Theories and Methodologies

Aimancipation

TERESA VILLA-IGNACIO

This essay is an account of my engagement with Abdelkébir Khatibi's writings on "aimance." I came to them seeking a model for gender equity, then became profoundly disappointed when his practice of aimance did not live up to the equity the theory proposed. Seeking an explanation for the disparity between theory and practice, I was pleasantly surprised to discover gender-equitable aimance where I least expected it, and, in turn, a glimmer of the explanation I sought.

In Khatibi's view, aimance is at once an emotional bond and a writerly practice that improves on the conventions of romantic love. Aimance both encompasses and eclipses love; it is "cette autre langue d'amour" ("that other language of love") that acknowledges the existence of the "opposition" between love and hatred even as it "affirme une affinité plus active entre les êtres" ("affirms a more active affinity between beings") that transcends that opposition ("L'aimance" 128). Aimance potentially subverts patriarchal norms; more precisely, it is a signifying mode capable of actualizing affinities between differently gendered beings when those affinities cannot be actualized under patriarchal norms.[1] As such, it may serve as either an alternative or a complement to the sexual expression of romantic love.[2]

Khatibi proposes aimance as the guiding principle of a new era of equality in intimate relationships:

> Rien que des Aimantes et Aimants
> Sans privilège actif ou passif
> Sans amour sans haine
> Rien que des désirs auprès de leur pensée
> Par attraction réceptive
> Et de souples corps parallèles
> Qui se touchent en se caressant. ("L'aimance" 129)[3]

TERESA VILLA-IGNACIO is associate professor of French and francophone studies at Stonehill College. Her research explores contemporary poetic and translational interventions in ethical philosophy, postcolonial liberation movements, and social justice activism. A coeditor of *Souffles-Anfas: A Critical Anthology from the Moroccan Journal of Culture and Politics* (Stanford UP, 2016) and *Traduire le Maghreb / Translating the Maghreb*, a special issue of *Expressions maghrébines* (summer 2016), she is completing a book manuscript entitled "Translational Poethics: French-American Postlyric Communities since World War Two."

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Nothing but Aimantes and Aimants
Neither more active or passive than the other
No love no hate
Nothing but desires closing in on their thoughts
Through receptive attraction
And supple, parallel bodies
Touching, caressing each other.

Aimance replaces the patriarchal hierarchy of lover and beloved (*amant* and *aimée*) with the gendered pair of lover and lover ("aimantes" and "aimants"). Instead of encouraging volatile aspirations to fusion that inevitably result in fission, aimance subsists in tender relationships of continuity: in desire and thought residing beside each other; in well-matched bodies engaging in gentle, reciprocal touch.[4] Such "receptive attraction" between aimants and aimantes recalls the proximate phenomenon signified by the verb *aimanter* ("to magnetize"), which describes the subterranean force that draws entities together. By attending to the invisible force of aimance, aimantes and aimants engage in a disposition of receptive inviting of the other to draw closer to the self.

The practice of aimance, as Khatibi historicizes it, arose from exchanges between European and Arab world literary traditions and thus exemplifies and grounds cultural plurality. He traces aimance to the European tradition of courtly love and its subversion of the contemporary clerical hegemony, especially through interventions from Arab culture. In a comparative analysis of courtly love poetry with the *diwan* of Ibn Quzmān, Khatibi argues that troubadour poetry was a "transposition" of the *ghazal* popular in Islamic Spain—a transposition of rhyme schemes as much as of thematics ("L'aimance" 130).[5] He also discusses the equivalence between the Arabic word *maḥabba* and the French word *aimance*: both bear witness to a multiplicity of desires, ranging from friendship to love to physical desire (131). The fastidious reproduction of feudal social codes in courtly love poetry, such as the maintenance of the lady's anonymity, lead Khatibi to classify it as "un idiome" ("an idiom"), one that served to keep the disciplinary action of the church at bay (130). This idiom also enabled a subversion of patriarchy that could grant equitable agency to women: Khatibi cites the female troubadour Maria de Ventadorn, who wrote that a lady should give herself to her lover as if to a friend, not as if to a master (130). In Khatibi's view, it was precisely the multicultural, multilingual, interfaith origins of courtly love that allowed it to emerge as a protected form of freedom of expression for aimantes and aimants whose interactions would otherwise have been repressed.

It bears noting, however, that Khatibi's texts tend toward reinforcing patriarchal norms, particularly concerning gendered divisions of labor, emotional and otherwise. Even as *Dédicace à l'année qui vient* (*Dedication to the Coming Year*; 1986) invites aimants and aimantes to engage in relational equilibrium, the poem's framing narrative relies heavily on traditional gender roles. It features an omniscient male speaker, a kind of master of ceremonies, who addresses the initiates as "beaux esprits" ("beautiful spirits") and guides them toward Aimance, while personifying Aimance as an ephemeral, out-of-reach, muse-like feminine presence, "the giving one" who "ravishes" the narrator's "gaze":

C'est toi, dis-je, la donnante
Et la mieux aimée de son offrande
Donne-moi le secret en lui-même
Redit-elle en souriant
Alors qu'elle ravissait mon regard. (75)

It's you, say I, the giving one
And the best loved of her cohort
Give me the secret in itself
Says she, smiling
All the while ravishing my gaze.

The section titled "Notes de mémoire" ("Notes from Memory") in *Par-dessus l'épaule* (*Over the Shoulder*; 1988), written in separate sections for women and men, hovers ambivalently between description and prescription of strictly divided gendered behaviors in aimance. "Notes pour les femmes" ("Notes for Women") clings to essentialist images of feminine arts such as carpet weaving and emphasizes the materiality and exoticism of women's appearance (13–16), whereas "Notes pour les hommes"

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("Notes for Men") relies on a dichotomy that associates women with an "interior secret" and men with its exterior "poetic enunciation" (159) and explores subjective states like melancholy and jealousy exclusively from the male point of view (164–65). One particularly fetishistic passage from "Notes pour les femmes" describes an aimant's wonder at the profound origins of his *jouissance* in his aimante's womanhood, a recognition of and stupefaction at the historicity of women's handmade, handwoven construction of womanhood, passed down for millennia:

> Chaque fois que la vie lui est encore plus douce, il découvre que la nudité de son aimante est parure d'un secret millénaire.
>
> Ce secret des femmes repose dans le geste des mains: lier et délier le corps, ses émotions, ses vibrations. Que serait l'Art s'il n'y avait ce geste initial de la tapisserie, du jardinage, de la cuisine et s'il n'y avait la cérémonie des parures? De main en main, les femmes se transmettent jalousement une initiation sororale à la vie et à la mort, fêtes, rites, mariages et séparations, magie blanche, noire, ou toute bleue de délicatesse. C'est un demi-espoir à la mesure de leurs étreintes et de leurs voluptés. (*Par-dessus* 25–26)
>
> Each time life is kind to him, he discovers his aimante's nudity is an adornment kept secret for millennia.
>
> This women's secret resides in their hand gestures: connecting and disconnecting the body, its emotions, its resonances. What would Art be without these inaugural gestures of carpet weaving, gardening, cooking, and without the adornment ceremony? From one hand to the next, women pass on their sisterly initiation to life and death, celebrations, sacraments, weddings and separations, white magic, black magic, delicate blue magic. Half-hopeful, equal to their embraces and sensual pleasures.

The speaker demonstrates the ability to evoke, even in the presence of a single woman, what we might consider an imaginary of the harem sublime in his realization that he is benefitting from the collective efforts of generations of women embodied in this one woman, the pinnacle of multiple harems' efforts to please men.[6]

The section titled "Apostille" ("Marginalia"), which directly follows "Notes pour les femmes," comes across as quite defensive, as if Khatibi anticipated a negative reaction to the "Notes." It is rife with rhetorical questions that indicate the author's self-doubt. He argues that women's resistance to patriarchy has become essential to gender relations and gender identity: "Sinon, comment comprendre qu'un homme soit *possible* sans cette résistance du sensible? Oui, qu'est-ce qu'un homme sans sa féminité retenue?" ("If not, how could manhood be *possible* without this resistance to the sensuous? Yes, what is a man without his restrained femininity?"; 41). Even as he touts economic, legal, and political equality between the sexes, Khatibi argues that the relations between the sexes are inherently asymmetrical and expresses concern that the equality of women and men could lead to the dissolution of the family hierarchy (44). Though he emphasizes his attachment to gendered and familial hierarchies, he never explains why he believes they are so necessary.

Khatibi makes greater strides toward a more equitable practice of aimance in his *Correspondance ouverte* (*Open Correspondence*) with the Moroccan psychoanalyst and author Ghita El Khayat. Published in 2005, their fifty-nine letters exchanged between 1995 and 1999 provide a real-life example of Khatibi engaging in a relationship of aimance. Khatibi and El Khayat have much in common: Parisian educations; interests in psychoanalysis, art, and travel; and the ongoing challenge of balancing their dual careers in literature and the social sciences. Yet Khatibi's motivation for the correspondence—which is to say, the practice of aimance—is not fully shared by El Khayat. It is he alone who returns again and again to the theme of aimance, whereas she is mostly content to contemplate their relationship in terms of *amitié*, or friendship (e.g., El Khayat and Khatibi 9–11, 71–73). Their correspondence becomes especially moving after the death of El Khayat's young daughter in 1997 (64 and following).[7] Khatibi accompanies El Khayat through her grief with kindness and generosity, responding to her sorrow but continuing to inform her about his activities in order to keep her grounded in the present

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reality of the living world and to encourage her not to give in to her despair. In this way he styles himself as a male protector who, having himself suffered many losses early in life, advises her from the wisdom of his experience. The contrast between their situations becomes increasingly stark: the grieving mother works through her mourning at home in Casablanca, whereas the jet-setting intellectual father leaves the kids at home with his wife.

The aporia between Khatibi's gender-equitable theorization and his less gender-equitable practice of aimance can be partially explained by his investment in understanding, promoting, and critiquing Islamic culture, including its patriarchal traditions, from within.[8] His literary, philosophical, and sociological approaches to understanding sexuality and gender in Islamic contexts emphasize the influence of faith-based interpretations of sacred narratives. Khatibi's approach to questions of sexuality therefore always returns to the primacy of Allah's role in creation. The sexualization of Adam and Eve is only a secondary effect of the main story of Iblis, or Satan, disobeying Allah (*Par-dessus* 90–111). In "La sexualité selon le Coran" ("Sexuality according to the Qur'an"), Khatibi similarly argues that questions of sexual and marital conduct in daily Islamic life are secondary to the belonging of creation to Allah (*Maghreb pluriel* 147–76; *Plural Maghreb* 95–116). Khatibi's partial feminism valorizes women's traditional cultural contributions to Islamic culture, beginning with Khadija's role as intermediary between Mohammed and the Angel who brought him the first verses of the Qur'an (*Par-dessus* 84–85).[9] The last two sentences of the back-cover description of *Correspondance ouverte* frame the text as a groundbreaking event in the Arab world: "Nous appartenons ainsi à la civilisation islamique et à son système social patriarcal. Cet échange est peut-être le premier dans le genre, publié dans le monde arabe . . ." ("Thus we belong to Islamic civilization and to its patriarchal social system. This exchange is perhaps the first of its kind to be published in the Arab world . . ."). Khatibi seems content to propose that aimance may temporarily subvert Islamic patriarchy (or any and all forms of patriarchy), but never overthrow it; in so doing, he reinforces its hegemony. From the vantage point of 2022 and its attendant globalized feminisms, it is difficult not to find Khatibi's practical forays into aimance unsatisfying.[10]

Yet heteronormative patriarchal relations between men and women are not the endpoint of Khatibi's exploration of aimance. He cites his contemporary Rezvani, an author of Russian and Iranian origin writing in French, who invents the term *aimanciper*, a neologism that combines *aimance* and *émanciper* ("to emancipate"), deployed in the phrase "qu'aimance nous aimancipe" ("may aimance aimancipate us"; Rezvani, "Aimance"). Khatibi hopes this unique aspect of Rezvani's idiolect will become a more widespread idiom ("L'aimance" 138–39). Khatibi doesn't elaborate on its potential significance, leaving it up to his readers to consider how the poetics of aimance might motivate practices of political liberation, or "aimancipation." In what follows, I explore how *Le livre du sang* (*The Book of Blood*; 1979) demonstrates aimance's potential, within a strictly heteronormative patriarchy, and even perhaps because of it, to motivate queer aimancipations.

Over the course of this mythic fantasy, delivered in unrelentingly emotionally heightened prose, the Asylum of the Inconsolable—located somewhere between heaven and earth—suffers its downfall, apparently as an effect of the presence of two figures alternately identified as androgynous and sexed, the Échanson, or Cupbearer, and his sister Muthna. This downfall seems particularly inevitable after the "Nuit de l'erreur" ("The Night That Went Astray"), in which the Échanson and Muthna engage in an incestuous encounter from which they and their community, at once a parodic representation of a Sufi order and an allegory for Islamic patriarchy, will never recover.

Readings of *Le livre du sang* have rightly pointed out its deconstructive qualities; in particular, they emphasize the relationship between the self-dissolving tendencies of its narrative structure and that of the social and epistemological orders it represents. Réda Bensmaïa views *Le livre du sang* as an "attempt to rewrite and surpass" the literary tradition of Islamic mysticism that has dangerously veered toward "decadence" (136, 137). Characterizing the

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book as an "unreadable" "text of bliss" (137), or Barthesian *jouissance*, that disrupts readerly expectations and tends "to exceed any inscription of plot," Bensmaïa equates the collapse of the asylum to the collapse of the narrative itself (138). Nasrin Qader observes that though Muthna and the Échanson threaten the purity to which the Asylum's fraternity aspires, that purity was always precarious, because the walled structure of the asylum creates an inside/outside binary that is always at risk of transgression (172). She argues that the denial of embodied materiality structures the downfall of both the asylum and the plot. The fraternity's aspiration to achieve transcendence by gazing upon the Échanson's beautiful face exemplifies the novel's paradoxical quest to erase materiality through contact with materiality, as well as the fraternity's need to determine the Échanson's and Muthna's sex and gender identities, and its frustration with that impossibility. That these structured impossibilities lead to their murder exemplifies the same paradox (154–56, 167).

These readings unquestioningly accept that Khatibi is instrumentalizing the problematic of gender nonconformism only to critique ideologies of spiritual and cultural purity. I would like to gesture toward a different reading, one centered on the Échanson's and Muthna's life stories as representative of transgender and gender-nonconforming persons' experiences of aimance, aimancipation, or the lack thereof. I have not encountered any evidence that Khatibi intentionally wrote *Le livre du sang* as an allegorical account of the lived reality of transgender or gender-nonconforming persons at any specific historical moment or place, nor would I anachronistically attribute this terminology to him. Yet, in the context of the global rise of LGBTQ activism in the four decades since the book's publication,[11] the text's vision of the relationship between transgender and gender-nonconforming identities and heteronormative patriarchy merits further investigation.

From this perspective, *Le livre du sang*, which alternates between novelistic testimony and theatrical dialogue, narrates the social marginalization of two transgender characters, offering both a critique of gender normativity and an articulation of solidarity with transgender and gender-nonconforming persons. The siblings suffer violence and sexual trauma in childhood, their father is slain by a poisoned sword, and their mother is transported "le cul en l'air" ("ass in the air"; 127) to the heavens. Thereafter, they are reared by a slapdash foster care system of increasingly irresponsible relatives, and the path of Muthna's life is littered with crimes and destruction, including her kidnapping and rape at the age of eleven in front of her brother (127–30, 149). Because of the Échanson's perfect beauty, which encompasses both masculinity and femininity, the Asylum's fraternity has chosen the Échanson to be the Cupbearer, whereas Muthna is relegated to sex work (141–43, 149).[12]

The text's turning point, the "nuit de l'erreur," takes place during the height of Carnival, a season of temporary social transgressions. Muthna leads the Échanson away from the street festivities to engage in an incestuous encounter, which leads to the only orgasm of Muthna's life (149–50). We can read their incest and Muthna's climax as a sacred instance of aimance. This love scene is representative of the tendency of transgender and gender-nonconforming persons to seek one another out for intimate or "aimant" relationships because the commonality of their experiences are grounds for understanding and trust (Erickson-Roth 338–39).

Although, as previously mentioned, *Le livre du sang* does not engage explicitly with theories of transgender and gender-nonconforming identity, the novel does reflect on the meaning and phenomenology of the terms it uses to characterize the Échanson's and Muthna's gender and sexuality: androgyny and hermaphroditism. The narrative proposes a hermaphroditic description of an androgynous person's body (142), and the narrator, empathizing with the Cupbearer, expresses anger and envy at not being fully androgynous but "tournant autour de ma verge déracinée" ("spinning around my uprooted penis"; 142–43) and describes the Échanson, also identified in the text as "l'Androgyne" ("the Androgyne"), as the "dépouille d'un corps angélique, abandonné sur terre par les dieux antiques" ("cadaver of an angelic body, abandoned on earth by the ancient gods";

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149). Khatibi later calls attention to androgyny as an original condition steeped in myth—the condition that precedes sexuality, for Adam was originally an androgynous figure, not sexed until Eve was created (*Par-dessus* 98). In reflections on *Le livre du sang*, Khatibi emphasizes that the separation of the androgynous being into two sexed beings is the origin of suffering, of passion (*Langue* 79), suggesting the sibling-lovers' incest is an attempt to restore their original wholeness. Khatibi thus consistently envisions androgyny as an original, holistic human condition before the advent of heteronormative sexual and gender dualism. Reading the semi-androgynous characters of the Échanson and Muthna as transgender or gender-nonconforming aligns with this vision, and the consummation of their incestuous desire enacts their spiritual desire to connect to a selfhood beyond the social construction of gender binarism.

In the aftermath of their incestuous aimance, the Échanson exhibits suicidal ideations.[13] Caught in a devolutionary mirror stage, he regards his reflection without recognizing himself, believing that he's watching himself die (*Livre* 177). That is, gazing at his reflection is no longer an act that constitutes or recuperates his identity, but rather this act of gazing allows him to bear witness to its disintegration. Unlike her brother, Muthna seeks social acceptance. She wishes to prolong her feeling of wholeness by taking the Échanson's place in the fraternity: she wills herself to be both herself and her brother (182). She engages in survival tactics, both by eliminating enemies, poisoning the "Disciple" who consistently rails against her presence among the refugees (183), and by seeking out alliances with power, taking the Asylum's Master as her lover (186–87). Yet all attempts at social acceptance are doomed to failure within the fraternity's exclusionary structure. Enraged by the indeterminacy of the Échanson's and Muthna's genders, the asylum inhabitants slit their throats under the gaze of the Master, who vengefully flays their veins (200–01). It is perhaps not surprising that transgender or gender-nonconforming characters would be brutally killed by a patriarchal order that views them as a threat.[14] However, this double murder also marks the beginning of the end—the limit—of heteronormative patriarchy itself. The fraternity cannot accept the existence of the Échanson and Muthna, but the very act of excluding them precipitates the dissolution of the fraternity in the physical destruction of the Asylum and the death of its inhabitants.

Although the fraternity's dissolution marks the destruction of the social order, it is not an unwelcome textual development. The double protagonists' story is one of struggle toward queer aimancipation: their sacrifice reveals that it is gender binarism that constitutes the heteronormative patriarchy's fault line. By narrating a transgender and gender-nonconforming struggle as the violent, apocalyptic endpoint of heteronormative, patriarchal structures of exclusion, *Le livre du sang* challenges us to imagine how social acceptance of gender-nonconforming aimance could usher in a nonviolent, postapocalyptic starting point of sexual egalitarianism, pangender equity, and nonhierarchical inclusivity.

Khatibi's relation to aimance is instructive in both its failures and its successes. Why does he fail at aimance when he's actively trying to succeed, yet succeed when aimance isn't even fully on his mind yet? Whereas *Poésie de l'aimance* and other aimance-centric texts take for granted the predominance of cisgender men and women and their traditional gender roles, aimance happens at the moment when Khatibi is most critical of the foundations of Islamic society, both its hierarchical spirituality and its gender binarism. This paradox reveals the radical demands that aimance places on those who would make it their ethical praxis, and aimancipation their model of political liberation.

Notes

I thank Juan Carlos Martín for his invaluable feedback on an earlier version of this essay.

1. "J'appelle *aimance* cette autre langue d'amour qui, tout en nommant cette opposition [entre l'amour et la haine], affirme une affinité plus active entre les êtres, qui puisse donner forme à leur désir et à leur affection mutuelle, en son inachèvement même" ("I call *aimance* that other language of love that, while naming that opposition [between love and hatred], affirms a

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more active affinity between beings, which can give form to their desire and mutual affection, even in its incompletion"; (Khatibi, "L'aimance" 128). Khatibi first published this fragment in "Protocole de l'aimance" ("Aimance Protocol") in the special issue on aimance that he edited for the journal *Poésie 94* (*L'aimance*). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

2. See Balibar's note on aimance, within the larger article on the term *love* in *Dictionary of Untranslatables*. Balibar traces the coinage of the term *aimance* to the psychoanalyst Édouard Pinchon, who in 1927 conceived of it as an equivalent to the libido that would "avoid its overly sexualized connotations and point to a broader concept of object attraction, one that would not necessarily entail sexual satisfaction."

3. This poem, "Épris d'un refrain inouï" ("Enamored of a New Melody"), also appears in Khatibi, *Dédicace* 88, *L'aimance* 72, and *Aimance* 19.

4. For a canonical account of fusional love in European literary history, see Rougemont.

5. elhariry shows that Khatibi's "distorted" historical account of this transposition conflates, perhaps deliberately, the bawdy genre of *zajal* poems with the elevated genre of *ghazal* or love poems, a poethos that reveals the poetic and relational potential of aimance to be nothing but an empty promise (128). In this essay I also address the empty promise of aimance, though from the perspective of the gender inequities in Khatibi's oeuvre.

6. See also the geisha sublime variation on this theme in Khatibi, *Ombres japonaises* 46–49.

7. See Saghafi for a philosophical meditation on aimance as an alternative or complementary form of the love relationship beyond death. See Rezvani, *Élégies à Lula* for a poetic instantiation thereof.

8. El Shakry's *The Literary Qur'an* is a present-day example of this approach. Critiquing the pervasive tendency to read Maghrebi literature, especially of French expression, as solely autobiographical or anticolonial, El Shakry shows how diverse approaches to reading and practicing the Qur'an are interwoven into Maghrebi novels. She argues that many novels first and foremost imagine ethical subjects engaging "in narrative acts of creation"—making aesthetic and ethical choices from the perspective of "Qur'anic narratology and intertextuality" (165, 166).

9. See Lyamlahy 294–98 on carpet weaving and women's agency within a traditional gendered division of labor.

10. Even in 1975, Mernissi could assess the status of women and women's sexuality in Islam both in line with Khatibi's Qur'anic analysis and as a more pointed critique: "Women are a dangerous distraction that must be used for the specific purpose of providing the Muslim nation with offspring and quenching the tensions of the sexual instinct. But in no way should women be an object of emotional investment or the focus of attention, which should be devoted to Allah alone in the form of knowledge-seeking, meditation, and prayer" (499).

11. See Broqua et al. for a recent survey of uneven international developments in gender and sexuality activism.

12. For recent overviews of the United States context, see Gill-Peterson on transgender childhood and social and medical traumas and Fitzgerald et al. on transgender sex worker experiences. For overviews of the French context, see Thomas et al.; Espineira et al. on transgender youth experiences.

13. According to Haas et al., 41% of the United States trans population has attempted suicide, in contrast with 10%–20% of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual population and 4.6% of the general population.

14. See the Human Rights Campaign's annual reports on fatal violence against transgender and gender-nonconforming people ("Resources").

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