

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

The Ontology of Becoming

HODA EL SHAKRY

Cette pensée autre, cet “encore innommable” est peut-être une promesse, le signe d’un avenir dans un monde à transformer. Tâche sans fin, sans doute. Cependant, dans la pensée (appelons-la ainsi), il n’y a pas de miracle, il n’y a que des ruptures.

—Abdelkébir Khatibi, “Double critique”

This other-thought, this “as-yet unnamable,” is perhaps a promise, the sign of a happening in a world to be transformed. Doubtless, an endless task. However, in thought (let us call it thus), there are no miracles, only ruptures.

—Abdelkébir Khatibi, “Double Critique”

[A]ucun dieu n’assistera désormais à notre mort, aucun ange, aucun démon non plus. Notre subversion . . . est de faire descendre le paradis et l’enfer dans une pensée-autre, face au seul visible.

—Abdelkébir Khatibi, “Pensée-autre”

[No] god will henceforth attend our death, no angel, and no demon either. Our subversion . . . is to bring down heaven and hell in an other-thought, facing only the visible.

—Abdelkébir Khatibi, “Other-Thought”

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Charting an epistemic imaginary of apocalyptic ruptures and subversive afterlives, Abdelkébir Khatibi invites us to think, write, and exist otherwise. This conceptual and formal experimentation imbues his interdisciplinary writings as a sociologist, semiotician, philosopher, cultural critic, and literary author. Woven throughout this prolific oeuvre are the critical praxes of *double critique* and *pensée-autre*—concepts that have garnered significant scholarly attention in recent years.¹ *Double critique* can be summarized as the simultaneous decentering of European colonial epistemes and totalizing—often

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theocratic—systems of thought and rule.² Offering an alternative mode of cognition and being, *pensée-autre* promises a way out of the (post)colonial double-bind that begins from “son dehors impensé tout en radicalisant la marge, non seulement dans une *pensée en arabe*, mais dans une pensée autre qui parle *en langues*” (“its unthought-of-outside while radicalizing the margin, not only in a *thought in Arabic*, but also in an other-thought that speaks *in tongues*”; *Maghreb pluriel* 63; *Plural Maghreb* 38). Speculative at its core, *pensée-autre* embraces “le Maghreb, comme horizon de pensée” (“the Maghreb as a horizon of thought”) in a practice of perpetual “transformations critiques” (“critical transformations”; 24; 11) oriented toward the “encore innommable” (“as-yet-unnameable”; 63; 38).

Far less consideration, however, has been directed toward how these principles intersect with Khatibi’s reflections on Islam, which appear across a diverse range of texts—from studies of carpets, tattoos, and calligraphy to meditations on semiotics, bilingualism, and orientalism. The eclectic nature of this archive brings into relief the centrality of thinking through and with Islamic intellectual traditions and practices to Khatibi’s broader philosophical oeuvre. It further demonstrates Khatibi’s commitment to *intersemiotique* (intersemiotic) modes of analysis that attend to the migrational and intermedial movement of signs across different semiotic systems (Feriani et al.). This essay explores how Khatibi’s (re)readings of the Qur’an, prophetic revelation, and mysticism simultaneously theorize and model *double critique* and *pensée-autre*. When examined in relation to these praxes, Khatibi’s writings on Islamic history, philosophy, and devotional practices introduce an ethics of *l’impensée* (the unthought) and *l’innommable* (the unnameable). I put this body of work into conversation with the Tunisian writer and philosopher Abdelwahab Meddeb (1946–2014) and with Khatibi’s experimental novel *Le livre du sang* (*The Book of Blood*). Read paratactically, Khatibi’s corpus illuminates an ontology of becoming—namely, a speculative, critical praxis of the self and the social that cuts across ethical and aesthetic registers.

Divine Intersign(s)

Allah tient en son sein l’interprétation des signes et en même temps il affirme la clarté de son message. Le Coran désigne ainsi le signe dans sa double face de voilement/ dévoilement. Dieu caché.

—Abdelkébir Khatibi, *La blessure du nom propre*

Allah holds in his breast the interpretation of signs and, at the same time, he affirms the clarity of his message. Thus, the Qur’an marks the sign in its double face of veiling and unveiling. A hidden god.

—Abdelkébir Khatibi, “Excerpts from Abdelkébir Khatibi, *La blessure du nom propre*” (trans. amended)

The Janus-faced practice of *double critique* targets the dialectic between “Western” and “Islamic” epistemes that lies at the heart of Khatibi’s sociological Weltanschauung. Amid the internal contradictions of French imperialism and subsequent consolidation of power under the emerging forces of decolonization, one tributary of Moroccan Islam leads to a doctrinal form of political theology that venerates the past.³ Khatibi describes this ideology, often misidentified as Salafism, as “le traditionalisme” or “*la métaphysique réduite à la théologie*” (“traditionalism” or “*metaphysics reduced to theology*”; *Maghreb pluriel* 24; *Plural Maghreb* 12).⁴ This Heideggerian “onto-théo-logie” (“onto-theo-logy”; 120; 75) supplants divine ontology by enshrining God’s qualities of being “immuable et éternel, invisible et absent” (“unchanging and eternal, invisible and absent”; 29; 15) into rigid religious dogma. Such a recursive reliance on mythic historical precedent goes against the future-oriented nature of *pensée-autre*—a critical ethos that Khatibi upholds across his interdisciplinary oeuvre. Contextualizing his own excavational approach to Islamic history, he notes, “Toute lecture ou relecture de notre patrimoine (*tourāth*), et tout regard posé sur cette gloire du passé, n’ont de poids décisif pour nous que comme *levier* à une double critique” (“Every reading or rereading of our heritage [*turath*] and every gaze at this glory of the past can have a decisive value for us only as a *lever* to a double critique”; 20; 8).

While the spectrum of practices and beliefs encompassed by Sufism have long been a part of

the diverse social and spiritual landscape of Moroccan Islam,⁵ Khatibi charts an alternative to ontotheology in the evolution of Islamic metaphysics into “une ontologie proprement mystique” (“a properly mystical ontology”; 27; 13, trans. amended).⁶ Associated with transcendental philosophies of being and esoteric hermeneutics, known as *تاويل* (*ta'wil*), this ecstatic thought and practice—championed by such figures as the jurist-theologian Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (1058–1111)—“conduit l'épistémè arabe classique jusqu'à ses limites théologiques” (“drove the classical Arab episteme to its theological limits”; 27; 13).⁷ As this tradition “subvertit la théologie et la décentre” (“subverts theology and decenters it”), Khatibi problematically opposes it to so-called “islam orthodoxe” (“orthodox Islam”), which, he argues, “refoule . . . la pensée mystique” (“represses . . . mystical thought”; 136; 87). Although he dramatically cleaves Islam into orthodox and mystical strains—a move also at the heart of French colonial policies in the Maghreb and the neo-orientalist rhetoric of the European Right⁸—Khatibi does so in order to demonstrate how both trajectories originate from and adapt the divine intersign.⁹ He therefore invokes historical figures—such as al-Ghazālī and the controversial Persian mystics Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj (858–922) and Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (1154–1191)—not in a gesture of nostalgic remembrance for the purported golden age of Islam, but rather to probe the imaginative potentiality of the mystical “expérience extatique de l'être” (“ecstatic experience of being”; 30; 15) in relation to *pensée-autre*.¹⁰

Khatibi's bifurcated analysis of Islamic metaphysics highlights the centrality of semiotic visuality—and particularly the sites of reading and writing—to both ontotheology and mystical ontology. As the privileged language of revelation, Arabic undergirds a metaphysical order in which divine speech is inscribed within—but also crucially exceeds—the Qur'an, whose miraculous nature hinges on both its revelatory origins and its fundamental aesthetic inimitability, or *الإعجاز* (*al-i'jaz*). The Arabic language, like the holy text itself, circumscribes a cosmogonical hermeneutics of “le visible à l'invisible, le présent à l'absent, la terre au

ciel” (“the visible and the invisible, the present and the absent, earth and heaven”; 21; 9). If the textualist turns to the Qur'an as the ultimate fount of signs reflecting divine unknowability and presence-absence,¹¹ then the mystic at once looks inward and outward: “il étoile l'homme et l'univers de signes visibles, audibles, palpables, bref, lisibles” (“he lavishes visible, audible and tactile—in short, readable—signs upon humankind and the universe”; *La blessure* 18; “Excerpts” 335).¹² By extending Qur'anic modes of reading, Khatibi redefines a mystical tradition that maps Islamic hermeneutical principles onto material signs across the corpus of divine creation.

Khatibi's study on Arabic calligraphy, written in collaboration with Mohamed Sijelmassi, demonstrates the capaciousness of Islamic modes of reading by accentuating the intertwining of orality and textuality within Qur'anic revelation and scripture. It opens with the assertion that “[a]vant de croire, tu est d'abord un lecteur” (“[y]ou are first and foremost a reader, then a believer”; *L'art calligraphique* 6; *Splendor* 6). Khatibi notes not only that the name Qur'an itself references literacy but also that the first word of the holy text revealed to the Prophet Muhammad through the angel Gabriel was the command *اقرأ* (*iqra*)—signaling both to read and to recite—from the sura *al-'Alaq* (96.1).¹³ A kind of intersemiotic urtext, the Qur'an explicitly “se conçoit comme une théorie radicale du signe, de la Parole et de l'Écriture; *al-qur'an*: lecture, déchiffrement et récitation du signe révélé” (“defines itself as a radical theory of the sign, of the Word and of Writing; *al-qur'an*—the reading, parsing and recitation of the revealed sign”; *La blessure* 17; “Excerpts” 334–35). It does so through its presentation as a divine speech act that is (re)mediated through writing, reading, and recitation across the semiotic terrains of mind, body, and spirit.

Qur'anic intersemiotics are exemplified in the figure of the *قلم* (*qalam*)—a writing implement signifying divine knowledge in the sura *al-'Alaq*, which declares:

أَفْرَأَوْ رَبُّكَ الْأَكْرُمَ (٣) الَّذِي عَلَّمَ بِالْقَلَمِ (٤) عَلَّمَ الْإِنْسَانَ مَا لَمْ يَعْلَمْ (٥)
(96.3–5)

Read—for thy Sustainer is the Most Bountiful One (3) who has taught [man] the use of the pen (4)—taught man what he did not know! (5) (Asad 1099)¹⁴

Referred to as the “*langue de la main*” (“tongue of the hand”) and “*l’âme de la parole*” (“soul of the spoken word”; *La blessure* 178, 181; “Excerpts” 339, 40), Khatibi’s writing instrument sacralizes and inscribes divine logos. His repeated intertextuality with this specific sura stresses the intersemiotic nature of Qur’anic knowledge practices across the acts of reading, reciting, and writing, while upholding “the will and ability to acquire knowledge” as a somatic and ethical imperative of human existence within a Qur’anic episteme (Asad 1099).

The importance of embodiment across Qur’anic modes of knowledge production is most explicitly figured in the Prophet Muhammad as the bodily vessel of divine revelation. Khatibi clarifies how the moment of revelation itself speaks to embodiment’s crucial role in Islamic ontotheology:

Ce qu’on désigne par l’impératif de Gabriel ordonnant à Muhammad de lire et de répéter le Nom propre d’Allah en “ouvrant la poitrine,” c’est bien cette théorie du souffle qui traverse le corps (dans le sens strict: le Coran descend dans le corps), et le sépare, le plie en signes distincts, afin que le croyant éprouve ses fibres comme autant de feuilles cristallines du texte. L’intersigne prophétique est un souffle, un discours extatique, dont la plasticité est régie, comptabilisée, voilée/dévoilée dans le corps: “Ne suis point ce dont tu n’as pas connaissance! L’ouïe, la vue, le cœur, de tout cela il sera demandé compte.” (*La blessure* 17–18)

What we mean by Gabriel’s command to Muhammed to read and to repeat the Name of Allah in “opening his chest” is exactly the theory of the breath that passes through the body (in the exact sense that the Qur’an descends into the body) and that splits it, that folds it into distinct signs, so the believer experiences these fibres as so many crystalline leaves of the text. The prophetic intersign is a breath, an ecstatic discourse, whose plasticity is governed by, accounted for, and veiled and unveiled in the body: “Do not follow blindly what you do not understand: ears, eyes, and heart, you will have to speak for them all.” (“Excerpts” 335)

Quoting from the sura *al-Isra’*, or “The Night Journey” (17.36), about the mystical evening voyage of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Jerusalem, Khatibi bridges ontotheology and mystical ontology by demonstrating how the Qur’an celebrates the corporeality of ecstatic experience.¹⁵

Khatibi’s reading of divine logos as infused into prophetic breath (*La blessure* 178; “Excerpts” 339) and woven within the very fibers of the body underscores the materiality of the “intersigne prophétique” (“prophetic intersign”; 17; 335), as well as how the Qur’an more broadly indexes the body as the primary site for the cultivation of spiritual knowledge. The body serves as a repository for the Qur’an to be veiled and unveiled as an epistemic object. This pertains to the miracle of prophetic revelation, in addition to how that experience is conjured in the bodies and spirits of believers—hence the veneration of the prophet Muhammad as the archetypal Muslim mystic. Bridging the interiority of mind and spirit with the exteriority of the practicing body, the mystic taps into the wellspring of divine ipseity encapsulated by the principle of oneness, or *توحيد* (*tawhīd*). Crucially, for Khatibi the “désir d’anéantissement dans le visage inaccessible d’Allah” (“desire for annihilation in the inaccessible face of Allah”; Khatibi and Sijelmassi, *L’art* 129; Khatibi and Sijelmassi, *Splendor* 129; trans. amended) exposes the ways in which transcendental mysticism delimits the generative possibilities of existence. His *double critique* of Islamic metaphysics subsequently reveals the critical and imaginative limitations of both ontotheology and mystical ontology in relation to *pensée-autre*. It is in popular and material art forms, such as calligraphy, textiles, and tattoos, that he directs us to practices that differentially mobilize the Qur’anic dialectic of the visible and invisible. While rooted in Islamic traditions, these intersemiotic sites lend themselves to a hermeneutics of suspicion aligned with an ethics of the unthought and unnameable.

Calligrams of the Soul

L’homme est un signe, un nom marqué par le sceau d’Allah. Il est ce corps dérobé à lui-même, et comme détaché de son mouvoir dans la vision divine. Ce qui

s'introduit en ce corps, dictée par la voix divine, c'est une peinture de l'âme se détachant dans le ciel d'Allah. À sa manière, la calligraphie retient cette peinture de l'âme. Elle donne à voir le chemin de la révélation.

—Abdelkébir Khatibi and Mohamed Sijelmassi, *L'art calligraphique de l'Islam*

Man is a sign, a name stamped with the seal of Allah. This is the body, concealed from itself, as if detached from its movement within the divine vision. Introduced into this body, by divine command, is a painting of the soul released into heaven. In its own way, calligraphy retains this painting of the soul. It reveals the path of revelation.

—Abdelkébir Khatibi and Mohamed Sijelmassi, *The Splendor of Islamic Calligraphy* (trans. amended)

Khatibi and Sijelmassi's groundbreaking study on Arabic calligraphy builds on "l'écriture divine" ("divine modes of writing"; *L'art* 18; *Splendor* 18; trans. amended). embedded within Islamic metaphysics to examine the complex intersemiotics of the art form.¹⁶ Disavowing the orientalist assumption that calligraphic arts developed to combat Islamic interdictions against human and divine representation, Khatibi instead notes how early calligraphers described their practice as "une géométrie de l'âme énoncée par le corps" ("a geometry of the soul expressed through the body"; 14; 14; trans. amended). When approached through the decentering lens of *double critique*, calligraphy reveals itself as an exemplary form of Khatibian *pensée-autre*.

The dialectic of the ظاهر (*zāhir* [exoteric or manifest]) and the باطن (*bāṭin* [esoteric or hidden])—both being أسماء الله الحسنى (*asmā' Allah al-ḥusnā*), or among god's ninety-nine holy names—underlies "la grande mystique islamique en tant qu'unité extatique de Dieu, du Texte et de l'Islam" ("the great Islamic mysticism as the ecstatic unity of God, the Text and Islam"; Khatibi, *Maghreb pluriel* 23; Khatibi, *Plural Maghreb* 10). This symbiotic interplay is also essential to Khatibi's analysis of calligraphy as an art form dwelling at the threshold between text and image, saying and unsaying, visible and invisible, knowable and unknowable. An homage to divine utterance and creation, calligraphy's

ornamental obfuscation mirrors the ways in which the Qur'an itself "est présenté à la fois comme une origine donnée et dérobée, absente et présente, voilée par une main céleste" ("is presented as simultaneously revealed and concealed, absent and present, veiled—but by a celestial hand"; 42; 42). In this sense, calligraphy is "une peinture secrète de l'âme" ("a secret painting of the soul") and act of worship that "faire venir infiniment ce qui est déjà là" ("bring[s] out in infinite variety what is already there"; 169; 169; trans. amended). The art form not only illuminates the sacred text but crucially embodies the "géométrie à parabole divine" ("parabolic geometry of the divine") as "une expérience mystique" ("a mystical experience"; 169, 170; 169, 170).

Khatibi describes the calligraphic trace as a form of "polygraphie" ("polygraphy") whose oversignificatory nature, or *sursignifiance*, "conjugue avec/au-delà de la langue" ("links and exceeds language") across multiple semiotic systems and registers of meaning: phonetic, semantic, geometric (*La blessure* 186; "Excerpts" 343). This excess of meaning is perhaps most visible in the case of the حروف مقطعات (*hurūf muqatta'āt*)—shortened or abbreviated letters opening twenty-eight Qur'anic suras, whose significance remains a subject of debate among exegetes and scholars.¹⁷ The Khatibian mystical constellation features scholars at the juncture of philosophy, theology, and jurisprudence (فقه [*fiqh*])—such as al-Ghazālī and the Andalusian philosopher Muḥy al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī (1165–1240)—concerned with the ethics and poetics of the imagination (Moosa).¹⁸ Ibn 'Arabī was among numerous Sufi seers and thinkers who speculated on the symbolism of the *hurūf muqatta'āt*, believing that the disjointed letters offered "comme des clins d'œil extatiques, pointes de l'intuition divine déchirant le chant de l'être . . . ces lettres cristallines où s'annule le sens" ("a kind of ecstatic wink, points of divine intuition rending the song of being . . . these crystalline letters where meaning is annihilated"; Khatibi and Sijelmassi, *L'art* 139; Khatibi and Sijelmassi, *Splendor* 139; trans. amended). This meditative practice recalls the primacy of reading as a spiritual heuristic in the

sura *al-'Alaq*, to which Khatibi repeatedly returns across his writings.

Beyond the belief that calligraphy at once embodies and exalts the divine word, for many mystics—such as those belonging to the cabalistic Ḥurūfī Sufi sect and the esoteric tenth-century underground organization *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* (the Brethren of Purity)—reading is a site of “speculation spiritualiste ou mystique” (“spiritualist or mystical speculation”; 128–32; 128–32; trans. amended) rooted in the symbolism of letters and scripts.¹⁹ These groups practiced the occult science of letters, or علم الحروف (*ilm al-ḥurūf*), in which meditation on letters and their various combinations cultivates spiritual communion by revealing hidden realities of creation and existence (132; 132). By indexing these figures in his study on calligraphy, Khatibi joins his sociological interest in popular and material art forms with his theorization of Qur'anic intersemiotics. Inflected by the principle of a veiled and invisible god, which is foundational to Khatibi's understanding of Islamic metaphysics, calligraphy promulgates the divine intersign (*La blessure* 17; “Excerpts” 334). Its paralinguistic qualities speak to an extradiscursivity that is central to *pensée-autre* as a praxis that speaks in tongues.

Exalting the Void

Le langage signifie et suppose la connaissance, et c'est Allah qui l'accorde.

—Abdelkébir Khatibi and Mohamed Sijelmassi,
L'art calligraphique de l'Islam

Language signifies and presupposes knowledge, and this is accorded by Allah.

—Abdelkébir Khatibi and Mohamed Sijelmassi,
The Splendor of Islamic Calligraphy

The mystical and esoteric philosophies explored by Khatibi also populate the Tunisian literary critic and author Abdelwahab Meddeb's experimental 1979 novel *Talismano*, which Khatibi has extensively analyzed.²⁰ While both writers find inspiration in the writings of al-Ḥallāj, Ibn 'Arabī, al-Ghazālī, and Suhrawardī, Khatibi parts ways with Meddeb in terms of how he instrumentalizes these thinkers

“marqués par une histoire extrêmement complexe du lien de la lettre à l'expérience mystique” (“marked by an extremely complex history of the link between the letter and mystical experience”; *Maghreb pluriel* 204; *Plural Maghreb* 137). Khatibi explores mysticism not as a solution to the fraught dialectic between “Western” and “Islamic” epistemes to which *double critique* orients itself. Rather, it is through and against Islamic intellectual traditions that Khatibi articulates the contours of his broader philosophical endeavor—from Qur'anic intersemiotics and the divine intersign, to the intermedial and polygraphic nature of calligraphy, to his critique of Western metaphysics and theological logocentrism through “l'adoration du texte et de sons sens infini (prophètes, mystiques, poètes)” (“the text's infinite meaning adored by prophets, mystics and poets”; *La blessure* 19–20; “Excerpts” 336).

Meddeb's avant-garde novel *Talismano* follows a spontaneous rebellion of social outcasts and occultists—prophets, artisans, guildsmen, musicians, sorceresses, alchemists, magicians, tattoo artists, calligraphers, and sex workers—moving through the old city of Tunis in a carnivalesque overthrowing of religious and political power. Occupying al-Zaytūna mosque and university, the group revives various occult practices—such as alchemy, sorcery, mummification, and effigy burning—as they organize themselves into craft guilds that each convene around a respective symbol. Meddeb dwells on the calligraphers, whose craft exemplifies a Sufi poethics of the ineffable that upends theological logocentrism (El Shakry, “Abdelwahab Meddeb”). This poethics signals aesthetic practices that mobilize conceptual and poetic modes of symbolization to represent both divine truth and the epistemic sensibilities that nourish spiritual cultivation of the self.

Calligraphic excess at once bridges the distance between “mots et images” (“word and image”; Meddeb, *Talismano* [1987] 111; Meddeb, *Talismano* [2011] 114) and proliferates sites of meaning across multiple semiotic registers as Khatibi reminds us. Meddeb's characters re/unwrite Mansūr al-Ḥallāj's *Kitāb al-Ṭawāsīn*, which relies on diagrams, symbols, geometry, and the science of

numbers and letters—as in the titular reference to the broken letters ط (*tā*) and س (*sīn*) from the *ḥurūf muqatta‘āt* that open various suras—to illustrate divine oneness and mystical experience. The calligraphers in *Talismano* weave a revised rendition of the text into the weft of a red tapestry in al-Zaytūna mosque, replacing every enunciation of the word Allah with a literal void in honor of the group’s new convention of “la suppression du Nom” (“suppression of the Name”; 109; 112). The amended text reads:

Le point est le principe de toute ligne, et la ligne entière n’est que points réunis. La ligne ne peut donc se passer du point, ni le point de la ligne. Et toute ligne droite ou courbe, sort par mouvement de ce même point. Et tout ce sur quoi tombe le regard est un point entre deux points. C’est là l’indice que [le vide] apparaît à travers tout ce qu’on contemple. C’est pourquoi je déclare: Je ne vois nulle chose en laquelle je ne voie [vide!]. (110)

The point is the principle of any line, and the line is but an assemblage of points. The line cannot do without the point, nor the point without the line. And all lines, straight or curved, spring from this same point. And anything that falls under our gaze is a point between two others. Here is the evidence that [the void] is apparent through each act of contemplation. This is why I declare: there is nothing in which I do not see nothingness [the void!].

(113; trans. amended)

Like Khatibi, Meddeb is interested in graphic modes of inscription, such as calligraphy and the arabesque, that generate aesthetic and ethical openings. *Talismano*’s calligraphers invite speculative meditation by overwriting the name “Allah” with the literal space of a void. In his commentary on this scene, Khatibi notes how Meddeb “tire la calligraphie islamique vers la (lettre) mystique, et celle-ci vers la notion du ‘vide’” (“draws Islamic calligraphy toward mysticism (the mystic letter), and the latter toward the notion of the ‘void’”; *Maghreb pluriel* 205–06; *Plural Maghreb* 138).

Meddeb crafts a hermeneutical praxis that valorizes the capaciousness of semiotic ambiguity over the modes of interpretive rigidity and exegetical

codification that he associates with Sunni orthodoxy. *Talismano*’s heresiological reprisal of prominent and often persecuted mystics recalls Meddeb’s proclamation that “all that’s great in Islamic culture, all that’s beautiful, came about not by the application of the Islamic letter of the law but rather through transgression or at least the skirting of that letter, in a will to forget and ignore it”—an ethos he associates with “the Sufis and the theosophists who dared to think freely” (Meddeb, “Islam” 8). The novel echoes this in what Khatibi describes as “Hermétisme de *Talismano*, dont la face explicite et de commentaire (la redondance, l’enflure, la surcharge) plie le texte sous un ébranlement baroque” (“The hermeticism of *Talismano*, whose explicit and explanatory side (the redundancy, the bombast, the overload) folds the text under a baroque shock”; *Maghreb pluriel* 197; *Plural Maghreb* 131). Meddeb’s nostalgic revelry in Islam’s past seeks to uphold “la survie symbolique du Coran en tant que signifiant” (“the symbolic survival of the Koran as a signifying object”; *Pari* 26; *Islam* 10) against the drive to privilege the signifier over the signified. The void, like the poethical mode of symbolization it indexes, enacts a narrative ethics that cultivates interpretive possibility.

Through a critical engagement with “la métaphysique du signe” (“the metaphysics of the sign” (trans. amended) both within and beyond the Qur’an (Khatibi and Sijelmassi, *L’art* 22; Khatibi and Sijelmassi, *Splendor* 22), Khatibi models an ethics of being through a practice of *doubled* critical reading. His flirtation with Sufi literature upholds a skeptical distance that speaks to the imaginative limitations of mysticism in ways that differ from Meddeb’s stylized approach. Although this leads some scholars to interpret Khatibi’s engagement as “philosophical and poetic rather than religious” (McNeece 262), I maintain that Sufism as a spiritual praxis cannot be uncoupled from its poetic and philosophical articulations. While Khatibi’s theories of *pensée-autre* and *double critique* are in conversation with Sufism, it is actually in challenging what the theorist Nasrin Qader refers to as the “transcendental turn in Islamic mysticism” that his ontology of becoming shifts into focus (186).

Detranscendentalizing Mystical Ontology

La question n'est pas que je sois soufi ou non, mais comment je traduis la mystique dans mes écrits qui sont loin d'être une négation du corps.

—Abdelkébir Khatibi, *L'œuvre*

The question is not whether I am a Sufi or not, but rather how I translate the mystical in my writings, which are far from being a negation of the body.

—Abdelkébir Khatibi, qtd. in Qader, *Narratives of Catastrophe: Boris Diop, Ben Jelloun, Khatibi* (trans. amended)

Khatibi's highly experimental 1979 narrative text, *Le livre du sang* (*The Book of Blood*), helps illuminate the work of mysticism within his broader philosophical writings. Modeled after the mystical epic, the story melds Greek mythology with pedagogically oriented Sufi literature (Bensmaïa, *Experimental Nations* 143). The cryptic plot takes up Khatibi's preoccupation with doubles and doubling (*double critique*, double writing, *bi-langue*) as a site of generative difference. The narrative centers on “la Figure de l'Androgyne” (“the Figure of the Androgyne”) embodied in a pair of androgynous twins: Muthna²¹ (a sex worker gendered female) and L'Échanson (literally “the cupbearer,” gendered male) who deconstruct the unified sexed body in their similarity-difference (*Le livre* 21).²² The face of L'Échanson, who serves a Sufi brotherhood, is the focal point for the brothers' meditation on divine beauty as they pursue the spiritual goal of eternal oneness: “La pensée du visage est tournée vers la beauté du visible. . . . La beauté est un reflet du paradis, et le paradis une nostalgie de ton être perdue” (“The contemplation of the face orients itself toward the beauty of the visible. . . . Beauty is a reflection of paradise, and paradise a nostalgia for your lost being”; 31).

The brotherhood's “nostalgie du paradis” (“nostalgia for paradise”) takes shape as a “pacte de chasteté” (“chastity pact”) that renounces the body in a false binary of the sacred and profane (21), recalling Khatibi's critique of “une ascèse fétichisante” (“a fetishizing asceticism”; *La blessure* 181; “Excerpts” 340; trans. amended). Their project erupts in erotic

carnage when Muthna, disguised as L'Échanson, infiltrates the “Asile des inconsolés” (“Asylum of the Inconsolables”) in order to poison its members. Exposing their body to its congregants, Muthna disrupts not only the brothers' spiritual communion oriented toward Mecca, but crucially, their logics of the sexed body. The brotherhood's members violently kill the twins before their master, who then slits his own wrists in literal self-annihilation that renders spiritual annihilation, or فناء (*fanā'*), impossible (Qader 156).

Qader astutely notes Khatibi's distinction between the “mystical” (*la mystique*) . . . as a special kind of opening toward the self and other” and “the transcendental mode of mysticism” that codifies a practice of interiority that privileges “nostalgia for the immaterial, for the invisible, and for lost unity” over “the material and the visible” (153–54). In the register of Suzanne Gauch's and Réda Bensmaïa's analyses of the tale, Qader reads *Le livre du sang* as a parabolic orgy that takes the transcendental mystical impulse to its logical, and impossible, ends. Khatibi's critique of the brotherhood's ascetic isolation is epitomized in the group's fatal exclusion of Muthna, whose sex work associates her with the polluted materiality of embodied forms of social care work that stand in dialectical opposition to the transcendental chaste beauty of her (br)other.

Read alongside his philosophical writings on Islam, the Qur'an, and mysticism, *Le livre du sang* renders legible a Khatibian ethics of care and ontology of becoming. The brotherhood demonstrates the dangers of disavowing bodily materiality and sociality for the promise of self-same unification. Khatibi instead places the ethical self in the ever-evolving critical praxis of *pensée-autre*. Just as he arrives at a theory of intersemiotics through the Qur'an and divine intersign, so too does Khatibi outline his ontology of becoming through an engagement with mystical thought. Committed to the project of *double critique*, he supplants the unattainable Beloved with forms of cultural materiality fashioned in and around Islamic traditions—from the intersemiotic traces of calligraphy, tattooing, and carpets to the sacred erotics of the body celebrated in *Le livre du sang*, *Amour bilingue* (*Love in*

Two Languages), *La mémoire tatouée (Tattooed Memory)*, and *La blessure du nom propre (The Wound of the Proper Name)*. In so doing, Khatibi cultivates a way of being, thinking, and relating rooted in the speculative act of becoming that is always already narrated in the register of the “future perfect” (Bensmaïa, *Experimental Nations* 143–45). The (per)version of mysticism that emerges under Khatibi’s *double critique* is one that embraces the interpretive capaciousness of esoteric hermeneutics, but whose gaze toward the future promises differentiated proliferation—rather than consolidated unification—in ecstatic pursuit of the unthought and as-yet-unnameable.

NOTES

1. See Hiddleston and Lyamlahy; Lionnet; Jebari; and Fieni, “Hold.”

2. Khatibi refers to this as “l’idéologie théologique du nationalisme arabe” (“the theological ideology of Arab nationalism”) among other things (*Maghreb pluriel* 16; *Plural Maghreb* 5).

3. On the complex history of Moroccan Islam both during the French Protectorate and following independence, see Bazzaz; Bourqia and Miller; Burke; El Shakry, *Literary Qur’an*.

4. On the conceptual and historical complexities of Salafism, see Lauzière. The question of “traditionalism” has a long history in Moroccan sociology. See Laroui, *Crisis and Les origines*. Khatibi offers a salient critique of Laroui in “Other-Thought” and “Double Critique” in *Plural Maghreb*. See also Himmich.

5. For the purposes of this essay, *Sufism* refers to a broad range of Islamic practices, beliefs, and teachings framed as a spiritual path—often under the guidance of a teacher, or “master”—directed at communion with the divine creator (Shaikh 35). Khatibi alternates between the terms *Sufism* and *mysticism*, or *mystical*—which can also refer to traditions outside of Islam, such as Taoism and Buddhism.

6. The bifurcation and individuation of these modes of Moroccan Islam, rather hyperbolically diagnosed by Khatibi, can be placed in the context of French colonial policies that differentially governed and fetishized Sufis, as well as in relation to the Moroccan monarchy’s unique reliance on religious authority both during the Protectorate and following independence.

7. A polymathic jurist, theologian, and mystic, al-Ghazālī adopted an interdisciplinary approach to Islamic philosophy and Qur’anic exegesis (Moosa).

8. This aligns Khatibi, much like Meddeb, with a particular tradition of French philosophy. See Elmarsafy; El Shakry, “Abdelwahab Meddeb.”

9. In a special issue of *Expressions maghrébines* on the Khatibian *intersigne*, Fieni defines the prefix *inter-* as marking “un interstice entre des éléments de signification, des langues, des énoncés et des stratégies critiques” (“an interstice between the elements of signification, languages, enunciations, and strategies of critique”; “Désappropriation” 3).

10. The controversial mystic al-Hallāj is most notable for having declared, أنا الحق (*Anā al-ḥaqq*, or “I am Truth”); he was eventually tried and executed for heresy. Suḥrawardī founded الإشراف (the *ishrāqī*, or “Illuminationism”) school of mystical philosophy.

11. Textualist approaches to the Qur’an focus on more literal interpretations that stress the ظاهر (*ẓāhir* [exoteric or manifest]) over the باطن (*bāṭin* [esoteric or hidden]) meanings favored by esoteric hermeneutics and Sufis. On the diverse spectrum of hermeneutical approaches, see Abdul-Raof; El-Desouky; and Wadud.

12. As Khatibi notes, the Qur’an is replete with references to “signs,” including 17.12; 6.97.

13. On the sura *al-‘Alaq* (“The Germ-Cell” or “The Clot”) as an intertext in Maghrebi literature more broadly, see El Shakry, *Literary Qur’an* xv–xviii, 21, 71–73, 113–14.

14. Khatibi cites these lines in an epigraph to his chapter titled “Le calame” (“The Pen”; Khatibi and Sijelmassi, *L’art* 74; Khatibi and Sijelmassi, *Splendor* 74).

15. While most exegetes believe the prophet miraculously traveled by a winged creature, or *burāq*, some contend it was merely a spiritual journey—or dream-state—rather than a bodily or physical one (Asad 1137–40).

16. I am citing from the revised 1994 edition. The original title was *L’art calligraphique arabe: Ou, la célébration de l’invisible (Arab Calligraphic Art; or, The Celebration of the Invisible)*.

17. Khatibi refers to them as *futūḥat* in *L’art calligraphique* 139 and *Splendor* 139, and *fawāṭih* in *La blessure* 179. The *ḥurūf muqatta‘āt* have been interpreted in a range of ways—as abbreviations of sentences, symbolic placeholders for Allah or the Prophet, or the initials of scribes who transcribed the Prophet’s revelations (Asad 1133–34).

18. The polymath Ibn al-‘Arabī wrote extensive philosophical treatises on a variety of subjects. His elaboration of the Qur’anic concept of the *barzakh*, or isthmus, as a spiritual, epistemological, and ontological space has been particularly influential. See Corbin; Chittick.

19. A secret society in eighth-century Basra (present-day Iraq), *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’* composed an influential Islamic encyclopedia comprising fifty-two treatises on various philosophical concerns within the Islamic sciences titled *Rasā’il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ (Treatises of the Brethren of Purity)*. On mystical numerology and divination, see Savage-Smith.

20. See “Bilinguisme et littérature” (177–207) in *Maghreb pluriel* from 1983 (*Plural Maghreb* 117–140), which was republished as “incipits” in the edited collection *Du bilinguisme* (171–204) in 1985.

21. In the epigraph to *Le livre du sang* Khatibi explains that the name Muthna “signifie justement, en arabe, effeminé, hermaphrodite, androgyne” (“precisely means, in Arabic, effeminate, hermaphrodite, androgyne”), to which Bensmaïa adds the

Moroccan vernacular meaning “we are dead” (“Writing Metafiction” 113). In addition to sharing oral resonances with the grammatical feminine, مؤنث (*mu’annath*), the name also recalls the grammatical term to indicate dual nouns or pronouns in Arabic, المثنى (*al-muthanna*; Qader 163–64).

22. Unattributed translations are mine.

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