, and palimpsest"; 227). The young female protagonist of Tanizaki's story is a geisha on whose back is tattooed, seemingly against her will, a giant spider that makes manifest an aspect of her identity previously hidden from her, her power over men.

This broad reflection on tattoos across Khatibi's essays is complemented by his engagement with the form in the autobiographical novel *La mémoire tatouée*. The text is the most compelling illustration, in terms of both practical observation and figurative allusion, of the author's long-standing interest in tattooing in Moroccan culture. The privileging of the tattoo from the title onward makes a clear case for the status of remembering as both a sensory and an intersemiotic process—an illustration, in Lucy Stone McNeece's terms, of "the degree to which memory is not cognitive but corporeal, sensuous and indelible" (13). In the dialogue with which *La mémoire tatouée* closes, the primacy of the form in the mnemonic processes to which the title alludes is underlined: "que le tatouage—premier signe—m'initie à me souvenir" ("may tattooing—the first sign—initiate me into memory"; *La mémoire* 111; *Tattooed Memory* 152). The central critical task performed in *La blessure du nom propre* is presented as that of decipherment, understanding the language of the tattoo in terms of discerning "une correspondance entre la composition grammaticale et la composition géométrique" ("a correspondence between grammatical and geometrical structures; 117). *La mémoire tatouée* complements this focus on the different dimensions of these entangled semiotic and mnemonic systems by adopting a palimpsestic approach, revealing an overlaying, interweaving, and entanglement of French and Moroccan cultures, languages, histories, and belief systems. Writing about memory is equated in this way with "a 'tattooed' body of text guided by the rhythm of signs and following the movement of 'migrant symbols'" (Feriani et al. 250). Reading the tattoo becomes central to the decolonization embedded in the text's subtitle: "autobiographie d'un décolonisé" ("autobiography of a decolonized subject"). While Khatibi describes the active silencing and even erasure of the culture and identity of the colonized under colonial rule, *La mémoire tatouée* provides evidence of the persistence of these phenomena in sublimated forms, present even in the language of the colonizer in which the text is written. The tattoo, which surfaces regularly during the text as an indication of early memories (relating not least to women and the emergence of desire), indicates alternative systems of inscription that coexist with the French language in which the author expresses himself: "le tatouage," notes Khatibi, "a l'exceptionnel privilège de me préserver" ("tattooing has the exceptional privilege of preserving me"; *La mémoire* 16; *Tattooed Memory* 17).

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The role of Segalen in Khatibi's formulation of such a sustained body of thought on tattooing forms part of a broader pattern evident in the postcolonial consumption of colonial culture. In a 1989 interview with Jean Scemla, Khatibi claimed, "Il faut s'éloigner de Segalen tout en le mangeant, c'est-à-dire en l'absorbant magiquement" ("You must distance yourself from Segalen while consuming him—that is, while absorbing him magically"; "Entretien" 10). Works such as *La mémoire tatouée* and *La blessure du nom propre* demonstrate how Khatibi absorbs reflections on tattoos in *Les immémoriaux* and translates them into the context of later-twentieth-century Morocco. The impact of Segalen's novel on Khatibi is evident, for instance, in the opening emphasis in *La mémoire tatouée* on the ruptures caused by colonial contact, seen in "la déchirure nominale" ("the name's rending"; 13; *Tattooed Memory* 13) or on the emergence of "une généalogie de plus en plus déchirée" ("a more and more broken genealogy"; 16; 15). Both texts open with the nighttime intonation of voices rooted in ancestral tradition: Khatibi recalls how "se récitait, la nuit, la voix penchée, à la limite de la stridence, de ma grand-mère" ("the leaning voice of my grandmother recited, at night, new heights of stridency"; 15; 15); in *Les immémoriaux*, Segalen describes "les beaux parlers originels" ("the fine ancient stories"; 9; *Lapse* 25) recited by the Tahitian priests, or *haèré-po*, guardians of the community memory. As suggested already, Segalen's title also provides a leitmotif in Khatibi's text: the young narrator's father becomes "une parole immémoriale" ("immemorial speech"; *La mémoire* 19; *Tattooed Memory* 21), and this adjective recurs throughout the text, reminding the reader of the ambiguities of its etymology, alluding to a distant origin (and hence rootedness in the past) but at the same time implying an amnesia about this origin (it's telling that the English translation of Segalen's novel is *A Lapse of Memory*).

Les immémoriaux is an account of the progressive colonization of Térii, Segalen's protagonist, and by extension that of broader Tahitian culture. Térii is an opportunist for whom the arrival of European missionaries provides a chance to rebuild his social status following the stumbling over the recitation of genealogies with which the text opens. Central to these transformations is the shift from a preliterate culture to a literacy grounded in Christian scripture, but Segalen focuses at the same time on existing systems of memory transfer central to Polynesian civilization, including those of the tattoo that plays a key role throughout the text as its meanings change radically in a context of rapid colonization. Térii is identified, for instance, by "le cercle de tatu bleuâtre incrusté sur la cheville gauche" ("the bluish circle tattooed into his left ankle"; *Les immémoriaux* 11; *Lapse* 27), evidence of his progression in the sacred hierarchy as he aims to become one of the senior priests, the "Douze à la jambe-tatouée" ("Twelve-with-the-tattooed-leg"). The accumulation of knowledge and status is reflected in the acquisition of additional body tattoos, body adornment becoming—notably, in a Marquesan context—a form of protection or even "visual armour" (Gell 189–90). Tattooing operates thus as a personal and collective practice, providing corporeal traces of what Makiko Kuwahara calls "a biography and history of the person . . . what the person did, what s/he is doing, and what s/he is going to do" (*Tattoo* 18), but also allowing individuals to incorporate shared history into their own narratives. In his anthropological study of tattooing, Kuwahara underlines the mnemonic functions of such an understanding: "tattooing represents a desire for stabilization and configuration of the self in a certain moment of time, and deals with the past, memory and souvenir. Remembering is considered as mental practice, using the mind and brain, but we also often use other ways . . . to capture the past. Tattooing is another way of remembering" (17). For both Segalen and Khatibi, the tattoo fulfils this function, but it is also emblematic of the (dis)continuities that emerge in contexts of colonization and decolonization.

The role of the tattoo in *Les immémoriaux* has been little studied, with attention directed more by critics to the representation of emergent writing systems in the text (Dollé) or the ways in which Segalen achieves a French inflected by traces of the Tahitian language (Coldrey). Tattooing is nevertheless central to the ethnographic novel, reflecting not least the prominence of the practice—"embedded in a social

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system, with which cosmology and religion were closely integrated" (Kuwahara, *Tattoo* 32)—in the historical sources on which Segalen drew. Térii's flaw is to ignore the potential of the tattoo as a vehicle for retaining community memory and tradition as he becomes enthralled by what he sees as the power of European writing systems, themselves understood nevertheless in relation to this indigenous form of inscription as "de petits signes tatoués sur des feuilles blanches" ("little marks tattooed onto white leaves"; Segalen, *Les immémoriaux* 25; Segalen, *Lapse* 35). Tattooing plays such a key role in Segalen's presentation of Tahitian culture that the Western sailors and missionaries are described in terms of their pasty, unadorned bodies: "les hommes à peau blême" ("pale-skins"; 23; 34).

The novel pivots around a twenty-year quest by Térii and his master (and undoubtedly father) Paofaï for "le parler ancien" ("the ancient words"; 113; 103), evidence of indigenous systems for retaining knowledge that would compete with the writing of the European colonizer. On Easter Island, they discover tablets inscribed with characters, and this inscription is again understood as a form of tattooing on wooden surfaces, but on their return to Tahiti, they encounter a culture rapidly changed through a process of evangelization. A major indication of this transformation is evident in attitudes toward the body, including sexual prohibitions reflected in the adoption of the loose-fitting clothing imposed by the missionaries. For the caste of priests known as *ari'i*, their decorated bodies had served as offerings to the god of war, Oro, with tattooing "creating a second layer of skin" (Kuwahara, *Tattoo* 41). It is not just nakedness or traces of outlines of the body that become a source of the newly inculcated emotion of shame, but also the marks tattooed on the skin themselves. Most of them, on the chest, arms, and legs, were now covered, but Térii sees a man punished for his failure to engage with the missionaries by having "une marque ignoble tatouée sur son front" ("an ugly mark tattooed on his forehead"; Segalen, *Les immémoriaux* 172; Segalen, *Lapse* 148). By the end of the novel, the historic tattoos that had previously been marks of authority and social prestige indicate instead divergence from the new colonial status quo. "A whole body of art," notes Robert Brain, "had disappeared within a generation of the arrival of Christianity" (55). *Tatouage volontaire* ("voluntary tattooing") joined adultery, bigamy, and drunkenness in a series of crimes proscribed by the religious authorities.[7] The Bible—described as "ces feuillets blancs tatoués de noir" ("these white leaves tattooed with black"; Segalen, *Les immémoriaux* 187; Segalen, *Lapse* 159)—is understood still in terms of tattooing, but Paofaï warns Térii (now christened with a biblical name, Iakoba) that "les signes Piritané ou n'importe quels autres ne sont pas bons pour nous" ("neither the Piritane signs nor any others are good for us"; 199; 169). Segalen captures in the novel through this discussion of tattoos the imposition of a "'civilized' body" by the missionaries, part of a shift from a "social hierarchy based on genealogical closeness to Tahitian gods" to a "new colonial regime" (Kuwahara, *Tattoo* 16).

Like *La mémoire tatouée*, another account of the erasure of indigenous culture and the growing dominance of colonial power, Segalen's novel ends with a sense of the possible residual presence of Polynesian culture. It is striking that the tattoo has since the 1980s played a prominent role in the cultural revitalization of the Pacific (Kuwahara, "Multiple Skins"). McNeece notes, "If colonization involves the appropriation and fixing of the signs of another culture within one's own, then decolonization demands the liberation of the sign" (28). Whereas Segalen explores, through the tattoo, the active prohibition of indigenous cultures by Western missionaries in the evangelization of Polynesian culture, Khatibi outlines a more subtle process of double critique as European systems of knowledge are complemented by more local hierarchies of calligraphocentric cultural practice in the marginalization of popular practices such as tattooing. In both cases, the residual presence and power of the tattoo remain. Khatibi's anthropological interest in the practice in *La blessure du nom propre* reflected a broader commitment to discerning the persistence of indigenous cultural procedures and forms in colonized contexts, and the essential role of the recovery of intersemiotic complexity in processes of decolonization. Segalen's description of the colonization of Polynesian culture

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seems more definitive, but the tattoo—proscribed and driven underground—remains one of a number of practices associated with mnemonic continuity that are transmitted despite missionary prohibition, suggesting the presence of a cultural opacity that Édouard Glissant (another close reader of Segalen) would detect in his work (11–13). In both cases, the tattoo has the potential to become a source of continued contestation, a tool for decolonization in a context where "forms specifically resistant to the new order" will emerge (Thomas 25).

Notes

1. For details of the protest, see *J'efface*.

2. Thomas explores this comparative approach (14).

3. Forsdick provides a detailed overview of the links between Segalen and Khatibi.

4. Unattributed translations are mine.

5. An English translation of this chapter is published for the first time in this issue of *PMLA*.

6. Sawada provides a comprehensive overview of the role of Japan in Khatibi's work.

7. D'Alleva discusses links between tattooing and the evangelization of the Pacific.

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