THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Khatibi, Now

YASSER ELHARIRY AND MATT REECK

Supple Bodies

We devalue the commonplace in our quests for novelty and newness. What could be more cliché? A stitch in time. An ounce of prevention. Don't count your chickens. Silver linings. We don't finish the proverb . . . we think we know how it ends, what it means. But as the Moroccan thinker and writer Abdelkébir Khatibi (1938–2009) would quip, without missing a beat, proverbs work through reiterative diffusion. They represent a "forme signifiante rendue à la propriété communautaire" ("signifying form rendered communal property"; "Le discours" 40),[1] which leads to "le décentrement" ("the decentering" 40) of the enunciating subject, an emptying antilingual stubbornness (33), intertextual neutralization (34), a "désappropriation" ("disappropriation") of language (40). These startling, fresh conclusions about the sociological, aesthetic, and philosophical aspects of proverbs exemplify Khatibi's disruptive attention to the verbal (and social) normalizations of our lives. The alacrity of such iconoclastic, deconstructive attentiveness forms one thread of his multifaceted intellectual character, and this special feature seeks to bring his unclassifiable—frequently unsettling, even uprooting—writings to a broader audience beyond francophone studies, where he is most read.

Khatibi's singular visions cut across language, art, literature, culture, and history, all of which he writes about while occupying an all-encompassing mode of transhistorical and translingual awareness, the kind described by Édouard Glissant as how "je parle et surtout j'écris en présence de toutes les langues du monde" ("I speak and above all I write in the presence of all the world's languages"; *Introduction* [1996] 39; *Introduction* [2020] 23). Like Glissant, Khatibi lived in the constant pursuit of an intellectual dream that, though set against the backdrop of the violent histories of colonialism and postcolonialism, nevertheless sought to mutate the

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immutable into a syncretic blend of his double "francoarab" (elhariry) and multiple (North African, Japanese, Chinese, Nordic) genealogies. When in his essay "L'autre exil occidental" ("The Other Occidental Exile") Khatibi's Tunisian contemporary Abdelwahab Meddeb wonders about how and why his own life has been defined by the perduring condition of exile's headlong rush toward global cultural syncretism, his statements mirror Khatibi's penchant for defining the self through intercultural heterogeneity: "Par quelle audace m'autoriserais-je de mêler des références appartenant à des civilisations si éloignées? Le mélange n'est-il pas déjà en moi? L'hétérogène qui me constitue sécrète une substance qui dissout les séparations héritées par l'histoire. L'homme de l'exil est celui qui traverse les frontières les mieux gardées" ("What audacity allows me to blend references that belong to such distant civilizations? Isn't the mixture already inside me? The heterogenous that constitutes me secretes a substance that eats away at the separations inherited from history. The exile is the one who crosses the most fiercely guarded frontiers"; 37).

Save for his years at the Sorbonne studying for his PhD in sociology, Khatibi spent his entire life in Morocco. Yet, he is frequently cast as an intellectual exile. Edward Said casually dismissed him as a sort of "derivative Derrida" (Reeck x), though the comment may well reflect more the stakes (and prejudices) of American Francophilia than it points to any critical engagement worth noting. The upshot? Khatibi never quite made the North American academic rounds like his frequent interlocutors Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Abdelwahab Meddeb (or, for that matter, the cut for *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*). No doubt, the lingual density, aperiodicity, and heterogeneity of his writings, as well as his choices of subject matter have presented obstacles for Khatibi in earning the steadfast American readership that he deserves, and that we deserve as scholars, thinkers, and writers.

Rare moments, specific relationships, mark Khatibi's life in the American university. His conversations with Glissant at Louisiana State University in 1992, which inspired Derrida's *Le monolinguisme de l'autre* (*Monolingualism of the Other* [1996]). His relationship with Samuel Weber, evoked in Brian Edwards's essay here. His visit to Northwestern University in 2007. Richard Howard's 1990 translation of *Amour bilingue* (*Love in Two Languages* [1983]) would seem to have been the first transatlantic sighting of Khatibi in the North American literary scene. In the 1990s and early 2000s, photocopies of photocopies, always of obfuscated origins, of Khatibi's texts circulated in our seminar rooms in French graduate school, never unaccompanied by perplexity as to what, exactly, to make of them. They were penetrating, but their density, provenance, and iconoclastic idiom made teaching and receiving them an uncertain enterprise. Khatibi's protracted infiltration of literary studies, and slow, haphazard availability in English (three more titles have followed the first) reflect the asymmetrical power relationships inherent to the international circulation, reception, and translation of new and unsettling writing that refuses to fit the mold. The East Coast Francophone School of the 1990s–2010s (Maryse Condé, Assia Djebar, Glissant, Abdellah Taïa, Meddeb) benefited from consistent institutional backing in the form of professorships and residences, as well as from the high regard, friendships, and support of critics and translators themselves. Khatibi, not so much. Word has it that he wanted all of his work translated by one press in their totality—rarely the fate of any author, and certainly not the case of francophone authors making their way into English.

Tides turn. In 2020, shortly after the ten-year anniversary of Khatibi's death, two of our contributors, Jane Hiddleston and Khalid Lyamlahy, edited the first book-length collection in English dedicated solely to his literary and theoretical contributions. The essays collected here extend that work, redirecting perspectives on Khatibi into new territory, and along increasingly critical, theoretical, and intersemiotic sightlines. As the essays demonstrate, and as his piercing attention and his incisive adjustment to the idiomatic flattening and discursive emptying of proverbs make clear, Khatibi's protean corpus is deeply informed by his professional training as a sociologist (Stafford) but also as a transversal

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intersemiotician. Khatibi's essay on proverbs, "Le discours parémiologique" ("Paroemiological Discourse"), which appeared in 1974 as part of his landmark first collection of essays, *La blessure du nom propre* (*The Wound of the Proper Name*), quotes the 1963 edition of Roman Jakobson's *Essais de linguistique générale* (*Essays on General Linguistics*). This citation allows him to draw on Jakobson's notion of the intersemiotic, and to dwell on the possibility of what Jakobson called "la transposition créatrice" ("creative transposition"; qtd. in Khatibi, "Le discours" 45) not only in literary translation but, more importantly, in criticism and essayistic writing. Such intersemiotic "creative transposition" is central to Khatibi's working methods, whether as a sociologist, essayist, experimental novelist, or on-and-off poet. Indeed, in this short but stunning analysis of proverbs, Khatibi's references are vast and heteroclite: the footnotes alone establish a theoretical framework that encompasses (in order of appearance) Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Zakariyyāʾ al-Rāzī, Louis Massignon, Jacques Lacan, Denis Vasse, Jean Starobinski on Ferdinand de Saussure, E. K. Maranda, crime novels, Algirdas Julien Greimas, George B. Milner, Derrida, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jakobson, Walter Benjamin, Claude Lévi-Strauss, al-Jāḥiẓ, and Georges Bataille.

The transversal, intersemiotic entwinement of Khatibi's intellectual and essayistic exiles and wanderings in "Le discours parémiologique" underscores a number of theoretical "knots" that postcolonialism has long strived to "slip" (Walker). In addition to the explosive (though usual) conjugations of race, gender, and identity, Khatibi is haunted by bodies and the body, the human body and the literary body, the corpus or *corp(u)s*. In the space that Khatibi creates for himself within the intellectual landscape of "Le discours parémiologique," gender plays a central, albeit evasive, ambiguous, even ambivalent, role. Right off the bat, he reminds his readers that "*corpus* signifie originellement *corps* . . . Corpus et corps; l'un dans l'autre se logent et se fondent" ("*corpus* originally means *body* . . . The corpus and the body; one resides and is founded in the other"; "Le discours" 25). Khatibi was prescient in imagining the sensible body as both the progenitor and the receptor of all sociolinguistic meaning. The body can never be far from the proverb, as he emphasizes by showing how proverbs have an embodied value, split between poetics and semantics, between performer and audience, between site of enunciation and rote memory.

We can push his desire to understand embodiment through the literary arts further. Khatibi himself took one step in that direction. In his protracted poetic cycle *Aimance* (*Loveance* [1986–2008]), Khatibi betrays a recurrent obsession with the nonbinary or gender-fluid body—"de souples corps parallèles," he writes, "qui se touchent en se caressant" ("supple, parallel bodies / touching, caressing each other" [*Œuvres* 129]). These nonnormative forms of embodiment (gender and genre are linked as sites of ideational play and productivity in Khatibi) never amount to something definitive, to something more than a haunting, an obsession. For example, Khatibi writes in "Le discours parémiologique" that "notre corpus est un corps ni féminin, ni masculin, *une espèce d'hermaphrodite (non platonicien)* qu'il faut essayer d'approcher dans sa singularité, sa différence irréductibles" ("my corpus is neither feminine, nor masculine, *a sort of (nonplatonic) hermaphrodite* that must be approached in its irreducible singularity and difference" 26; our emphasis). Or, during boyish bouts of riffing on proverbs in the company of male friends, he writes, "[J]e parlerai en contrepèteries et métaplasmes qui, en arabe, altèrent la consonne radicale, mais *qui assurent à mon corps un plaisir androgyne*" ("[I] will speak in spoonerisms and metaplasms, which, in Arabic, alter the root consonant, but *which also assure an androgynous pleasure to my body-corpus*"; 43; our emphasis). These excerpts display his engagement with nonnormative bodies, and yet this engagement remains figurative, ideational, an abstraction. The otherwise fecund literary collapse of *corps* and *corpus* unwittingly introduces an oblique degree of removal from corporeal embodiment, though (especially since) the proverbs in question frequently involve body parts.

Of the essays collected here, Teresa Villa-Ignacio's, Hoda El Shakry's, and Matthew Brauer's all take Khatibi to task on sex, gender, and the

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body, not least of all for a seemingly unshakable patriarchal hetero-dominance that persistently underlies what, on the surface, read as broader, inclusive understandings of gender. Villa-Ignacio delves into Khatibi's novel *Le livre du sang* (*The Book of Blood* [1979]) to unearth an unconscious corrective couched deep within the text, which "demonstrates aimance's potential, within a strictly heteronormative patriarchy, and even perhaps because of it, to motivate queer aimancipations." Both Villa-Ignacio and El Shakry build on the trailblazing Nasrin Qader's insightful work on Khatibi in *Narratives of Catastrophe: Boris Diop, Ben Jelloun, Khatibi* (2009) in order to disrupt, as El Shakry argues, the doxological "logics of the sexed body" and "deconstruct the unified sexed body in [its] similarity-difference." El Shakry shows how Khatibi's strategy for unveiling an other, yet unexplored potential realm for being is evident both in his readings of religious, spiritual, and sexual being and in his interest in semiotic systems that contain doubled significances that skirt capture from single-pronged (and so ultimately ideological) readings. More broadly, Brauer identifies how the sexualized (sexed) body generates a fundamental index for how Khatibi explores themes of difference. These explorations often start from traditional frames, such as patriarchal heteronormativity or the Qurʾan, which, even when Khatibi exposes them for the discursive and ontological suppressions they put in place, all the same limit the scope of future imaginings. However much Khatibi—excavated from the tomb of the past—now moves toward us, and moves us to thinking, he still does not necessarily move in lockstep with us. Now, still, Khatibi's rereadings of the canonical and the divinely writ through his intersemiotic method of "creative transposition" ("Le discours" 45) run the risk of illegibility within disciplinary, scholarly conventions.

Refractions

Scholarly and literary conventions, like all forms of tradition, produce borders, fiercely guarded. They also produce flat surfaces lacking angularity, geared to meeting disciplinary beliefs, or generic customs. Khatibi asks the attentive reader to recalibrate these expectations. For reading Khatibi is always rereading, a reading that bends borders, reconfigures boundaries, and refracts domains of knowledge. Reading Khatibi requires new lingual grammars, and alingual modes of bilingualism. David Fieni, for instance, asks us to reimagine Khatibi's writing as a form of graffito: a writing *on* the French language, an angularity, a refraction, and a bilingualism that present a challenge to colonial master-languages. Khatibi's writing creates a visual grammar originating from, and exceeding, language, a graffito, which, as Fieni tells us, is a prime site of "wild, undomesticated" cultural expression, marked with the stylistic indicator of an excessive doubling. When doubled, art and literature fissure at the seams of the polarities that demarcate them as hierarchical, encoded spheres of sociocultural regimentation. In his essay on reading Khatibi, Khalid Lyamlahy considers the many forms of the fragment as evidence of Khatibi's onto-aesthetics, which extends Derrida's critique of a Western understanding of being as "life without differance" (Derrida 71). Lyamlahy's focus on the fragment, crystallized as a note, suggests the authority of a passing moment's insight, perception, the punctum of sensible experience. His essay provides an essential reading guide to Khatibi's work, outlining how postcolonial literary agency can open up thinking through disruptions of the oeuvre conceived as complete, total, authoritative, original, or unique. The fragment, in Lyamlahy's analysis, perforates the textual surface with multiple entrances and exits. The perforated surface constitutes Khatibi's creative and critical strategies. The piecemeal, combinational form captures the crucial relationality between the genesis of ideas and artistic creativity.

Khatibi's bilingualism elides the teleological conventions of lingual hybridity, like the "Africanization" (Miller) born of the violence and ruptures that occur in the encounter with—in the wake of—the colonial "machine" (Sartre, "Préface" 25, 28; "Introduction" 19, 23). Neither does his bilingualism revolve around an exclusive, bicultural

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locus, knotted to implicit themes of exile, loss, and wandering; nor is it exclusively derived from mixing French and Arabic languages, or interweaving European and North African frames of cultural reference. Khatibi unknots the polarized, the compacted, and the recalcitrant, opening the seams of (lingually contoured) thinking where normalization has produced convention, consensus, doxa, and doctrine. His bilingualism denotes a restless onto-aesthetics that burrows into being through the application of oppositional forces, to uncover the unseemly, ambiguous mark within the proverbial.

Khatibi reaches beyond the bipolar contexts of colonial and postcolonial writing toward what today we would recognize as a Global South solidarity. His bilingualism turns away from the binary and toward cultural polyvocality and new modes of transcolonial identification instead, "processes of identification that are rooted in a common colonial genealogy and a shared perception of (neo)colonial subjection" (Harrison 2). Khatibi's self-chosen marginality in Rabat, Morocco, gave him an "abri commode" ("agreeable shelter"; *Le scribe* 55) where he remained free of the doxological conventions of intellectual ideology. As his lingual and geographic references were not determined exclusively by colonial and postcolonial commitments, or professional allegiances to metropolitan French philosophical debates, he sought identifications with far-flung but kindred intellectual spirits. To wit, in their essays, both Brauer and Charles Forsdick evoke the importance of the French naval doctor Victor Segalen's writing for Khatibi. Segalen's ethnographic novel *Les immémoriaux* (*A Lapse of Memory* [1907]), set in French Polynesia, became a foundational text for Khatibi when it was republished in Jean Malaurie's Plon series in 1956. Forsdick takes this as a point of entry that allows him to delve deep into the nexus of postcolonial tattoos in Segalen and Khatibi, as approached through the lens of "mnemonic history." The postcolonial scholarship on tattoos discussed by Forsdick identifies how they serve as a semiotic resistance. In the paired cases of Khatibi and Segalen, and in a manner not dissimilar from graffiti, tattoos emerge as cultural and historical encoding beyond the control of the Western sign. Tattoos are explicitly a signifying form that contorts, distorts, and refracts hegemonic cultural control, but they also function broadly as a symbol of sign systems that, as mnemonic inscriptions, carry meaning beyond the logocentric mark. Further forms of Khatibi's transcolonial self-identifications include his fascination with Chinese calligraphy, Taoism, and Japan, as evidenced, respectively, by his essay on calligraphy in *La blessure du nom propre*, his first poetry collection, *Le lutteur de classe à la manière taoïste* (*Class Warrior—Taoist Style* [1976]), and his short text on Japanese literary culture, *Ombres japonaises* (*Japanese Shadows* [1988]).

In pursuit of further refractions for his intellectual genealogies, Khatibi turns to cultivating affiliations with the Americas. For instance, a sociological conference in Venezuela spurs him to discuss for the first time his critical stance of double critique—mentioned in many of the essays in this collection—during his 1973 interview in the North African literary magazine *Lamalif* ("Abdelkébir Khatibi"). To invigorate this American connection, Edwards's essay opens our dossier by gesturing beyond the *bi-* and beyond the *polar*, advocating subtly for the reconceptualization of the boundaries that have hewn North African cultural studies in definitive ways, linking parts of North African culture and arts to the Anglophone world, while leaving other parts to find relation only to Francophilic, metropolitan French counterparts. By focusing on the unexplored relational aspect of the *inter-* and the *trans-* in Khatibi's interactions with the American scholar Samuel Weber, Edwards creates a "parole tierce" ("third term"), an unspoken dimension of multipolarity, that insinuates itself into the relationship of Paul Bowles and Mohammed Mrabet. Edwards thereby applies pressure on circulation as a partial disciplinary model whose dialogic modality largely excludes the third term, the unfungible particular.

This notion of the unsaleable particularity of local cultures, the excessive sign that renounces global circulation, defines Hiddleston's exploration of world literariness in Khatibi's work and in novels by two North African writers. Hiddleston modulates

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the terms of Lyamlahy's perforation. For her, Khatibi's worldliness refers to an ethical engagement with transculturality and an aesthetic practice of porosity, which goes beyond normative academic discourse and the capitalist circulatory logics of world literature anthologizing. In attempting to define the limits of Khatibi's ethical stance on transculturality, Hiddleston reads Tahar Djaout's *Le dernier été de la raison* (*The Last Summer of Reason*) and Kaouther Adimi's *Nos richesses* (*Our Riches*) for the ways that these novels fail as idealist interventions in cultural milieux antagonistic to multiplicity and open-border transculturality. Then, Brahim El Guabli's indexing of the polymorphous figure of the Jew in Khatibi's creative works both unties the North African Jew from a typical historical register—their exodus from Morocco in the 1960s—and allows a more open-ended consideration of their potential meaning to national culture. Documenting the various textual traces of the Jews—real and imagined—in Khatibi's work, El Guabli points to the suspended question of their importance, where their absent presence, in the context of twentieth-century Morocco, signifies various forms of personal loss and cultural guilt.

Read as an ensemble, the essays in this collection focus on Khatibi's refractive methods in various domains of thought, society, and the arts. We might, to this end, turn to the image of the crystal, which appears at the beginning of *La blessure du nom propre* in the prefatory "Le cristal du texte" ("The Crystal of the Text"), as a useful metaphor for visualizing Khatibi's dispersive epistemological aesthetics of the *inter-* and the *trans-*. In his crystalline intersemiotics, Khatibi's intersign escapes essentializing, normalizing procedures by being defined prima facie not by a sign of "white light" but only by the iterative difference of acculturated signs. The whole is suspended, and a radiative constellation of in-between states, intersigns, is produced (Fieni 3). Like the "difference" within a discursive formation à la Michel Foucault (*L'archéologie du savoir* [*The Archeology of Knowledge*]), or the "relational" in Glissant (*Poétique de la relation* [*Poetics of Relation*]), the integument is the location of meaning. The linkages—just as much the acknowledged, or real, as what is imaginable on the horizon—all matter. Refraction dissolves the illusion of wholeness, its hold over our imaginations, our scattered brains.

Body Bending Meaning

Edwards's essay is richly suggestive of Khatibi's essay on proverbs: both invoke the negative aspects of disciplinary legacies of the colonial-modern social scientific apparatus (Stafford 48). Divested of understanding how a proverb operates within the performative context of its utterance, colonial anthropology wished to produce a one-to-one correspondence, or likeness, between proverbs in two languages. Monuments written in stone. Eternal. Abstract. But this fail-safe method—bent on producing authority as much as on representing reality—turns a blind eye to different forms of meaning. For colonial and postcolonial French is incapable of apprehending the foreign phoneme, and it remains incapacitated by a kind of "œil absent . . . la cécité, de l'invisible et de l'illisible" (absent eye . . . blindness, the invisible and the illegible"; Khatibi, *Maghreb pluriel* 181; *Plural Maghreb* 119), its "strabisme irrévérencieux" ("irreverential strabismus"; "Le discours" 39), its "sémiotique interne, trouble" ("fuzzy navel-gazing semiotics"; 40). As the saying goes, Khatibi reminds us, *ʿaynak mīzānak*, "Les yeux / sont ta balance" ("Your eye is your measure"; "Le discours" 53, 56). Or *illā tʿārat ʿaynā ḥafra bqat*, "Tes yeux envolés il reste deux trous" ("Without your eye it's just a hole"; 53, 56). Or *taʿlā al-ʿayn ḥattā taʿlā ou jī al-ḥajāb fūq mannha*, "Aussi haut que les yeux pourront s'élever le cil est dessus" ("The eye shoots higher and higher, yet there's still an eyebrow above it"; 53, 56).

Proverbs, in the end, are not proverbial. They are not the clichés of tradition, but the embodied rituals of social solidarity posing resistance to Western bookish universalism in oral uses of language. A proverb is as much as anything else a verbal talisman (Tengour 107–08), or mantra, an utterance that escapes semantics, an utterance full of magic and poetry, demanding, as Khatibi writes, that we listen

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to it "en un temps rituel" ("in ritual time"; "Le discours" 32). Proverbs skirt convention, disrupt as they cohere, double binds that unbind in creative iterability. In this view, the communal construction of meaning within social speech "enveloppe la parole en un temps rituel répétitif, celui de la conversation. Sa fonction, à ce niveau, n'est pas de décoder le 'réel' par un simple déclic métaphorique ou une amplification parabolique; elle est de travailler obstinément *contre* la parole" ("envelops speech in repetitive, ritual time, that of conversation. Its function, at this level, does not lie in decoding the 'real' through a quick metaphoric click or parabolic amplification; it stubbornly works *against* speech"; 32–33). Emptied of our social-semantic body, "on a désappris à parler en proverbes" ("we have unlearned to speak in proverbs"; 42), which amounts to no less than the "violence d'autodestruction fébrile et hilare" ("feverish, euphoric violence of self-destruction"; 42).

Piercing the eye of French, Khatibi approaches his corpus of resistance, then, less as a "corps *doxologique*" ("*doxological* body") than as a body that should rather be read "comme une partition intersémiotique" ("like an intersemiotic score"; 31). In lieu of "la castration sémantique" ("semantic castration"; 46) by proverb, Khatibi wonders "comment fonder le pouvoir de jouissance" ("how to found the power of pleasure"; "Le cristal" 11), through "une traduction du corps et de sa jouissance" ("a translation of the body and its pleasure"; 21). "Entre le non-sens et la recherche d'un langage pur," he writes, "se joue tout le statut de la traduction" ("The whole status of translation is at play between nonsense and the search for pure language"; "Le discours" 45). From body to body, from body snatcher to mind scanner, the bodies within bodies of "le corps *parémiologique* constitue[nt] un cercle concentrique par rapport à l'autre cercle, un cercle *tracé*" ("the *paroemiological* body constitute a concentric circle in relation to the other circle, a *traced* circle"; 31). Meaning forms a resistive social *corps*, refracted through an oral *corpus* that spreads diffuse traces of previous proverbial utterance.

In his 1971 experimental autobiography *La mémoire tatouée* (*Tattooed Memory*), Khatibi writes of a "Très Grande Violence" ("Very Great Violence"). He glosses identity as the "nœud de ma Très Grande Violence" ("the knot of my Very Great Violence") that exists between "le jour et la nuit" ("day and night"), between "l'incandescence et la mort" ("incandescence and death"; *La mémoire* 178; *Tattooed Memory* 146; trans. modified). Living life through a "live" identity is an adventure, an interpretation and extrapolation of the conditions given at birth, and the best way to live through this mandate is to open signs and language to every possibility. Living like this is an act of violence but also a productive organon, an organ of combination, a "combinatoire" ("combinatorium"), as he will later repeatedly call this space in *La blessure du nom propre*. Identity is infused with violence necessary for life, and for creation, "Il s'agit bien de la violence, dans une combinaison de plus en plus complexe" ("It is indeed a question of violence, in a combination that's increasingly complex"; *La mémoire tatouée* 184; *Tattooed Memory* 151; trans. modified).

Such a force must be applied to create anew, to unbind the most heavily bound. This iconoclasm, this desire for regeneration, and this ethics of transcultural hybridity beyond the surety of first origins are the valences that we hope to bring to the attention, again, now, of scholars, both for the specific encoding that Khatibi's thought carries for him as a situated person, and for the ways that his example might, still, prove to be inspiring for other thinkers, situated as we all are, now, in the postcolonial world of diasporic relations and affiliations, undergoing perpetual translation, bodies refracting bodies, minds unbinding minds.

Note

1. All unattributed translations are our own.

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