Introduction: Khatibi’s “Place of Hostage”

"MON DIEU! QUEL SUCCÈS!" SUCH WAS THE RESPONSE OF THE MOROCCAN NOVELIST, POET, AND SOCIOLOGIST ABDELKÉBIR KHATIBI (1938–2009) when he learned that his 1974 study of the “intersemiotics” of the Islamic body, *La blessure du nom propre* (“The Wound of the Proper Name”), which dealt, in part, with the monotheistic interdiction against tattoos, had inspired a reader to get a tattoo (*Language* 15).1 While one might be tempted to interpret this remark merely as Khatibi’s vindication of the affective powers of his writing, it in fact reveals an important element of his critical-literary practice: his way of bringing deconstruction to bear on the tasks of decolonization. The curious case of the tattooed reader illustrates how, by deconstructing holy writ’s apparent desire “to erase in a single palimpsestic gesture all later writing, especially that which is traced on the body” (*Blessure* 66), Khatibi helped create the conditions for somebody else to perform an act of auto-biography, understood as a form of mental and corporeal decolonization.

From his earliest essays, Khatibi was quick to acknowledge the affinity between Derrida’s critique of Western metaphysics and his own thinking. He reaffirmed this perspective after more than two decades in his “Lettre ouverte à Jacques Derrida” (“Open Letter to Jacques Derrida”): “I’ve always thought that what bears the name ‘deconstruction’ is a radical form of ‘decolonization’ of so-called Western thought” (*Language* 24). Khatibi split deconstruction into what he called a “double critique” that would allow him to take aim not only at Western thought but also at Arab and Islamic metaphysics.2 Khatibi’s doubling of poststructuralist critique redirected deconstruction in a way that would use to great effect in his important essays on the sedimentation of orientalist epistemologies and the need to decolonize knowledge and the institutional means of producing it.3

Khatibi’s “thinking friendship” with Derrida (*Jacques Derrida 7*) would reach a plateau in the dialogue that emerged out of the latter’s essay *Le monolinguisme de l’autre, ou la prothèse d’origine* (“The Monolingualism of the Other”) and his critique of the orientalized Semitic speaking subject in *La langue de l’autre* (New York: Mains Secrètes, 1999; print) is translated with the kind permission of the publisher.
"Names and Pseudonyms" opens the collection with a deflection of the problems associated with writing in the language of the former colonizer. Instead of deciding whether "Francophones" are "a community of hostages" in a foreign language and culture, Khatibi offers pseudonymy as a strategy for exercising and experimenting with the unreadability and opacity that writing fiction between two idioms affords. The pseudonym is crucial for Khatibi not merely in the sense that the orchestration of fictional characters in a novel allows him to experiment with alternative life possibilities but also because the interference between two languages provides a "cover" for Khatibi and allows him to tap into the "epistemic potential" of new ways of inhabiting the world through language, as Walter Mignolo claims in his reflections on the writer (45). "I name myself in two languages while unnaming myself," Khatibi writes in Amour bilingue ("Love in Two Languages"). "I unname myself by reciting myself" (89).

Khatibi's reclamation here of what Édouard Glissant calls "the right to opacity" (e.g., 10–11) is all the more striking given the focus in the other two essays on the textual intricacies and principles of construction regulating his 1990 novel Un été à Stockholm ("A Summer in Stockholm"). The second essay details the Oulipian formulas used to generate the novel (allegorical characters set in motion through a magic square), the superimposition of mobile images in the spirit of Bergman and Baudelairean flânerie, and the organization of all the elements of the novel into a distributed network of affective relations through syntax; one can easily imagine why he titled both the essay and a chapter in the novel "Cold Ecstasy." The narrator's admission, toward the end of Un été à Stockholm, that "this narrative is not a roman à clef" (156) doubtlessly holds the key to the play of clarity and opacity, of light and shadows, that Khatibi's essays and novel project onto each other: the key used to generate the novel cannot be used to decode it.

In "Technography," Khatibi explains how he conceived Un été à Stockholm as an interactive text that would redeploy idioms that have been "digitized" to alter the body and sensibility. The
stunning conclusion to this essay hails the "trans-migration" of a "new person" across temporal borders (from the twentieth century to the twenty-first), generic frontiers (from the essay form to that of fiction), and ontological categories (from human to cyborg). While this birth of the new echoes Frantz Fanon's famous call, at the end of Les damnés de la terre ("The Wretched of the Earth"), for a decolonized "new man" ("homme neuf"); 376, let me suggest that we read Khatibi's new person as not quite human. As his experimentation with the gender mutations inherent in the "bilanguage" illustrate (in texts such as Le livre du sang ["The Book of Blood"] and Amour bilingue), this figure will not be identifiable or specifiable but rather masked by pseudonymy, almost unreadable, and animated by an incommunicable desire.

Khatibi helped initiate a yawning gap in the French language in which Arabic, Berber, and Islamic forms of knowledge might gain access to global comparativism and poststructuralist thought from within, even as his oeuvre exposed poststructuralist critique to the "other-thinking" ("pensée-autre") of Arabo-Berber-Islamic modalities of writing and thought. Sadly, the dearth of translation of and scholarship about Khatibi in languages other than French and Arabic has kept him in his place of hostage in the French language. One hopes that the twenty-first century witnesses a reincarnation of Khatibi in other languages along with other ways of thinking beyond the false divide that would isolate "worldly" critical decolonization from "otherworldly" theoretical experimentation.

3. On Khatibi's critique of orientalism, see "L'orientalisme désorienté" (113-45) and "Décolonisation de la sociologie" (47-62), also in Maghreb pluriel.

4. In his analysis of the exchange between Derrida and Khatibi, Walter Mignolo comes to a similar conclusion, writing that "Khatibi and Derrida are not on the same side of the colonial difference" (85).

WORKS CITED


BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

DAVID FIENI is a Mellon postdoctoral fellow and visiting assistant professor of French at Cornell University. His current projects include a book-length manuscript entitled "Decadent Orientalisms," which demonstrates how the figure of decadence is constitutive of colonial modernity, and an exploration of graffiti as a form of "nomad grammatology" written on sites as distinct as the French banlieue and the Israeli security wall.

CATHY PORTER, visiting professor at the Society for the Humanities, Cornell University, and professor of French emerita at the State University of New York College at Cortland, is the translator of some three dozen books in the humanities and social sciences.

NOTES

1. Translations other than those from Khatibi's "Testimonial Exercises" are mine.

2. For an elaboration of this critical strategy, see the essays collected in Maghreb pluriel, especially "Pensée-autre" (9-59) and "Double critique" (43-111).