

## Heteroglossia and the Poetics of the *Roman Maghrébin*

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### ABSTRACT

Tracing both the critical relevance and translational migration of Mikhail Bakhtin's 1935 essay "Discourse in the Novel" in the Maghreb, this essay explores the theoretical landscape of the *roman maghrébin* over the last 50 years with a particular emphasis on Morocco. Focusing on the critical concepts of heteroglossia and heterology, it argues that the Arabophone and Francophone Maghrebi novel continues to be written and theorized as *pluralistic*, *polyphonic*, and *polysemic*. The *roman maghrébin* thus disrupts those monoglossic and monolithic assumptions that inform a view of the novel as the genre par excellence for the hegemonic institutionalization of national identity, language, and literature. As such, the *roman maghrébin* relies upon a literary-critical poetics of opacity and untranslatability that in turn engenders particular reading practices and publics. This rendering of the novel as always already under translation, and yet untranslatable, further serves to destabilize not only the formal category of the novel, but also false binaries of the secular/sacred, personal/political and private/public.

**KEYWORDS** Heteroglossia; Bakhtin; Maghreb; Francophone; Arabic; novel

This is not a trade. It is a mobile position in the world. It is the ability to cross borders: between languages, between civilizations, between markets.


Abdekebir Khatibi (Quoted in Kilito *Je parle toutes les langues, mais en arabe*)<sup>1</sup>

These distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization—this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel.

Mikhail M. Bakhtin ("Discourse in the Novel")

### Theoretical migrations: Moscow-paris-rabat-cairo

In 1987 the renowned Moroccan novelist and literary critic Muḥammad Barrāda published a translation of Mikhail Bakhtin's seminal 1935 essay

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“Discourse in the Novel” as *al-Khaṭ ab al-Riwāʿī* [Novelistic Discourse] with the major Cairo publishing house *Dar al-Fikr*. Bakhtin’s essay introduces the interrelated concepts of *heteroglossia* and *heterology*, which are often collapsed into “plurilinguisme” or “heteroglossia” in the standard French and English translations.<sup>2</sup> As Bakhtin scholar Karine Zbinden elaborates, while heteroglossia [*raznoiazychie*] refers to the multiplicity of national languages within one culture, the neologism heterology [*razorechie*] speaks to the “coexistence within one natural language (‘national’ in Bakhtin’s terminology) of ‘socio-ideological languages’ [...] the internal heterogeneity of one single natural language” (Zbinden 69).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, heterology calls attention to the *extralinguistic* conditions—social, cultural, spiritual, psychological, and political—that render each utterance a singular moment that “permits a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized)” (Bakhtin, “Discourse” 263). According to Bakhtin, the genre of the novel most clearly encapsulates heterology through its wealth of voices and speech genres—defined as the various oral and written “sphere[s] in which language is used”—as well as its dynamic relationship with living forms of language both inside and outside the world of the novel (Bakhtin, Speech 60).<sup>4</sup> Unlike many of his Formalist and Structuralist counterparts at the turn of the century, Bakhtin argues that novelistic discourse functions outside of a hermetically sealed sign system. His conceptualization of language thus relies on literature as a *public* site through which *social* meaning is generated. Heteroglossia and heterology then refer respectively to the relational as well as internal dimensions of linguistic heterogeneity—concepts that resonate deeply in the context of the Maghreb, and particularly within the *roman maghrébin*.

In his lengthy critical introduction to the translation, Barrāda highlights the importance of Bakhtin’s theories to the evolution and innovation [*al-tatawar wa al-tajdid*] of the novel in Maghrebi *belles lettres* and criticism [*al-ādab wa al-naqd*] (Barrāda 20–23). His Arabic translation, which also includes a glossary of critical terms, relies upon Daria Olivier’s 1978 French translation: *Esthétique et théorie du roman*, as well as its French Structuralist mediation through Tzvetan Todorov’s *Le Principe Dialogique*.<sup>5</sup> Barrāda’s subtle mistranslation of the essay’s title consequently mirrors the French edition’s emphasis on the genre’s autonomous formal qualities, rather than on the social and aesthetic dimensions of discourse *within and through* the novel. His translation of Olivier’s *plurilinguisme* alternatively as *al-tʿadud al-lughawī* [polylinguistic] and *al-tʿadud al-lisānī*, [polylingual], however, suggests a more thoughtful engagement with Bakhtin and the work of Todorov.<sup>6</sup> While *al-tʿadud al-lughawī* encapsulates a multiplicity of languages, or heteroglossia, the use of the term *lisānī*, etymologically from *lisān* or tongue, is more closely aligned with Todorov’s translation of the Bakhtinian neologism as *hétérologie*.<sup>7</sup>

This anecdote of traveling (mis)translations thus rather succinctly illustrates some of the intersecting ideologies underlying the production, circulation and transculturation of Maghrebi literature and its theorization across both Arabic and French. Barrāda's intellectual interest in translating Bakhtin for an Arabophone audience reveals the investment of the Moroccan left—even its most vocal proponents of Arabization—in theorizing Maghrebi literature through the problematic of heteroglossia/heterology. That such a translation relied on French as both a linguistic and theoretical mediator exposes the imprint that French cultural imperialism left on the conceptualization of Maghrebi aesthetic theory with respects to the genre of the novel. It further echoes the fact that Bakhtin's critical project—conceived while in internal exile in Kazakhstan amidst expansive Stalinization—was itself imbricated in a geopolitical and socio-cultural economy inflected by the colonial imagination.<sup>8</sup> The “Bakhtin Circle,” as his philosophical school of thought came to be known, was interested in how individual speech acts—both oral and written—can disrupt the centralization and institutionalization of national language and culture.<sup>9</sup> Hence, Bakhtin's theory of *dialogization* addresses the ways in which authoritative speech, language and discourse may be upended, desacralized, and relativized in literary forms such as the novel.<sup>10</sup>

In what follows, I examine how these translational migrations and slip-pages can be read alongside the Maghreb's own fraught relationship to the hegemonic nature of Arabic and French across both “secular” and “sacred” registers. Engaging with Bakhtin's theories of heteroglossia, heterology and dialogism, as concepts in active critical circulation within the Maghreb, I propose that the *roman maghrébin* unsettles the genre of the novel as a repository of monoglossic and monolithic narratives of national identity, language and literature. I further maintain that the *roman maghrébin* cannot be conceptualized outside of its interlocution with the broader tradition of Arabic letters. This entails conceiving of the Maghreb as both a geopolitical space—etymologically ‘the place where the sun sets’ from the Arabic root *gh-r-b* or “to set”—as well as a creative site for the actualization of thought; or in the words of Khatibi, “the Maghreb as a horizon of thought.”<sup>11</sup> Focusing primarily on Moroccan Arabophone and Franco-phone critical works, this essay traces the unique formal and aesthetic preoccupations of the Maghrebi literary scene. I further interrogate how the *roman maghrébin* has come to embody a particular poetics that in turn generates specific reading practices and publics. This rendering of the novel as always already under translation, and yet untranslatable, serves to destabilize not only conventional notions of the novel, but also false binaries of the secular/sacred, personal/political, and private/public. In so doing, this essay considers, (how) do theory and literary genres travel or translate? How is this impacted by the dynamic between globality and historical

specificity? And finally, how can literature, and specifically the novel as a space that literally dialogizes speech, come to embody multiple sites within one language—namely, to write French but not *in French*?

### Novel approaches: Theory & praxis

Prior to and long after Muḥammad Barrāda's translation of Bakhtin in 1987, literary critics across the Maghreb have been theorizing the region's unique linguistic heterogeneity and writing fictional works that bring this to the forefront. Moroccan theorist and novelist Abdelkebir Khatibi's groundbreaking 1968 *Le Roman maghrébin*, for example, offers a critical catalogue of Maghrebi literary production that highlights its intertwined aesthetic, formal, and socio-political dimensions. Barrāda translated the work in 1980 under the reworked title *Fi al-Kitābah wa al-Tajriba* [On Writing and Experimentation]—signaling Khatibi's continued relevance to both Francophone and Arabophone audiences alike. In his 1981 essay "Pensée autre" published in the collection *Maghreb Pluriel*, Khatibi further theorizes the region as both a decentered and decentering space. He argues that the Maghreb's geopolitical, linguistic, and cultural heterogeneity engenders new modalities of thinking, being and writing. Khatibi further cautions that "one must listen to the Maghreb resound in its plurality (linguistic, cultural, political)" (39). He thus conceives of the region as a site in perpetual motion, but one that also resists the epistemological trappings of the nation-state by "globalizing of its own accord" [se mondialiser pour son propre compte] (39). Khatibi's above formulation may certainly be situated within the particular historical realities of the Maghreb—its ethno-linguistic diversity, as well as its geopolitical location on the threshold of Northern Africa, the Mediterranean and the Middle East. However, I also propose reading the genealogy of Maghrebi cultural production against the grain of dominant narratives within the intellectual history of the Arab world. Inflected by a colonial temporality, such narratives trace the migration of literary capital from Western Europe through the Arab East [*Mashriq*—largely during the nineteenth-century cultural "renaissance" known as the *Nahda*—with the Maghreb serving as a no-man's-land between, or cultural sponge to the "East" and "West."

As I argue elsewhere, the very bifurcation of Arabophone and Francophone Maghrebi literature into distinct spheres of study is shaped, on the one hand, by geopolitical interests—both (neo)colonial and (neo)liberal—and on the other, by the institutional structuring of disciplines and departments, as well as the commercial interests of the global publishing world.<sup>12</sup> For example, area studies departments in the United States, and to a lesser extent Europe, rely on either a geographical demarcation—generally *Near Eastern* or *Middle Eastern*—or a philological orientation—such as Arabic or French.

In both cases, the Maghreb, and particularly its non-Arabophone communities, are excluded or divided across different programs. I have thus advocated for the inclusion of Francophone Maghrebi literature under the expanded rubric of *Arab/ic literatures*, which encompasses the diverse communities of the broader Arab and Arabophone world without privileging Arabic as a primary signifier of ethno-national identity. This disrupts the concept of an original national language by calling attention to the Maghreb's fraught relationship with Arabic as an arguably "colonial language" that displaced Berberophone languages during its violent introduction in the seventh century. Moroccan theorist 'Abdelfattah Kilito, for example, describes his anxieties surrounding both Classical Arabic and French as exemplar literary languages, but also as the languages of officially sanctioned culture.<sup>13</sup> Impossible to use "correctly," he labels them the languages "of fault [...] and risks" (Kilito 15–16). In contrast to the evolving colloquial Arabic(s) of the Maghreb's various ethno-linguistic communities, Classical and Modern Standard Arabic [MSA] are privileged as the torchbearers of official—literary, state and religious—culture. The Maghreb is thus caught between multiple *loci of enunciation*—as Walter Mignolo so aptly dubs the geopolitics of language and its relationship to the creation, articulation and sustaining of hegemonic epistemologies (Mignolo 120–4). Such concerns are further complicated by the highly political nature of Arabization policies across the region during the last 50 years. During the Algerian civil war of the 1990s, for example, Francophone intellectuals such as Tahar Djaout were the casualties of violent clashes between the government and various dissident Islamist groups. By contrast, Berberophone languages have recently become sanctioned as official national languages, and the use of colloquial Arabic has increased in television, film, and literature. The tensions between authoritative language and vernacular speech are thus both troubled and constantly shifting in the Maghreb.

In this context, the genre of the novel poses a series of both opportunities and limitations. In the politically charged moment of 1968, Khatibi's taxonomy of the Arabophone and Francophone *roman maghrébin* relies upon the understanding that it is "an imported literary genre" (Khatibi 14). He further highlights the structural and thematic embeddedness of the *roman maghrébin* within the political and social struggles of decolonization and nationalism. For both Khatibi and Bakhtin the novel exposes and disrupts the ways in which language is enmeshed in social, historical and political structures of power, as well as their attendant systems of meaning. It thus circulates within and across the various discursive registers and speech genres that stratify a given social context. In this regard, the novel can be read as both the product of and one of the generative forces behind the shifting configurations of a linguistic community. I am thus proposing that the *roman maghrébin* has long been and continues to be theorized as an active agent in the shaping of

Maghrebi understandings of literary and linguistic consciousness as inherently *pluralistic*, *polyphonic*, and *polysemic*. It is no coincidence then that the vast majority of Maghrebi novelists are public intellectuals engaged in both the creative and critical processes of refashioning language. Khatibi alludes to this in *Le Roman maghrébin* when he graphs the statistics of Maghrebi writers to show that 80% of novelists by 1968 were academics by profession (35). Moreover, this trend has continued into the present across Arabophone and Francophone intellectuals residing both in the Maghreb and abroad.

In the Moroccan context, for example, there is a clear continuity within the critical lexicon employed by literary theorists across the last 50 years such as: ‘Abdullāh al-‘Arwī [Abdallah Laroui], Abdellat if Lāabi, ‘Abdelfattah Kilito, Muḥammad Barrāda, Muḥammad Amanašūr, Sa‘īd Yaqtīne, Aḥmad al-Madīnī, Bensālem Ḥimmich, Abdellah Baīda, Bashir Qamari and Mohamed Leftah.<sup>14</sup> These theorist-novelists have forged a path between the drive for innovation—encapsulated by such critical concepts as *ibdā‘* [creation], *tajdīd* [renewal], *taṭawar* [development/evolution] and *tajrib* [experimentation]—and attempts to thematically and formally reimagine the Arabic cultural heritage or *turāth*.<sup>15</sup> In his recent book *al-Riwāyah wa-turāth al-sardī* [The Novel and the [Arab/ic] Narrative Heritage] Moroccan theorist and novelist Sa‘īd Yaqtīne suggests that the broader Arab/ic *turāth* be treated not as a static object of the past to be either emulated or avoided, but rather as a narrative and thematic wellspring to be creatively reworked into an evolving form.<sup>16</sup> Yaqtīne thus takes us beyond Khatibi’s delineation of the novel as an imported genre to instead consider its dialogic relationship with other autochthonous modes of narrativity. Moreover, he opens the text with a quote from Bakhtin on the novel’s parodic stylization of other canonized genres, and how this reveals the dialectic between language and form (Yaqtīne 6).<sup>17</sup> Yaqtīne, like the above theorists, thus demonstrates that writing the *roman maghrébin* entails a particular theorization of its poetics, and by extension its various reading publics.

### Untranslatability and multilingual reading

Bilingual Moroccan theorist Abdelfattah Kilito, who infamously penned *Lan Tatakalam Lughati* [Thou Shall Not Speak My Language] in 2002—which irreverently traces the ideological, political and affective undercurrents of Arabic translation and linguistic mastery—recently published another theoretical work with an equally provocative title: *Je parle toutes les langues, mais en arabe* [I speak all languages, but in Arabic]. The title of the book—a monolingual declaration *in French* of the author’s polylingual abilities *in Arabic*—renders legible the playfulness with which Kilito, among other Maghrebi intellectuals, explores the plasticity as well as the politics of language in the context of the Maghreb. Notably, it alludes to a line from Kafka describing

himself as a young artist in Prague during the Austro-Hungarian empire: “You see, I speak all languages, but in Yiddish” (Kafka 290 in Kilito 34). This reappropriation of Kafka’s words—a writer of Jewish Czech origin who wrote exclusively in German—highlights the political stakes of being caught between multiple languages and their various written as well as oral registers. Kilito, however, expands on Kafka’s adage to suggest that the Maghrebi writer is necessarily writing in multiple languages—French and Arabic (in both its literary and vernacular forms), not to mention Tamazight and Kabyle for some Berberophones: “We all live the experience of plurilingualism in the same language” (Benabdelali in Kilito 55).

While Kilito suggests that Maghrebi literature is oriented towards a multitude of readers, “the real [*vraie*] reader, corresponding to the singularity of writing [*la singularité de l’écriture*], seems to be the privileged reader who masters both languages of the author [...] French and Arabic, specifically Moroccan Arabic (some surahs of the Qur’an should also be familiar)” (Kilito 139-40). He thus unapologetically adheres to a model of literary untranslatability, suggesting that certain modes of literarity are incommensurable with translation. While his formulation is based on an understanding of Maghrebi literature as inherently heterologic and polysemic, I would argue that it is also rooted in a particular Maghrebi literary poetics that consciously orients itself towards opacity and untranslatability. In so doing, Maghrebi literature calls attention to the instability of semiotic categories, while also disrupting the identitarian claims of hegemonic discursive and ethno-linguistic communities. Kilito closes his work by suggesting that in its very formal qualities, the *roman maghrébin* engenders its own particular reading practices. Like a number of Maghrebi critics and authors, he demonstrates that the *roman maghrébin* necessitates engaging with the texts’s simultaneous embeddedness within and transformation of its social and linguistic context. Kilito thus reminds his reader that heterologic writing requires multilingual reading: “The question: in what language do you write? does not make sense unless it is completed by this other blithely overlooked one: in what language do you read?” (Kilito, 140).

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## Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.
2. In their translations and critical commentary, the preeminent Bakhtin scholars Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist employ the phrases “social voices” or “social heteroglossia” instead of *heterology*.

3. Other variations include heterologic [*raznorechivoe*] and heterological [*raznorechivyi*]. While Zbinden offers a fascinating and thorough analysis of the Franco-English translational politics of Bakhtin, she does not examine Barrāda's Arabic edition.
4. Bakhtin cites among his many examples of speech genres: militaristic speech, scientific statements, rhetorical speech (both political and judicial), as well as everyday speech. Such spheres subscribe to special "lexical, phraseological, and grammatical resources of the language" and indicate a certain adherence to "the national unity of language" (Bakhtin *Speech* 60–61). It is worth noting, that while the novel takes theoretical precedence in "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin elsewhere emphasizes the heterologic dimensions of other speech genres, both oral and written. See: *Rabelais and His World, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics and Speech Genres*.
5. Barrāda cites Todorov's text in the copyright section of his translation. Todorov has also published an essay in the collected volume *Du bilinguisme* alongside Khatibi, Kilito and other renowned Maghrebi theorist-novelists.
6. The terms appear side-by-side in the critical index of the translation. Barrāda coins the phrase *sūgh ḥawārī*—literally "dialogic formulation"—to translate the French *dialogisation*.
7. For Todorov's explanation of the term *hétérologie* in distinction to *hétéroglossie* or *hétérophonie* see *Le Principe Dialogique* (Todorov 88-93). As Zbinden elaborates, Todorov's translation emphasizes the etymological distinction between *logos* ["word"] and *glotta* ["tongue" or "natural language"] (Zbinden 77).
8. On Bakhtin's context, political views and exile, see Katarina Clark and Michael Holquist's biography *Mikhail Bakhtin*. On Russian "self-colonization," see Alexander Etkind's *Internal Colonization*.
9. The group included Matvei Isaevich Kagan (1889-1937); Pavel Nikolaevich Medvedev (1891–1938); Lev Vasilievich Pumpianskii (1891–1940); Valentin Nikolaevich Voloshinov (1895–1936) and Ivan Ivanovich Sollertinskii (1902–1944) among others. Voloshinov's 1929 *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* is a pivotal text in this regard. Notably, its authorship was largely contested for many years during which it was misattributed to Bakhtin. See the translators's preface and introduction (Voloshinov vii–6).
10. Bakhtin's book *Rabelais and His World* speaks to this phenomenon through the lens of the carnivalesque.
11. An earlier version of Khatibi's essay "Pensée-autre," which appears in his collection *Maghreb Pluriel*, was titled "Le Maghreb comme horizon de pensée." For a detailed discussion of this metaphor in Khatibi's work, see Harrison's "Cross-Cultural."
12. See El Shakry "Lessons from the Maghreb."
13. Kilito is certainly not alone in this regard. In the Algerian context, Rachid Boudjedra, Assia Djebar, Malek Haddad, and Tahar Djaout have expressed similar sentiments.
14. Notably, their critical works were published through Paris, Cairo or Beirut until the early 2000s, when much of Moroccan critical and literary production in Arabic, and to a lesser extent French, shifted to various domestic private, state and university presses in Rabat and Casablanca, such as: Maṭ ba' al-M'ārīf al-Jadidah, Dār al-'Amān, Wizārat al-Thaqāfah, Dār al-Thaqāfa, al-Marqaz al-Thaqāfi al-'Arabī, Sharikat al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzi' al-Madāris, Dār al-Nashr al-Maghribiyyah, al-Rābitah and La Croisée des Chemins.
15. The innovative neo-historical fiction of the Moroccan philosopher Bensālem Ḥimmich is a fascinating example in this regard.



16. Yaqtīne explicitly borrows the terms *hypotext* and *hypertext* from Gérard Genette's narratology.
17. The Arabic quote is unattributed but appears to be from Barrāda's translation of "Discourse in the Novel."

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