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Theories and Methodologies

# The Way toward the Other: Khatibi, Bowles, Mrabet

BRIAN T. EDWARDS

In 2008, the year before his death, the Moroccan philosopher and writer Abdelkébir Khatibi engaged in a series of public conversations with the American literary theorist Samuel Weber in Rabat. The dialogues were published in 2012, three years after Khatibi's death, by the press of Mohammed V University as *Le chemin vers l'autre* (*The Way toward the Other*). They have an extremely limited circulation, even in Morocco.[1] Since this is apparently Khatibi's final book, it seems an apt point of departure for work still to be done.

Khatibi's dialogues with an interlocutor from the United States offer an opportunity to open up the disciplinary frames through which Khatibi is generally considered in the American academy. In Morocco, Khatibi is well known across a range of disciplines, including sociology and philosophy. For the most part, however, discussion of his work in the United States has been limited to French departments, where his meditations on translation, bilingualism, and dialogue have been understood within the context of postcolonial francophone literature. And although the conversations with Weber took place in French and as yet are untranslated, they provide an opportunity to broaden the reach of his work in the United States. Indeed, the conversation provoked Khatibi to reflect on the United States, and more broadly on the transatlantic, which in turn allows us to inquire into the emerging presence of the United States and English as a competing paradigm in his work.

In what follows I follow these pathways to explore, with some irreverence, juxtapositions that have been left aside. I am inspired by yasser elhariry, who has commented that in francophone literary studies "there appears to be no exit from language," leading to his provocative suggestion that the field would benefit from opening up its canon of texts, bringing a "new, different constellation of international poets, essayists, and translators to the conversation" (1274).

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In a different critical conversation, Hosam Aboul-Ela has recently argued that discussions of world literature have evaded an extended engagement with US imperialism. Aboul-Ela encourages us to attend to the influence of Paul Bowles's Moroccan writing and especially his translations from "the Moghrebi" (40), which exhibit a series of paradoxical positions: anticolonial politics, an attempt to escape American Cold War consciousness, and the influential inability to imagine a liberating framework.

In *Le chemin vers l'autre*, Khatibi references Bowles's translations of "analphabetic" men in Tangier. It is a provocative but aborted remark alluding to the extended project undertaken by the American expatriate, who long resided in Tangier. Indeed, given the obsessions that animate his career, it is notable that Khatibi did not engage more fully with Bowles (1910–99) or his translation project, which from the 1960s through the 1980s produced more than twenty books and engaged four Moroccan authors: Ahmed Yacoubi (1928–85), Mohamed Choukri (1935–2003), Larbi Layachi (1937–86), and Mohammed Mrabet (1936–). Considering that Khatibi and other Moroccan intellectuals ignored Bowles's collaborations or dismissed them out of hand (frequently with hostility), it's not surprising that francophone studies has followed suit.

The relationship between Khatibi and Bowles has long seemed an ancillary question, outside the bounds of the critical conversation about the work of both writers. To draw comparisons between Khatibi and either Bowles or the "illiterate" Mrabet has seemed ridiculous or offensive. Thirty years ago, in the pages of *Middle East Report*, Hédi Abdel-Jaouad asked why prominent Moroccan intellectuals gave so little attention to the work of Mrabet or Tahar Ben Jelloun and invoked Khatibi's dismissal of "paraliterature" as part of an explanation. In the intervening years, Ben Jelloun entered the canon of francophone Moroccan literature and himself took aim at Bowles's translations (most recently in his 2005 novel *Partir* [*Leaving Tangier*], set partly in Tangier) as if to underline his own migration from paraliterature to literature *tout court*. Mrabet, though, remains marginal in North African literary studies.

Yet Mrabet's texts in Bowles's translation resonate with Khatibi's obsessions, particularly the intertwined relationship between translation, love, and friendship, and the notion of an *étranger professionnel* ("professional stranger" or "professional foreigner"). The latter is a key term for Khatibi, as Alison Rice writes, associating travel with the "multiple idioms he comes up against . . . the numerous tongues into which he throws himself with such intensity" (71). If Bowles's status as professional foreigner (or "invisible spectator," as one of his biographers calls him [Sawyer-Lauçanno]) is suggestive of yet another point of comparison, Mrabet's existence as the author of thirteen books, dictated or taped for Bowles and published without Arabic original, suggests that Mrabet, too, survives in a language that is not his own. Mrabet, who lives on in Bowles's English, has but one language, yet it is not considered his own.[2]

Thus, I would like to respond to this cluster's collective engagement with Khatibi—the man who helped us understand the plurality of the Maghreb, the essential bilingualism of Moroccan identity, and living within and between languages—with a series of questions about encounters across languages in Tangier and Rabat both before and after the turn of the twenty-first century. Notwithstanding Aboul-Ela's critique of the "rank economics" that structured Bowles's relationships with his analphabetic subjects (40), economics may be a provocative rubric for considering the non-fungibility of the Moroccan dialect, the lack of financial gain to be won from translation, and even the rapidly failing Moroccan north during the decades when King Hassan II abandoned Tangier.[3] In this sense, these mostly forgotten translations may be considered as an "end of circulation," helping us understand the occlusion of Tangier and more broadly Moroccan letters in world literature. In other words, if Mrabet's books do not return to Moroccan literature—if they end their circulatory path in Bowles's translation—they reveal to us one of the key failures of "world literature," namely how its proponents emphasize those works that circulate endlessly at

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the expense of the local, the particular, and the untranslatable. And the fact that Khatibi's work and Mrabet's collaboration with Bowles remain little known within transnational American studies and francophone studies, respectively, reveals the limits of that which does not circulate.

As an attempt to open Khatibi studies yet further, then, this essay asks what Khatibi's conversation with Weber reveals about Bowles's translation project with Mrabet and vice versa. Twenty-three years after the death of Bowles, thirteen years after Khatibi's passing, as the critical fate of both authors continues to play out, I insist on staging a conversation between three professional strangers.

## *Parole Tierce*

The dialogue and the *entretien* ("interview") are Khatibian forms par excellence. A notable amount of his oeuvre is composed of variations on conversation, whether within the pages of a single book or dialogues across volumes, such as the extended dialogue between Jacques Derrida's *Monolingualism of the Other*, which Derrida addresses to Khatibi, and Khatibi's series of "replies" collected in 2007 in *Jacques Derrida, en effet* (*Jacques Derrida, in Effect*). In taking up these final dialogues with Weber, I am suggesting not only that they open up something new in Khatibi's work, and thus should be considered part of his oeuvre, but also that we can derive from them a parallel to Bowles's extended dialogue with Mrabet, which, I have elsewhere argued, we should think of as collaboration more than translation (*Morocco Bound*; "Moroccan Paul Bowles").

The series of five extended conversations in Rabat were organized around themes suggested by Khatibi. By 2008, much had changed in short order. King Hassan II had died in July 1999, after a thirty-eight-year reign, and the end of an era seemed to be upon Morocco. Bowles had died in November of the same year, provoking the Moroccan press to issue a wide range of opinions, both laudatory and critical. In the wake of the attacks on September 11, 2001, events such as the US invasion and occupation of Iraq (2003–11), the declaration of a "war on terror," and President George W. Bush's insistence on a world of binarisms—"Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" (1349)—had forced many Moroccans to reconsider their nation's historic friendship with the United States.

The dialogues were hosted—or "animés" ("animated" or "moderated") as the title page put it—by the Moroccan theorist and critic Taieb Belghazi, who introduced each of the topics with extended opening remarks. So engaging were Belghazi's comments that Khatibi described the introductions as "une émergence d'une parole tierce entre nous" ("the emergence of a third speech between us"; Khatibi and Weber 37)[4] and said that Belghazi's interventions constructed a veritable "trilogue." The pressure triangulation exerts on dialogue—intrinsically binary—reflects the larger gesture of the Weber-Khatibi project. Khatibi understood these conversations as the beginning of a series of dialogues across the Atlantic; the "parole tierce" suggests a new frontier. English and the United States haunt, in a Khatibian or Derridean sense, the structuring bilingualism of colonial and postcolonial Morocco. If the binary that represented the postcolonial condition was France/Morocco—or French/Arabic—geopolitically a third term had emerged through the presence of the American. By 2008 the relationship between Morocco and the United States was hardly spectral, and the dialogues include discussions of violence and war, and the ongoing electoral campaign in the United States that would conclude with Barack Obama's election (49).

Because Weber is the primary interlocutor, the dialogues also interrogate trajectories between the United States and Morocco. Khatibi reflects on his own travels. For example, in April 2007 he had visited Northwestern University, in Evanston, Illinois, where Weber had introduced him at a public event. Crossing the Atlantic in the other direction, Weber would decamp from Evanston every fall to run an extended seminar in Paris. Khatibi refers to Weber as an *étranger professionnel*, a compliment that allows Khatibi, Rice writes again, "to situate [intellectuals] beyond the expectations of any particular profession

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in order to underscore a lifestyle, a way of being, concentrated outside the confines of a country or its customs" (66). For Khatibi, that sense of being between spaces, between nations, between languages, opens up the constitutive space of the "inter": "the commitment to dwell in the interstices of multiple tongues" (87). That Tangier long existed as an international zone—or "Interzone," in William S. Burroughs's famous construction from *Naked Lunch*—will point us back to the extended Bowles project as the literary ancillary of this in-between space. The Bowles-Mrabet collaboration left ambiguous the status of author and translator. By leaving key expressions untranslated, Bowles left unsettled the question of whether they belonged to Moroccan or American letters. The Tanjawi playwright Zubir Bin Bushta claimed, on Bowles's death, that Bowles was the father of "al-adab at-tanji," a neologism I translate as "Tangerian literature," suggesting the potentiality of the in-between status of this work. Despite the transnational or supranational potential of this construction, though, Bowles's Tangerian literature did not circulate as a model that world literature might take up. Its circulatory path ended in Tangier.

## Atlantis Lost and Found

The Khatibi-Weber dialogues are halfway back to a world before the twenty-first century, and they suggest the rubric through which encounters between America and Morocco were being discussed in 2008, fourteen years ago. They begin with the myth of Atlantis, an apposite starting point for a transatlantic dialogue.[5] Khatibi discusses Atlantis in the context of the incomplete Platonic text *Critias*, left unfinished or "atrophied." For Khatibi, the myth of Atlantis complicates the question of the model and the copy, so important for Plato (Khatibi and Weber 37). Atlantis, for Khatibi, is a place you find everywhere and nowhere—a utopia, but one that might be located. Khatibi's Atlantis is the model of an ideal community, guided from a distance by Poseidon, the god of wind, of adventure, of travel. The mythical city of Atlantis was extremely hierarchal, reigned over by Justice under Poseidon's vigilant eye (38). But Atlantis would in time fall out of favor with Zeus and become corrupted, and the punishment—drowning—would be apocalyptic.

Khatibi is especially interested in the ending of Plato's *Critias*, which breaks off just as Zeus is about to speak to the Atlantans. The manuscript cuts off at a dramatic moment: "Having assembled them, he says. . . ." Zeus's silence, Khatibi explains, becomes the origin of an extraordinary literature around the myth, filled with essential questions for all societies, including the question of justice and punishment and of the incomprehensible violence that shakes the world—our world, Khatibi emphasizes (38). He reminds us that the question of death and cruelty is elemental, "qu'on ne peut arracher non plus de l'homme" ("which one cannot snatch [or rip] from man either"; 39). Death (*mort*) and silence, or the lack of words (*mot*), for Zeus are connected, as they are for Khatibi.

Nasrin Qader has commented on Khatibi's play on *mort* and *mot* as a key to his earlier work. She argues that the distance between catastrophe and narration in Khatibi

> is the distance of the "r" that both relates and separates "mot" from "mort" as well as the word "death" from death. The catastrophe of the body that suffers inscribes itself in thought and in writing obliquely as spacing, as silence, as temporal rupture, and thus requiring that the thought of catastrophe be always an open, fragmentary, and unfinished thought: *pensée-autre*. (141)

Qader argues that *pensée-autre* ("other thought") is pluralized thought because it is "thought *toward*, or thought *with*, where 'toward' and 'with' do not designate another subject or an object toward which thought is teleologically oriented" (130–31). Other thinking engages a kind of directionality: the French word *sens* means both "meaning" and "direction." Khatibi's interest in Zeus's silence, in the god's unfinished discourse to the Atlantans, and in catastrophe relies not on "meaning" per se but the directionality of *sens*. Here the key word is *vers*, which means both "toward" and "verse." In the title phrase "le chemin vers l'autre" ("the way

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toward the other"), the directional meaning of *vers* becomes poetic.

Tangier has an intriguing relationship to Atlantis. Following Moroccan tradition, Khatibi associates the northern city with the utopia, suggesting a rich set of possibilities. Tangier of course was for three decades literally a kind of "Maghreb pluriel" or plural space: the city's historic multilingualism and its notorious multiplicity of sexualities bring together aspects of Atlantis as utopic space. The challenge posed by Atlantis—the challenge posed by Tangier, in other words—is the challenge of the other in a world of languages and sexualities. In *Amour bilingue* (*Love in Two Languages*), Khatibi explores these themes. In that novel, about the overlap between love and language, he defines the gap inside translation as that gap that divides individuals—not only in person, but in narrative.

Qader, reading *Amour bilingue*, associates the text's slippage between the first-person narrator's "I" and "he" with the genre of the *récit* ("narrative") itself—a genre that fascinated Bowles too. The novel's story is "the story of the failure of encounter with one's own story" (151). *Amour bilingue*, for Qader, is a *récit* "not because it tells the story of a life . . . but because it constantly disrupts the time of possibility . . . shatter[ing] the ground upon which the narrative 'I' is founded" (151). Qader carefully dissects the places where the speaking "I" of the text yields to the third-person "he" and where the slippage of the narrative "I" within the ordering of time is connected to the pronoun itself, to having a pronoun that is "I" and not "he." "Love as thought," she concludes, "tells the story of the relationality between thought and other as love" (152).

That this complex interactive site of time, love, and language reappears in the 2008 dialogue with Weber should come as no surprise. To Khatibi, Atlantis represents a utopic space, as much as Tangier represents a space of possibility for Bowles. It is important to Khatibi that the location of Atlantis, both for Plato and for many Moroccans, was imagined to be off the coast of Tangier, beyond the Pillars of Hercules, a land formation on Morocco's Atlantic coast. Khatibi's reference to Tangier is notable—perhaps it is a sort of touristic remark for Weber, who was making his first trip to Morocco for these conversations. And yet, by placing this utopia on the Moroccan map, Khatibi leads us to associate Tangier's alleged corruption or fall from a putatively utopian internationalism with its much-discussed excesses of sexualities and idioms. Zeus's silence—the space between death and word (*mort et mot*)—figure the end of circulation found there.

In the decades of the international zone of Tangier (1925–56), the city itself posed both a challenge and an alternative to the national form. In the wake of World War II, it offered a putative antidote to decades of war and global crisis. I have referred to this historical formation as "queer Tangier" to name the simultaneous excesses of governmental systems, currencies, postal systems, sexualities, and languages that offered an exception to both the international order and its structuring safety valve (*Morocco Bound* 140–57). The year after the war ended, the local chamber of commerce suggested that Tangier serve as the site of the United Nations—a serious proposal, but one that was politically impossible. At the same moment, archeologists led by Harvard's Carleton Coon launched an exploration to find Atlantis off the Tangier coast.[6] The fascination with Atlantis in Tangier after World War II and Khatibi's 2008 discussion of Atlantis in the context of war, violence, and the cruelty of the twenty-first century are linked by what I call the excesses of plurality. That they terminate in silence, loss, and the end of circulation is their shared fate.

## Transatlantic Translation

The fourth dialogue revisits the transatlantic in a section on America and Morocco and on how each imagines the other. It is here that Khatibi brings Bowles into the conversation. Belghazi begins with an extended discussion of what role Morocco has played for Americans exploring their own national identity.[7] Khatibi makes a remark about Bowles that is at once descriptive and tantalizing:

> Cet écrivain, surtout nouvelliste, et compositeur de musique pour le cinéma, était le scribe de ses petits

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> amis analphabètes. Il transcrivait en américain le récit de leur "autobiographie." Curieux transfert de la langue orale arabe a l'écriture en anglo-américain: il n'y a pas de "texte original," rien qu'une traduction. Qui est l'auteur? Que veut dire cette signature entre le scribe et son ombre?
>
> (Khatibi and Weber 115–16)

> This writer, above all storywriter, and composer of music for cinema, was the scribe of his illiterate boyfriends. He transcribed into American English the recital of their "autobiography." Curious transfer from oral Arabic language to writing in Anglo-American. There is not an "original text," nothing but the translation. Who is the author? What does this signature between the scribe and his shadow mean?

As I remarked earlier, Khatibi has drawn attention to what he calls his own nonidentification (as sociologist, philosopher, writer, political theorist, etc.) and described it as a "bon obstacle" ("good obstacle"; 21) precisely because it allows him to work on himself or work on the "I": "il me permet de travailler sur moi, sur mon image dans le regard des autres, proches ou lointains" ("it permits me to work on myself, on my image with regard to others, close or distant"; 21). In Khatibi's description of the multiple aspects, or disciplines, of Bowles's career, there is a hint of identification with Bowles's own professional nonidentification.

Khatibi's reference to Bowles's illiterate—or "without alphabet"—boyfriends might in this context seem odd, a way of not taking the project seriously. The dismissive phrase recalls Ben Jelloun's homophobic review of Bowles's early translations some three decades earlier and forces us to consider a potentially anxious repetition.[8] But the dismissal may be categorical rather than homophobic. Belghazi has suggested to me that for Khatibi, "Mrabet and Choukri do not possess language. They use it and work around it, but it is never theirs." In this way, Khatibi's comment in *Maghreb pluriel* about the Maghrebi writer applies to them:

> Cet auteur n'écrit pas sa langue propre, il transcrit son nom propre transformé, il ne peut rien posséder (si tant soit peu on s'approprie une langue), il ne possède ni son parler maternel qui ne s'écrit pas, ni la langue arabe écrite qui est aliénée et donnée à une substitution, ni cette langue apprise et qui lui fait signe de se désapproprier en elle et de s'y effacer. (201)
>
> This author does not write his proper language, he transcribes his proper name transformed; he cannot possess anything (if ever one appropriates a language), he possesses neither his maternal speech that is not written nor the written Arabic language that is alienated and given to a substitution, nor this other learned language that signals him to disappropriate and erase himself therein.
>
> (*Plural Maghreb* 134–35)

Without alphabet, Mrabet and Choukri cannot enter into the rich movement between two languages that animates Khatibi's understanding of bilingualism.

By not possessing his own language, Mrabet might seem to fulfill Khatibi's definition of the Maghrebian writer, an intriguing possibility for the analphabetic Tanjawi. Khatibi indicates the complexity of Bowles's project in the next sentence of his remarks: "[Bowles] transcrivait en américain le récit de leur 'autobiographie'" ("Bowles transcribed into American English the recitation of their 'autobiography'"; Khatibi and Weber 115). Recalling Qader's discussion of the *récit*, I would like to suggest that the space between *récit* and *autobiographie* here represents the shift between the "je" and the "il"—the "I" and the "he"—that Bowles's project magnifies and makes interesting. Who is the "I" who speaks in the books authored by Mrabet and penned by Bowles but a "he"?

Indeed, Khatibi gives us another clue as to the potential link we might make between Bowles's work with Mrabet and his own, namely his invocation of one of his phrases for himself—"scribe"—from his 2008 self-portrait *Le scribe et son ombre* (*The Scribe and His Shadow*). Here we may glean Khatibi's potential interest in the textuality of Bowles's project, the disruptive play of textuality in which the translation is not preceded by a written text: Bowles's "curious transfer from oral Arabic language" into written English.

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Bowles's translation with no original not only represents a rupture with his own project—the Mrabet translations interrupt the Orientalist fiction and essays Bowles was writing in the 1950s—but disorients the principles by which we typically understand translation itself. The obsessive and varying formulations Bowles used to describe his process (in some cases the books were "translated," in others "taped and translated," and in yet others "edited and translated") suggest their elusive status (Edwards, *Morocco Bound* 237). I do not want to celebrate them or argue that they are liberating; Aboul-Ela emphasizes the continuities of the translation project with Bowles's fiction project. Yet Bowles's translations nonetheless disrupt colonial discourse and American Orientalism by posing friendship, collaboration, and translation as rubrics for a transatlantic conversation. To play on Khatibi's fascination with Atlantis, let us call them transatlantic translations.

In "Double Critique," composed by Khatibi in 1974 as Bowles was working with Mrabet in Tangier and then revised in 1981 for publication in *Maghreb pluriel*, Khatibi moves toward the bilingual. Khatibi quotes his friend Derrida's remarks about ethnology and discourse and then suggests an addition:

> Le lieu de notre parole et de notre discours est un lieu duel par notre *situation bilingue.* Lorsque nous nous laissons confronter entre deux métaphysiques . . . ne risquons-nous pas de passer de l'une à l'autre sans mettre au jour la traduction et le transport qui s'y opèrent, imperceptiblement, d'une archéologie à l'autre et d'une langue à l'autre? Certainement, c'est là le grand risqué. (*Maghreb pluriel* 57)

> The space of our speech and of our discourse is dual by virtue of our *bilingual situation*. When we allow ourselves to be confronted with two metaphysics . . . do we not run the risk of passing from one to the other without bringing to light the translation and the transportation that take place, imperceptibly, from one archeology to another and from one language to another? Certainly, this is the great risk involved. (*Plural Maghreb* 33)

Now, three decades later, in a different conjuncture, the dialogues of *Le chemin vers l'autre* offer an alternative possibility to imagine a triangular conversation (*parole tierce*) beyond the "bilingual situation." As the geopolitical arrangements of the twenty-first century reorganized relations between Morocco and France, the United States and American English would represent different forms of outside power and different challenges for linguistic identification in Morocco. The debates over Arabization and authentic Moroccan language would be replaced by the rise of global English in Morocco. Khatibi's thinking in the discussion with Weber, putatively his final published work, is a rich contribution to this discussion.

My juxtaposition of Paul Bowles and Mohammed Mrabet alongside Abdelkébir Khatibi intends to move the rubrics of francophone studies into a space where more languages and cultural forces are in play. My more basic goal, however, is to encourage new directions for scholars working in disparate fields: to those outside French and francophone studies that they read Khatibi's work, to those working in French studies that they consider the Bowles-Mrabet collaborations as integral to a robust knowledge of Morocco, and to those who work in Middle East and North African studies that they attend to the ways in which the modalities and issues of dialogue and translation open up an understanding of the period between the postcolonial and the global. Examining how Khatibi's thinking runs from the intimate or personal to the geopolitical may suggest a model for how literary studies and translation might matter to other disciplines.

## Notes

My thanks to Taieb Belghazi, yasser elhariry, and Matt Reeck for incisive readings of an earlier draft of this essay.

1. In 2019, at the Khatibi symposium held at Dartmouth College, only one or two participants had managed to acquire a copy—and not for a lack of trying—seven years after its publication.

2. Before Bowles's death in 1999, Mrabet had worked with two French collaborators—Éric Valentin and Simon-Pierre Hamelin—and between 2006 and 2011 produced four more books, which

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appeared in French. Might I suggest that Mrabet now has but two languages and neither is his own?

3. Here I am suggesting a link between what Abou-Ela calls "rank economics," the economics of translation, and *non-fungibility*, a word from economics that designates goods that may not easily be interchanged. In my own work on circulation ("Logics"; *After the American Century*), I have focused on what I call the "ends of circulation" to describe locations and texts where the global circulation of texts and cultural forms leads to untranslatable dead ends. This suggests a challenge to one prominent school of thought in the world literature debate, represented most famously by Pascale Casanova, whose work on world literature privileged the fungible or easily translatable. My point here is that the occlusion of the Mrabet-Bowles collaboration from discussions of world literature and from francophone studies is related to its non-fungibility.

4. Unattributed translations are mine.

5. Belghazi suggests in his remarks that Khatibi's primary obsessions at this point were the Platonic question of community, the concept of the ideal city as it moves from myth to philosophy, globalization, and internationalism.

6. This expedition is something I uncovered in the archives of the Tangier American Legation Museum, in the pages of a 1947 issue of the *Tangier Gazette*.

7. Belghazi introduces the topic through a discussion of my book *Morocco Bound* (2005), which I note here since I was implicitly a part of the conversation, though not present in the room.

8. In his inaugural column for *Le monde* (1972), Ben Jelloun attacked Bowles for his translation projects, which he called a "littérature bâtarde" ("bastard literature") marked by "une technique de viol" ("a technique of rape"). See Edwards, "Logics."

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