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**A Carnavalesque Mirage: The Orient in Isabelle Eberhardt's Writings**

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**Submitted for the Degree of PhD**

**To the National University of Ireland, Galway**

**College of Arts, Social Sciences, and Celtic Studies**

**School of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures**

**Discipline of French**

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## ABSTRACT

In the late nineteenth century, Isabelle Eberhardt roamed North Africa in male disguise, befriending the natives, marrying one of their sons, and converting to their faith. At once male and female, at once Western and Oriental, she seems to have been the very incarnation of the carnivalesque, with its impulse to blur racial and gender categories and amalgamate what is usually kept separate by artificial boundaries. This thesis, however, argues that this seeming carnivalesque thrust is in fact an illusion – a mirage, to employ an image more suitable for the context of the desert where she spent most of her adult life. This is the case for two reasons: the writer's marked will-to-power, and her inscription within the nineteenth-century patriarchal and Orientalist traditions.

Will-to-power is what brought Eberhardt to the desert in the first place. An ambitious writer, she was quick to see the richness of the literary material the desert could provide; and it is with the hope of returning to Europe with original productions that would secure her literary recognition that she first headed to the Sahara and mingled with its people. Whether she fulfilled this ambition is, however, doubtful. Instead of originality, her portrayal of North Africa deploys the most typically Orientalist strategies: while North African landscapes are symbolically appropriated through the use of words evoking conquest and possession, her native characters are infantilised, feminised, eroticised, endowed with passion and deprived of intellect.

While participating in the Orientalist subjection of the Maghreb, Eberhardt also takes part in the patriarchal subjection of women. Although her transvestism and her unconventional lifestyle have been read as marks of a feminist stance, Eberhardt not only never showed interest in the feminist movement, but indeed saw powerlessness as the natural predicament for woman, as illustrated in her writings, where her heroines who seek empowerment are inevitably doomed to failure. It is precisely in the light of this association between womanhood and weakness that her transvestism can be read: because femininity meant disempowerment, the success of her own quest for power made it necessary to borrow a male identity. Taking her masculine role to heart, Eberhardt not only took part in the sexual objectification of woman, providing eroticised descriptions of female natives, but also legitimised, in a sense, their oppression by depicting them as morally and intellectually inferior.



Eberhardt's cultural in-betweenness dismantled neither power mechanisms nor racial and gender categories. If her disguise as a man perpetuated the postulate of male superiority, her masquerading as an Easterner did not prevent her from displaying attachment to her European identity, by rehearsing the West's traditional construction of the Orient as a site of power and desire. It is in this binary and hierarchised approach to race and gender that Eberhardt fails to incarnate a carnivalesque vision.

## Introduction

Isabelle Eberhardt's life (1877-1904) was made up of contrasts. Although a European woman, she spent most of her adult life disguised as an Oriental man as she roamed North Africa; although she preferred the company of the natives and denounced colonial malpractice, she was, towards the end of her life, to take an active part in the imperial project; and although an ambitious writer, she was to die an obscure literary figure. No wonder that she should, both in her lifetime and posthumously, elicit profuse and often contradictory responses.

In a paper entitled "The Passionate Nomad Reconsidered" and written two decades ago, Julia Clancy-Smith identifies three types of Eberhardt criticism: works which class her as a "heroic white woman" who epitomises what they nostalgically evoke as a glorious colonial past, those which salute her as a proto-feminist figure, and, finally, those which hail her sympathy for the colonised and her conversion to Islam. In such attempts at categorising the writer, critics do little more than project on her their own political positioning, thus failing to locate her within the specific context in which she lived and wrote.<sup>1</sup>

Clancy-Smith argues that it is from "the formerly colonized, particularly Algerians"<sup>2</sup> that most of the panegyrising of Eberhardt's anti-colonialism comes. In effect, Algerian authors like Hedi Abdel-Jaouad<sup>3</sup> have argued that the writer adopted the Maghreb as a substitute country for the Russia she never saw, while others, like Mohammed Salah Dembri and Leila Sebbar, have gone as far as considering her an Algerian, as indicated by the very titles of their papers – "Isabelle Eberhardt est-elle Algérienne?"<sup>4</sup> and "Isabelle l'Algérien",<sup>5</sup> respectively. Yet the idea of Eberhardt's anti-colonial stance has not been defended only by Algerian critics. Without calling Eberhardt an Algerian, Ursula Kingsmill Hart underscores her sympathetic attitude towards the natives by opposing it to

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Clancy-Smith, "'The Passionate Nomad Reconsidered': an Algerian Woman in *l'Algérie française* (Isabelle Eberhardt, 1877-1904)", *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, eds (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 61-78, 62.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Hedi Abdel-Jaouad, "Isabelle Eberhardt: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Nomad", *Yale French Studies* 83, 2 (1993): 93-117.

<sup>4</sup> Mohamed Salah Dembri, "Isabelle Eberhardt est-elle Algérienne?", *Algérie-Actualité* 262 (25 nov. 1970): 12-14.

<sup>5</sup> Leila Sebbar, "Isabelle Eberhardt: Isabelle l'Algérien", *Les Cahiers du GRIF* 39, 39 (1988): 97-102.

Frenchwoman Aurélie Picard's harsh, authoritative, and contemptuous manner. Developed in her *Two Ladies of Colonial Algeria*,<sup>6</sup> Hart's argument is that while Picard's marriage with the "negroid"<sup>7</sup> Sidi Ahmad Tijani, head of the Tijaniya Brotherhood, was motivated solely by her eagerness to flee the poverty she suffered in her native France, Eberhardt's life in the desert and her membership of the Qadiriya community stemmed from the affection she felt for the people of the desert and her sincere evolution towards Islam and mysticism. A similar, if more implicit, contrast emerges from Elise Nouel's evocation of these two figures in *Carré d'as aux femmes*.<sup>8</sup> Other Western critics who have pointed out Eberhardt's (supposed) anti-colonialism range from Lesley Blanch<sup>9</sup> to Catherine Stoll-Simon<sup>10</sup> and Margaret McColley.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, some rare "formerly colonised" voices *have* written in denigrating terms of Eberhardt's complicity with the colonial project. This is mainly the case with the Syrian Rana Kabbani, who, in her introduction to the English translation of Eberhardt's diary, castigates the writer for serving colonialism and using the East as a site for her licentious lifestyle.<sup>12</sup>

In their anthology of women travellers, Shirley Foster and Sara Mills propose to replace critics' usual judgemental approach to nineteenth-century women travellers by "a more dispassionate view" of both travellers and their writings.<sup>13</sup> This is precisely the ambition of the present study: going beyond simplistic categorisations of Eberhardt as the "good" anti-colonialist or the "bad" colonialist. If colonisation itself is a complex

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<sup>6</sup> Ursula Kingsmill Hart, *Two Ladies of Colonial Algeria: The Lives and Times of Aurélie Picard and Isabelle Eberhardt* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Centre of International Studies, 1987).

<sup>7</sup> Hart recurrently uses this word to describe this Muslim dignitary and members of his family. Hart's representation of Arabs and blacks is indeed sometimes surprisingly stereotyped and derogatory, as it is in the following example, where she describes Sidi Ahmad: "The man whom the crowd applauded was not, as one might suppose, a handsome oriental [*sic*] prince and fair of face, for Sidi Ahmad had inherited the dark complexion and looks of his mother. He was fat, with a flat nose, thick sensual lips, and a black frizzy beard which encircled his face. Only his eyes reflected kindness. Although only in his early twenties, he already had false teeth, the result of Arab negligence toward physical care and hygiene." Hart, *Two Ladies of Colonial Algeria*, 15.

<sup>8</sup> Elise Nouel, *Carré d'as aux femmes* (Paris: Guy Le Prat, 1977).

<sup>9</sup> Lesley Blanch, *The Wilder Shores of Love* [1954] (London: Phoenix, 1993), 293.

<sup>10</sup> Catherine Stoll-Simon, *Si Mahmoud ou la renaissance d'Isabelle Eberhardt* (Léchelle: Emina Soleil, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Margaret E. McColley, "Environmental Destruction and Narrative Reconstruction of the Algerian Landscape in Isabelle Eberhardt's *Les Nouvelles*", *Journal of Postcolonial Cultures and Societies* 1&2 (Jan.-Apr. 2011): 78-102.

<sup>12</sup> Rana Kabbani, Introduction to *The Passionate Nomad: the Diary of Isabelle Eberhardt*, by Isabelle Eberhardt (London: Virago, 1987), v-xii.

<sup>13</sup> Shirley Foster and Sara Mills eds, *An Anthology of Women's Travel Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 6-7.

phenomenon which deploys various, though intertwined, mechanisms of power,<sup>14</sup> this is even more the case with women's involvement in it; to the complex factors, including nationality, historical context, and class, that critics like Reina Lewis,<sup>15</sup> Billie Melman, and Lisa Lowe have shown to intervene in shaping colonialist (and, more specifically, Orientalist) discourse, women add another complicating element – gender. The negotiation of these various elements results in “heterotopic”<sup>16</sup> discourses that not only vary from one to another but are sometimes self-contradictory. For instance, while differing from the writings of her nineteenth-century successors in that they are free from the Victorians' exaggerated concern with morality,<sup>17</sup> Lady Montagu's portrayals of Turkey also contain inherent contradictions. As the wife of a high-ranking British ambassador, she looked down on the Orient she visited as no more than an exotic, mysterious place, that is, as the West's Other; yet as a woman, she deployed a rhetoric of identification, pointing to the similarities in condition and character between Turkish and European women.<sup>18</sup>

Orientalist discourse is arguably even more heterotopic than Lowe and Melman have shown it to be. As Charles Forsdick illustrates through the examples of Maryse Choisy and Alexandra David-Néel, contemporary women coming from the same country and a similar background can display different attitudes to travel and to the Other.<sup>19</sup> Eberhardt herself had little (apparently, at least) in common with her contemporaries. Where female travellers privileged harems, Turkish baths, and other feminine sites, access to which was facilitated for them by their gender category, Eberhardt preferred typically masculine

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<sup>14</sup> This complexity is highlighted in the works of Frantz Fanon and Edward Said, who, in different ways, point out the relevance of issues of sexuality and discourse to colonial relations. More recently, Lisa Lowe and Anne McClintock, among others, have discussed colonialism as a multi-faceted and unstable exercise of domination whose manifestation depends on variables such as class and gender. See, respectively: Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* [1952] (Réghaïa: ENAG Editions, 1993), Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* [1978] (London: Penguin, 1995), Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), and Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity, and Representation* (London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> Lisa Lowe borrows this concept from Michel Foucault to refer to “the complex and uneven terrain composed of heterogeneous textual, social, and cultural practices” of Orientalism. See Lowe, *Critical Terrains*, 10-11.

<sup>17</sup> Billie Melman, *Women's Orients: English Women and the Middle East, 1718-1918* [1992] (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1995), 99-100.

<sup>18</sup> Lowe, *Critical Terrains*, 31-32.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Forsdick, “Hidden Journeys: Gender, Genre and Twentieth-Century Travel Literature in French”, *Cross-Cultural Travel: Papers From the Royal Irish Academy International Symposium on Literature and Travel*, Jane Conroy ed. (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 315-323, 318-319.

spaces (the desert, the road, and the *zaouïa*,<sup>20</sup> among others); where other European women were prompt to display “a sense of solidarity of gender”,<sup>21</sup> Eberhardt held women (European and native alike) in deep contempt and distanced herself from them by opting for cross-dressing. Simultaneously, however, the attachment she voiced to Arabic culture and its people also distances her from the derogatory images that Edward Said inexorably finds in all the male-written texts he examines in his *Orientalism*.

In analysing Eberhardt’s writing of North Africa, mainly the Algerian desert, this study points to the limits of the academic categories of male and female Orientalist discourse, showing that, while Lewis, Lowe, and Melman are right in highlighting the role played by gender in shaping that discourse, any approach to cultural and racial Otherness is made more problematic by the intervention of several other elements that contribute to the definition of individual identity. In addition to class and nationality, whose relevance has been signalled by the authors cited above, these include biographical details like “accidents” of birth and family history. Because Eberhardt was born of an unknown father, because her mother’s elopement with her children’s tutor and her setting up home with him out of wedlock placed the whole family, and Isabelle herself, in a situation of extreme social marginality, and because she was permanently estranged from the commonly accepted codes of femininity by the Spartan education that her stepfather bestowed on her and her brothers alike, Eberhardt cannot be expected to evince a vision that would be similar to that of a “respectable” lady like Henriette Brown. Othered in her native West on account of her scandalous birth and caught, on account of her education, between the male and female gender categories, her attitude to the cultural Other, particularly to the gendered cultural Other, could not but be more complex than either the Saidian schema or those of Lewis or Melman.

For a long time, interest in the complexity of Eberhardt’s character and life has been predominantly biographical. Authors such as Edmonde Charles-Roux,<sup>22</sup> Cecily Mackworth,<sup>23</sup> Annette Kobak,<sup>24</sup> Mohammed Rochd,<sup>25</sup> and so many others have written

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<sup>20</sup> The term *zaouïa* (also spelled *zaouiya*) refers to the headquarters of a religious community, run by the descendants of a local saint. It also functions as a school that dispenses the community’s religious teachings.

<sup>21</sup> Melman, *Women’s Orients*, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Edmonde Charles-Roux, *Un Désir d’Orient: jeunesse d’Isabelle Eberhardt* (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1988) and *Nomade j’étais: les années africaines d’Isabelle Eberhardt, 1899-1904* (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> Cecily Mackworth, *The Destiny of Isabelle Eberhardt* [1951] (New York: Ecco, 1975).

<sup>24</sup> Annette Kobak, *Isabelle: The Life of Isabelle Eberhardt* [1988] (New York: Vintage, 1990).

lengthily on the intrigues of her eventful and unconventional life, providing not always converging details. Debates have been conducted on whether Alexander Trophimowsky, the tutor referred to above, was or was not her father; on whether her mother's settlement in Geneva with him was planned in Russia or whether their arrival there was initially meant as no more than a holiday trip; on the circumstances of Trophimoswky's death and on whether Isabelle had anything to do with it; on the reason why Eberhardt always lived penniless despite the sale of the Villa Neuve, the old family house, after her stepfather's death. With regard to the "Oriental" part of her life, speculations have also abounded on whether or not she had a liaison with Ali Abd El Wahab, her long-time Tunisian correspondent; on the nature of her relations with General Lyautey; and, perhaps more importantly, on the circumstances of the sword-assault of which she was the victim in Behima (in the Algerian South) in 1901, and on whether the French authorities had any hand in it.

It was only in the 1990s that interest in Eberhardt's complexity moved beyond the sensational details of her biography to focus on her involvement in the colonial conflict. Clancy-Smith's paper, published in 1992, approaches Eberhardt in relation to *fin-de-siècle* Orientalism on the one hand and the nineteenth-century society of *colons* on the other. Clancy-Smith's conclusion is that Eberhardt, for all her marginality, contributed to the construction of French Algeria and indeed was emblematic of the complex interaction of gender, class, and race in what she terms the "half-breed of colonization."<sup>26</sup> Published two years before Clancy-Smith's piece, Laura Rice's article "'Nomad Thought': Isabelle Eberhardt and the Colonial Project"<sup>27</sup> shows that Eberhardt's challenge to colonialism lay less in a thorough siding with the natives than in her simultaneous alliance with the latter and with representatives of the colonial system (like the *Légion Etrangère*), which allowed her to subvert the typically colonial Western-versus-Native codification. Four years later, Ali Behdad took up this view in a chapter devoted to the Russian writer in his *Belated Travelers*,<sup>28</sup> giving further evidence of how she put her knowledge of Arabic and Islam at

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<sup>25</sup> Mohammed Rochd, *Isabelle Eberhardt: une Maghrébine d'adoption* (Algiers: Office des Publications Universitaires, 1992).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Laura Rice, "'Nomad Thought': Isabelle Eberhardt and the Colonial Project", *Cultural Critique* 17 (Winter 1990-1991): 151-176.

<sup>28</sup> Ali Behdad, "Allahou-Akbar! He Is a Woman: Colonialism, Transvestism, and the Oriental Parasite", *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 113-132.

the service of the colonial project and reading her pronounced *penchant* for transvestism as a mark of her complicity with the male Westerner's voyeuristic gaze at a feminised Orient. Borrowing the concepts of "noise" and "parasite" from Michel Serrès, Behdad shows Eberhardt to have been a parasite on the colonial system, which she disturbed because of the "noise" she introduced into it – her sympathetic portrayal of the natives – but without the support of which her settlement in, and hence her very positive representations of the Orient, would not have been possible.

The debate over Eberhardt's ambiguous intervention in the colonial situation has continued in the later twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries, notably with the works of Sidonie Smith and Dunlaith Bird. In *Moving Lives*, Smith argues that Eberhardt "remain[ed] anchored in her native Europe" despite her literal and symbolic espousal of difference;<sup>29</sup> an argument that she had earlier developed in a paper entitled "Isabelle Eberhardt Travelling 'Other'/'wise'".<sup>30</sup> For her part, Bird shows how Eberhardt, like other nineteenth-century women travellers, including Freya Stark and Olympe Audouard, found in *vagabondage* – a term through which Bird refers both to physical movement and to a textual and physical construction of a mobile gender identity – a means of casting off the constraints of gender normativity. In Eberhardt's particular case, Bird shows that the negotiation of racial and gender elements and the resort to tactics such as cross-dressing not only served to clear a space for herself in an Orient traditionally explored almost exclusively by men but also translated Eberhardt's sense of uncertainty with regard to her "true" identity.<sup>31</sup>

While it is difficult to call Eberhardt's evolution in colonised North Africa anything other than complex, it might be worthwhile to go beyond enumerating aspects of this complexity. Subscribing to the Nietzschean postulate of the universal character of the will-to-power, it is in the light of the writer's own quest for empowerment that this thesis reads not only her undecidable position within the French-North African conflict, but also other intriguing aspects of her lifestyle, such as her cross-dressing and her ambiguous relation to

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<sup>29</sup> Sidonie Smith, *Moving Lives: 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Women's Travel Writing* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2001), 39-41.

<sup>30</sup> Sidonie Smith, "Isabelle Eberhardt Traveling "'Other'/'wise': the 'European' Subject in 'Oriental' Identity", *Encountering the Other(s): Studies in Literature, History, and Culture*, Gisela Brinker-Gabler ed. (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), 295-318.

<sup>31</sup> Dunlaith Bird, *Travelling in Different Skins: Gender Identity in European Women's Oriental Travelogues (1850-1950)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 74.

Islam, which oscillates between strict observance and constant transgression. It will be argued that Eberhardt's political, religious, and sartorial practices were all relied upon as empowering strategies in her attempt to reconcile her numerous markers of weakness – her female gender category, her illegitimate birth, and her subsequent marginality in her native Europe – with a no less marked quest for recognition and power. Although it has become common, with the academic success of Bhabhaian theories on hybridity, to look at negotiation as a positive alternative to domination, this thesis treats negotiation and domination as two facets of the same attempt to establish one's power, the difference between them being not one of purpose, but one of means: one negotiates when one cannot afford outright domination. Such a vision is not necessarily at odds with the Bhabhaian argument; what Bhabha explains in *The Location of Culture* is precisely the way hybridity, negotiation, and invisibility function as empowering weapons for the otherwise disempowered colonised.<sup>32</sup> In the same way, it will be shown how disturbing the male/female and Western/Eastern categories is used by the non-colonised but nonetheless disempowered Eberhardt to escape her original condition of weakness.

Only one critic, so far, seems to have been alert to the will-to-power underpinning Eberhardt's politics. In "Isabelle Eberhardt, ou '*La Roumia Convertie*'",<sup>33</sup> a chapter inserted in a study of the construction of the figure of the female Muslim in both Oriental and Western writings, Lamia Ben Youcef Zayzafoun highlights the mechanisms of power at play in the writer's vision of the Orient and in the place she occupies within French/North African relations. This awareness that the representation of Otherness is conditioned by the representing subject's positioning within the power apparatus and that such positioning is, in the case of Eberhardt, very ambiguous makes Zayzafoun subscribe, like Rice and Behdad before her, to the thesis that the "converted *roumia*" simultaneously subverted and backed colonialism and colonialist discourse. Unlike these authors, however, Zayzafoun uses the writer's texts to argue that it is as a Frenchwoman, rather

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<sup>32</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* [1994] (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>33</sup> Lamia Ben Youcef Zayzafoun, "Isabelle Eberhardt, ou '*La Roumia Convertie*': a Case Study in Female Orientalism", *The Production of the Muslim Woman: Negotiating Text, History, and Ideology* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2005). "*Roumia*" is the feminine form of "*roumi*", an Algerian word used to refer to Christians in general and to the French in particular.



than as a native, that she sought to reinvent herself and that she often othered those very Easterners with whom she is commonly said to have identified.<sup>34</sup>

From the same perspective of power, Zayzafoun reads critically both Eberhardt's marriage with the Algerian spahi Slimène Ehni and her fascination with Sufism, particularly with the status of female *marabouts*. Although her marriage with a native obviously subverts the Western coloniser's racial code, Zayzafoun shows how her preference for the physically and socially fragile Slimène rather than for healthier and wealthier Orientals like El Khoudja Ben Abdallah and Rechid Bey<sup>35</sup> reflects her wish to hold the reins of power within the couple. By the same token, Zayzafoun explains that her fascination with *maraboutes* owes as much to these women's elevated social status as to her quest for spirituality.<sup>36</sup> As power holders, these women were dispensed from the rigid restrictions usually imposed on female behaviour in Muslim culture. They could travel alone, wear, according to some authors, male attire, and even indulge in sexual excess under cover of spiritual experience; no wonder, therefore, that Eberhardt should look up to them as women who have successfully solved the equation of Islam, gender, and power.<sup>37</sup>

While sharing several of Zayzafoun's arguments, including her reading of the Eberhardt/Ehni relationship and of Eberhardt's interest in *maraboutisme*, as well as her focus on Eberhardt's ambivalent stance, the present thesis disagrees with some of her statements, such as the idea that Eberhardt identified with the disempowered female natives, whose impecuniousness she shared, or the affirmation that Eberhardt deprives her black female characters of a name.<sup>38</sup> More importantly, it distances itself from the author's not wholly consistent conclusion. Zayzafoun closes her paper by presenting Eberhardt as a "dissenting woman" whose innocence has been manipulated for its own interests by

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>35</sup> Rechid Bey was a young Turkish embassy secretary that Eberhardt knew in Geneva and that she envisaged marrying some time after her stepfather's death. The project, however, was never implemented, as Eberhardt suddenly changed her mind. El Khoudja Ben Abdallah was a learned (though self-taught) Algerian who instructed Eberhardt in Arabic on her arrival in Bône (now Annaba).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>38</sup> This statement is easily contradicted by Eberhardt's fiction. One example is "Silhouettes d'Afrique", in which, although negatively portrayed, the unrestrained and obscene Bou Bou is given a name. See Isabelle Eberhardt, "Silhouettes d'Afrique", *Œuvres Complètes II: Ecrits sur le sable (nouvelles et roman)* (Paris: Grasset, 1990), 58-67, 61. Zayzafoun's article includes other incidental inaccuracies, such as her confusion of Eberhardt's brother Augustin with her stepfather Alexander.

colonialist discourse.<sup>39</sup> This statement doubly contradicts the argument developed by this critic throughout her paper: the claim that Eberhardt was manipulated and recuperated strips her of the will (to power) she is supposed to possess, while her qualification as “dissident” places her outside the system of power to which she has been shown to aspire.

In attempting to “redeem” Eberhardt by viewing her as “a dissident woman”, Zayzafoun joins Rice, Behdad, and indeed most contemporary critics. Whether she is called “Isabelle la rebelle” as Nabil Bouaita nicknames her,<sup>40</sup> or a “nomadic spirit”, in Rice’s phrase (borrowed from Deleuze), the idea that Eberhardt is located outside the moral and colonial order (and their mechanisms of domination) seems to be taken for granted; and yet, as will be developed in this study, the idea of Eberhardt’s imperviousness to power and order is a myth. Although Eberhardt’s birth and unconventional education did place her outside the grid of social and moral norms, her lifestyle as an adult and her writings reveal a more ambiguous attitude to conventions. Not only did the dissolute character of her life – the heavy drinking, kif-addiction, and promiscuity – that is associated with her name decrease as she matured, but her diary shows that she increasingly distanced herself from this mode of behaviour even as she displayed it: “J’éprouve de plus en plus de dégoût pour ce second *moi*, voyou et dégingandé moralement, qui fait son apparition de temps en temps.”<sup>41</sup> Even more significant is the fact that while expressing disgust at her “immoral” self, she took care to erase traces of this immorality from her texts. To mention but one example, her sojourn in Tunis, which, according to biographers, was the most “scandalous” episode of her life, was re-written as an uneventful stay spent in the sole company of the native servant Khadidja.<sup>42</sup>

Through these and many other instances, this work seeks to demonstrate Eberhardt’s conservative moral outlook, thus challenging the widespread representation of this writer as a rebel-figure. To date, no author seems to have paid attention to her conservative side, with the exception, perhaps, of Mark Sedgwick and also Edmonde Charles-Roux, whose volumes, *Un Désir d’Orient* and *Nomade j’étais* arguably constitute the best documented

<sup>39</sup> Zayzafoun, “*La Roumia Convertie*”, 57. In Zayzafoun’s paper, colonialist discourse is represented by Victor Barrucand, who hired Eberhardt as a reporter for his newspaper *Al-Akhbar* and published her papers posthumously.

<sup>40</sup> Nabil, Bouaita, “L’Ordre colonial et la littérature d’Isabelle... la rebelle”. *Parcours maghrébins* 2 (Jan. 1986), 10-11.

<sup>41</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, *Journaliers* [1923, posthumous] (Paris: Joëlle Losfeld, 2002). Eberhardt’s emphasis.

<sup>42</sup> For a discussion of Eberhardt’s life in Tunisia, see Catherine Stoll-Simon, *Si Mahmoud*.

of all Eberhardt's biographies.<sup>43</sup> Although Charles-Roux does refer to Eberhardt as a rebel and a nomad (both in lifestyle and in spirit), she is not blind to the conservative elements both in her upbringing and in some of her own initiatives and decisions. Where most biographers portray Alexander Triphomowsky, her (step)father, as an anarchist who had broken totally with the patriarchal tradition, Charles-Roux insists that, while an *original*, he perpetuated much of the traditional patriarchal education, forbidding his daughters to travel on their own, ensuring that they dressed and behaved properly, and showing concern over their friendships. Eberhardt's own reluctance to displease her exigent "tutor" presents her as a dutiful daughter, respectful of parental authority as well as of tradition.

It is precisely as a traditionalist that Mark Sedgwick defines Eberhardt in his *Against the Modern World*. Devoting three pages of his book to this writer, he reads her conversion to Islam as a way of retrieving values lost to the modern Western world.<sup>44</sup> Sedgwick explains that the word "tradition" derives from the Latin *tradere*, which means to hand over. Etymologically, therefore, tradition consists in the transmission of beliefs and practices through generations, and a traditionalist is s/he "who prefers some established practice over something that has replaced it." Thus defined, Sedgwick adds, traditionalism is synonymous with conservatism, the two tendencies sharing a disapproval of change.<sup>45</sup> While taking up Sedgwick's association of tradition with conservatism as well as his view of Eberhardt as a traditionalist, this study sees both assumptions as incomplete. The set of practices transmitted by tradition are, as Eric Hobsbawm argues, rule-governed; they translate value systems, conventions of behaviour, and respect for institutions and authority.<sup>46</sup> In Eberhardt's time, respect for institutions meant subscription not only to gendered patriarchal morality but also to the Orientalist canon and the racial codes which formed the colonial order. Indeed, the nineteenth century was the age when racial prejudice came to be theorised, given the precious support of science, and, in turn, put at the service of the then triumphant imperialist project. As another manifestation of Western hegemony,

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<sup>43</sup> Charles-Roux's two books provide sometimes over-lengthy details not only about Eberhardt herself but also about members of her family, her acquaintances, friends, and correspondents.

<sup>44</sup> Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 63-65.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>46</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions", *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger eds [1983] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1-14, 9.

the Orientalist construction of the East as a site of power and desire also reached its apogee in this century, through writers like Nerval, Loti, and Fromentin.

What is contended here is that Eberhardt's traditionalism was not limited, as Sedgwick seems to suggest, to her romantic idealisation of the past and her preference for religion over the materialist nihilism of modern Europe. In contradiction with the myth of "Isabelle la rebelle", it will be argued that this writer not only held order and authority in high esteem, but that her vision was enmeshed in the outlook which prevailed in her time. Not only did she view authority as exclusively male and white, but she also valorised distance between these and what she saw as inferior categories. In other words, her approach to both gender and race was dichotomic, drawing a line between male and female, between whites and non-whites. While such a hierarchised and oppositional view already makes her an accomplice of the patriarchal and colonial orders, Eberhardt's contribution to the colonial project was multifold. Apart from her collaboration with the French General Lyautey, which will be fully discussed in Chapter 1, she, emulating the Orientalist *plumes* of her time, reproduced colonialist discursive reflexes analysed by David Spurr,<sup>47</sup> Mary Louise Pratt,<sup>48</sup> and Edward Said, among others. Eberhardtian colonialist gestures include the eroticisation and infantilisation of the natives and a rhetoric of appropriation recurrent in her fiction as well as in her personal writings.

In view of the writer's highly unconventional biography, claiming that she advocated order and respected authority may not sound very plausible. With "its masquerades and disorderly conduct",<sup>49</sup> her lifestyle seems rather to belong to the Bakhtinian realm of the carnivalesque with its potential for "liberat[ing] from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from all that is humdrum and commonly accepted."<sup>50</sup> As an aesthetic expression, the carnivalesque relishes all kinds of mixtures and "misalliances" which blur the frontiers between the sinful and the virtuous, the noble and the ignoble, the high-ranking and the subaltern, and substitute for these dichotomies

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<sup>47</sup> David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and the Colonial Administration* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

<sup>48</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>49</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* [1965] trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 235.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

in-between categories like the king-fool, the noble bandit, the saintly harlot.<sup>51</sup> Because erasing such distinctions is more easily enacted on travel-routes, where the need for company and possibility of unexpected difficulties together favour human contact, in crowded places, where anonymous passers-by often brush against one another, and in the festive ambiance of wine-drinking, which loosens the drinkers' concern for propriety and social position, locations such as the market-place, the road, and the tavern – so omnipresent in Eberhardt's fiction – are its typical chronotopes.<sup>52</sup> Other Eberhardtian chronotopes like the mosque or the *zaouïa* may seem at odds with the carnivalesque spirit of insolence because of the religious veneration by which they are coloured, but they nonetheless share with the spaces mentioned above a levelling tendency to disregard race, class, and gender. Similarly, it is possible to argue, as Chapter 2 will, that, as represented and practised by Eberhardt, religion itself is carnivalised. Hers is an Islam in which fervent faith and an aspiration to moral elevation seem to pass through “sinful” kif-addiction, heavy drinking, and sexual promiscuity – the very amalgam of sin and virtue described by Bakhtin. In addition, her preference for the Sufi tradition betokens a ecumenical, hence unifying rather than divisive, approach to religion.

Inasmuch as its insolence defies authority and its disruption of categories subverts the order of things, the carnivalesque is laden with an obvious political significance. It is this dimension that Rice highlights (though without adopting a Bakhtinian perspective) when she argues that Eberhardt's blurring of the Oriental/Western categories is where her challenge to colonialism lies. If the writer's carnivalesque lifestyle was looked upon suspiciously by the French authorities, it is because her living among the “inferior” people of the desert made light of the rigidly hierarchised racial code, while her notorious propensity to drinking and intense sexuality mocked the cliché of Oriental excess, sensuality, and lack of restraint, as well as the claims to higher civilisation that the Westerners used as a pretext for the colonial enterprise. Yet such Eberhardtian eccentricities reinforce the colonialist myth of Western superiority at least as much as they disrupt it: because the writer made no secret of her life amongst the natives and of her conversion to Islam, it was possible to read her excess as a sign of her “going native”, that

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<sup>51</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* [1929] trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 123.

<sup>52</sup> Borrowing from mathematics, Bakhtin uses the term “chronotope” to refer to the space-time frame in which every discourse necessarily evolves. In literature, specific genres are characterised by particular, corresponding chronotopes.

is, of her contamination by the Oriental passion and lack of control that colonialist discourse opposes to Western rationality and moderation. By the same token, her unbridled sexuality seemed to confirm the libidinous character of the Islamic doctrine and its followers – another age-old Orientalist cliché. As will be shown, the negative stereotypes relating to the Orient and its inhabitants are made even more manifest in Eberhardt's writings, in which North African characters are depicted as primitive, dark-minded, and passive creatures, whose backwardness and inability to take control of their own destiny makes them ideal candidates for colonisation.

In the same way as Eberhardt's colonialist portrayal of the natives belies the carnivalesque aspiration that her life among them appears to embody, her seemingly subversive cross-dressing is in fact a double mark of her absorption of the patriarchal ethos. For one thing, her donning of male clothes is an application of the Law of the Father in the most literal sense of the word: Alexander Trophimowsky thought male attire safer for a woman and imposed it on his (step)daughter.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, it will be argued that Eberhardt's eagerness to pass as a man translates a wish to enjoy a power which, from her patriarchal perspective, was an exclusively male privilege. Because she saw victimhood and weakness as the natural predicaments of women, assuming a male gender identity was, for her, the only ethically acceptable means of self-empowerment.

Read in the light of the Eberhardt's double postulate of the inferiority of women and of the natives, the very physical intercourse she frequently had with Maghrebian males can similarly be read as a will to identify with the male invader, for whom such practices were far from uncommon. As a woman who had never subscribed to the female "duty" of submitting to male domination, her readiness to have sexual intercourse with male natives while rarely agreeing to have such relations with a European partner confirms, rather than rejects, the male Westerner's status as a dominator. Because the European male enjoys a gender status superior to hers, taking him as a partner would have been an act of submission that a physical relationship with a native cannot be, her subordinate female status being compensated for by her superiority as a Westerner. Moreover, in being herself the initiator of such relations, Eberhardt assumes the male role, leaving the feminine task of acceptance to her (male) native partners. Eberhardt's seemingly carnivalesque practices

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<sup>53</sup> Mackworth, *The Destiny of Isabelle Eberhardt*, 20.

thus simultaneously serve the colonial and patriarchal orders, while also perpetuating the Orientalist tradition of feminising the Orient.

In a nutshell, what this study seeks to demonstrate is that Eberhardt's seeming subversion of the colonial and patriarchal orders is carnivalesque only in appearance. Where the carnivalesque "unites, weds, and combines",<sup>54</sup> abolishing hierarchies, Eberhardt preaches an ethics of distance which distributes physical and moral traits along hierarchised gender and racial lines; where the Bakhtinian concept unsettles power mechanisms, Eberhardt found in in-between categories a means of achieving an empowerment originally denied to her on account of her gender category and unorthodox family history. But despite her resorting to transgression as a necessary strategy in her quest for power, she took care to demonstrate her loyalty to the prevailing racial and moral codes: while marrying a native, she wrote disapprovingly of racial and cultural hybridity, a disapproval to which her own abstention from motherhood might well be related; while leading a dissolute life, she celebrated temperance and asceticism; and while converting to Islam, she erased the act of conversion, re-writing the adopted religion as a faith inherited from an invented Muslim father. Eberhardt's evolution in, and writing of, the North African Orient are, thus, dictated by two impulses: the will-to-power, on the one hand, and a conservative outlook which looks askance at change and subversion, on the other. It is from the difficulty of reconciling these often contradictory inclinations that the complexity of Eberhardt's stance stems.

Because one of the strategies deployed by Eberhardt in her attempt to accommodate these two impulses was re-writing her subversive gestures so as to conform with the transgressed codes, this study will consider both Eberhardt's texts and biographical evidence. There are, however, other reasons for this choice. Although more than a century has passed since the Russian writer's death, few authors have undertaken a close examination of her texts. While critics as well as biographers quote extensively from her diary and, to a lesser extent, from her letters, they tend to disregard her fiction; when they do not, their reading remains more or less literal, ignoring the metaphorical/symbolic dimension of Eberhardtian diction and imagery. Two reasons lie behind such neglect: on the one hand, Eberhardt-the-writer has always been rated second to Eberhardt-the-liver; indeed, there seems to be an agreement that, as Guri Ellen Barstad puts it, Eberhardt "[a]

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<sup>54</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 123.

fait de sa vie sa plus grande œuvre.”<sup>55</sup> Another, perhaps more valid excuse, is the difficulty of identifying, among the texts posthumously assigned to Eberhardt, those which have actually been written by her; this is precisely the justification given by Denise Brahimi for having limited her *Requiem for Isabelle* to the study of Eberhardt’s diary together with a few short stories.<sup>56</sup>

Brahimi’s argument may have had some validity at the time when *Requiem* was published in 1983, but this is hardly the case today. While it is true (and well-known) that considerable modifications were made to some of Eberhardt’s writings by Victor Barrucand, these changes are limited to the writer’s later texts, which Barrucand published as *A l’Ombre chaude de l’Islam* (1906) and *Notes de route* (1908);<sup>57</sup> Eberhardt’s texts that were not edited by Barrucand underwent few, if any, modifications.<sup>58</sup> More importantly, archival research, undertaken essentially by Marie-Odile Delacour and Jean-René Huleu, has made it possible to isolate “authentic” Eberhardtian texts from those which have been reworked by her posthumous editor. Delacour and Huleu have republished annotated editions of all of Eberhardt’s writings, indicating those passages written by Barrucand. Archival research has also been undertaken as part of the present work;<sup>59</sup> its results match those made public by Huleu and Delacour, whose dependable editions will accordingly be used throughout. Parts of texts written by Barrucand have been avoided, except on one or two occasions, when they significantly reinforce other passages known to have been written by Eberhardt. When this is the case, Barrucand’s contribution to the text is clearly signalled.

In the course of her very short life, Eberhardt kept a diary and wrote personal letters as well as fiction and newspaper articles. Although the amount of literary material she produced is rather impressive for one who died so young, it remains relatively thin, thus making the project of spanning it in its totality manageable. Discussing the totality of the writer’s work presents the advantages of offering a better grasp of her complexity, assessing the evolution of her ethical and political vision, and comparing her “public” and

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<sup>55</sup> Guri Ellen Barstad, “Isabelle Eberhardt ou l’invention de soi”, *Romansk Forum* 16, 2 (2002): 265-269, 265.

<sup>56</sup> Denise Brahimi, *Requiem pour Isabelle* (Paris: Publisud, 1983), 13-14 and 16.

<sup>57</sup> These two books were later republished in a single volume, under the title *Sud oranais*. The edition used here is Isabelle Eberhardt, *Sud oranais* (Paris: Joëlle Losfeld, 2003).

<sup>58</sup> Eberhardt’s diary and a collection of her short stories were first edited by René-Louis Doyon under the titles *Journaliers* and *Contes et paysages*, in 1923 and 1925 respectively.

<sup>59</sup> Eberhardt’s manuscripts are available at the Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer, in Aix-en-Provence, in the file X23.



her “private” writings. It is with these points in mind that the corpus has been framed. It includes Eberhardt’s diary, *Journaliers* (1923), the collection of letters *Ecrits intimes: lettres aux trois hommes les plus aimés* (1991), the *récits* and short stories included respectively in *Œuvres Complètes I: Ecrits sur le Sable I (récits, notes et journaliers)* (1988) and *Œuvres Complètes II: Ecrits sur le Sable (nouvelles et roman)* (1990), her two unfinished novels *Trimardeur* and *Rakhil*, and, finally, *Sud oranais* (1906), a collection of her articles about the South Oran region and the Moroccan frontier. All these works were published posthumously. The texts which make up the corpus were actually produced at various points in the period 1895-1904, as is detailed in the discussion proper.

While wishing to remedy the (now no longer justified) lack of interest in Eberhardt’s fiction, and her writings as a whole, biographical material is difficult to ignore in the case of a figure like Eberhardt. Even those authors who have interrogated her texts also incorporate elements of her life. On the one hand, Eberhardt consciously fashioned her life as a piece of fiction in which she acted out changing and fictitious roles (as shown by her transvestism and her numerous male and female pseudonyms); on the other hand, many of Eberhardt’s texts are renderings of episodes of her own life. The result, as Ali Behdad writes, is that:

faced with an ostensibly autobiographical text such as Eberhardt’s, [one] cannot resist the temptation to imagine the persona behind it and to try to understand her historical significance in this context [...]. As [one] read[s] her journals, notes, and stories, [one] cannot separate [oneself] from the imaginary of Eberhardt’s life that intrigues [...] and makes [one] “interested” in her [...].<sup>60</sup>

In examining both Eberhardt’s life and her writings, this study subscribes to the famous Derridean assumption that there is nothing outside the text<sup>61</sup> – that is, that supposedly extra-textual elements are like discourse, liable to analysis and interpretation.

This study comprises four chapters. Chapter 1, entitled “Possessing the Land, Dividing the People”, discusses Eberhardt’s contribution to the Orientalist and colonialist projects in relation to her divisive and hierarchised vision of race and culture. Although she has often been hailed for her supposedly laudatory portrayal of the natives, it will be argued that such positive portrayal is limited to the Arabs of North Africa alone. While idealising this group as paragons of generosity and manly honour, other Maghrebians – Berbers, Jews,

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<sup>60</sup> Behdad, *Belated Travelers*, 113.

<sup>61</sup> Jacques Derrida, *On Grammatology* [1967], trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 158.

and blacks – are denigrated for their supposed assimilability, greed, and animality respectively. Reproducing such racist stereotypes is a doubly colonialist gesture: while marking the writer’s subscription to the myth of African backwardness which served as a support for nineteenth-century imperialism, it also participates in the colonialist policy which sought to enforce domination by setting the colonised against one another. Eberhardt’s divisive approach to race and culture will be shown to have intervened in her buttressing of the colonialist policy of association, launched by her friend General Lyautey, which, unlike the strategy of assimilation it came to replace, advocated the pacific subjection of the natives, with little interference with their cultural specificity. The chapter also points out more subtle manifestations of Eberhardt’s colonialist thrust by examining her writings. What an analysis of short stories like “Le Major” (1944, posthumous) and “Iloes du sud” (1903) shows is that, like her contemporary Conrad,<sup>62</sup> Eberhardt decried colonialist malpractice without questioning the idea of the *mission civilisatrice* itself. More subtly still, Eberhardt’s colonialist stance reveals itself through her deployment of the rhetoric of appropriation when describing the North African landscape.

Chapter 2 examines the complex implications of Eberhardt’s conversion to Islam, arguing that, although sincere, the adoption of this new faith also proved to be empowering in many ways. In allowing her to befriend the natives, it might be argued that it facilitated her acquaintance with her husband, Slimène Ehni, one of the rare Muslim *indigènes* to have been granted French citizenship.<sup>63</sup> In turn, this marriage granted Eberhardt access to Frenchness – that marker of power – before making her an active agent in the French imperial mission: because her Islamic religion made her a welcome interlocutor to the native dignitaries, she was an ideal candidate for the role of mediator between them and the colonial authorities, a role that Lyautey offered her in 1904. Another form of power Eberhardt hoped (though failed) to achieve through her religious conversion was saintliness. As will be developed, Eberhardt looked up to the venerated Sufi *marabouts*, who liberated themselves from the constraints usually imposed on Muslim women, as an example to emulate, persuading herself not only that the virtues she claimed she possessed

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<sup>62</sup> Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), to which reference will often be made in this analysis, is considered a classic of colonial literature, in turn hailed for its denunciation of the myth of the civilising mission and decried as a racist book.

<sup>63</sup> Slimène Ehni, a spahi in the French army, inherited French citizenship from his father, who, like him, had served in the French army and was naturalised in 1870. Eberhardt met Slimène shortly after her settlement in the desert in 1900, or, possibly, during a short visit she made to the Sahara in 1899, while living in Tunisia. The couple married in October 1901.

– generosity, disinterestedness, and (as she thought) a gift for premonition – entitled her to share their status but also that fate predestined her to holiness. The writer's manipulation of the Islamic concept of fate (*Mektoub*) for her own interests is precisely one of the points that will be emphasised in this chapter. Taken as a sign of passivity when influencing the course of events proves impossible – in the case of the loss of a beloved one, for example – this concept is, when action *is* possible, re-written as a translation of individual will. In both cases, *Mektoub* is envisaged as empowering, either in enabling a serene coping with otherwise overwhelming sorrows or by providing a divine sanction for personal decisions. In the same fashion, Islam itself is constantly revised so as to fit the converted *roumia's* shift in political positioning: the faith which, prior to her involvement in Lyautey's policy of association, is masculinised and evoked in terms of warfare and glorious conquest, becomes, in 1904, associated with the feminine values of peace and tolerance.

The discussion of the masculinisation/feminisation of Islam in the second chapter paves the way for a more exhaustive discussion of gender in Chapter 3, which analyses the ethical significance both of Eberhardt's transvestism and of her sexual involvement with native male partners. As previously mentioned, the writer's cross-dressing will be read as a confirmation of, rather than as a challenge to, the hierarchised male/female dichotomy. In borrowing a masculine identity, Eberhardt bestowed on herself a power that not only cultural norms, but also she herself, thought incompatible with femininity. It is additionally as part of her overall performance of this supposedly empowering masculinity that her eroticisation of the female native, read by some critics as a mark of homoerotic desire, will be explained. Alongside her adoption of male costume and a male name, Eberhardt, in thus objectifying the native woman, also enacted what she saw as male privilege. However, because desire, as discussed in this chapter, is not the given that precedes power apparatuses that it is often said to be, it will be argued that what seems to be nothing but a part of an empowering performance does not exclude the possibility of actual homoerotic inclinations in the writer. Interestingly, however, there is no evidence that the writer ever enacted such inclinations; a detail which says much about her eagerness to locate herself within the normative moral and sexual grid. Eberhardt's subscription to the gendered moral code of her time also manifests itself in her domestication and moralisation of such *lieux* as houses of prostitution. In her incongruous insistence on the modest demeanour of the inmates of such places, Eberhardt emulates more conventional nineteenth-century travellers like Henriette Brown, whose descriptions of harems has been shown by Reina

Lewis to be imbued with bourgeois morality and its cult of domesticity.<sup>64</sup> Having examined Eberhardt's portrayal of native women, the chapter moves on to examine her relationship with native men, and with Slimène Ehni in particular. The Eberhardt/Ehni relationship will be read as a miniature illustration of the colonial schema. Reversing her husband's gender identity and her own, Eberhardt endows Slimène with qualities traditionally assigned to the ideal Victorian wife – forbearance and a home-loving character – while reserving for herself the masculine roles of the educator and the traveller. Eberhardt's refraining from getting pregnant will be read as another illustration of her loyalty to the colonial code and its imperative of preserving the purity of the colonising race.

Chapter 4 analyses the ideological implications of Eberhardt's mobile lifestyle. Although the writer refers to herself as a nomad, it will be argued that her displacements fail to fit within Deleuze's and Guattari's famous definition of the term not only in that they are imposed by circumstances rather than being a wilful rejection of sedentariness, but also in that they are rendered through a rhetoric evoking what the two philosophers have termed the State – that is, the apparatuses of power that nomadism is supposed to oppose. Indeed, Eberhardt's evocation of the vagabond in terms evoking possession, empire, and conquest betray her inability to extirpate herself from the logic of power. This complicity with the State did not wane under the effect of the insight that travel is traditionally expected to generate; rather, Eberhardt's outlook moved towards an even stronger identification with the prevailing moral code and a fuller involvement in the colonial enterprise. Her representations underwent just as little modification: a comparison between her earlier and later writings reveals the persistence of exotic clichés, her discovery of the disenchanting colonial reality notwithstanding. Exoticism itself will be shown to have colonialist underpinnings. Not only does it glorify the Western Self at the expense of an objectified Other and locate this Other's space in a bygone, static past, thus excluding it from the dynamic course of history, but the very Self/Other opposition betrays its entrenchment in a typically colonialist Manichean vision. Finally, accepting the interconnectedness between movement and writing that has been signalled by authors like Butor<sup>65</sup> and de Certeau,<sup>66</sup> the chapter closes on an examination of Eberhardt's stylistic

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<sup>64</sup> Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism*, 109-121.

<sup>65</sup> Michel Butor, "Travel and Writing" [1974], *Temperamental Journeys: Essays on the Modern Literature of Travel*, Michael Kowalewsky ed. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 53-70.

idiosyncrasies, highlighting their confirmation of the author's colonial thrust and of the empowerment reflexes which have been emphasised throughout the discussion. Such reflexes particularly manifest themselves in the writer's handling of intertextuality: in her disregard of Oriental literary productions, as in her limiting of her intertextual interaction to direct citations that match her own vision of things, Eberhardt shields her own discourse from the menace of confrontation while silencing the dissenting voices of literary and/or cultural Otherness.

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<sup>66</sup> Michel de Certeau, "Spatial Stories" [1984], *Defining Travel: Diverse Visions*, Susan L. Roberson ed. (Oxford, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 88-104.

## Chapter 1

### Possessing the Land, Dividing the People

The common tendency to hail Eberhardt as an epitome of resistance against racism and colonial injustice<sup>1</sup> seems to find obvious support in her life among the colonised Maghrebians, her conversion to their religion, her marriage to one of their men, and her denunciation of the colonial atrocities inflicted on them. Yet while Eberhardt did unambiguously condemn the colonisers' exploitation of the natives and such injustices as the confiscation of their lands, her stance towards colonisation is complicated by the evidence that she was personally involved in its project: instances like her collaboration with a General Lyautey seeking to pacify South Oran or her participation in the gruelling experience of collecting taxes in Tunisia have been mentioned by most biographers as well as by critics like Laura Rice<sup>2</sup> and Ali Behdad.<sup>3</sup> However, biographers do not (and are not expected to) discuss the obvious contradiction between such instances and her seeming support of the natives, and both Rice and Behdad end up reconciling Eberhardt with the thesis of her opposition to colonialism. While Rice portrays her as a "nomadic spirit" who evaded not only colonialism but indeed all systems of authority, Behdad explains that the "noise"<sup>4</sup> she produced in the colonialist discourse forced the latter to revise its strategies, replacing the coercive policy of assimilation by that, more humane and more respectful of native culture, of association.

Taking up Rice's and Behdad's attempts to go beyond the simple panegyricising of Eberhardt's ability to sympathise with the down-trodden, this chapter discusses her complex involvement in the coloniser-versus-colonised hostilities and, more generally, her attitude towards the land where she chose to settle and its people. Instead of focusing on

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Simone Rezzoug, *Isabelle Eberhardt* (Algiers: Office des Publications Universitaires, 1985); Hedi Abdel-Jaouad, "Isabelle Eberhardt: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Nomad", *Yale French Studies* 83, 2 (1993): 93-117; Michelle Chilcoat, "Anticolonialism and Misogyny in the Writings of Isabelle Eberhardt", *The French Review* 77, 5 (Apr. 2004): 949-957; Denise Brahimi, "Le Voyage sans retour", *Etudes françaises* 26, 1, (1990): 59-68; Ursula Kingsmill Hart, *Two Ladies of Colonial Algeria: The Lives and Times of Aurélie Picard and Isabelle Eberhardt* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Centre of International Studies, 1987); Lesley Blanch, *The Wilder Shores of Love* [1954] (London: Phoenix, 1993); and Margaret E. McColley, "Environmental Destruction and Narrative Reconstruction of the Algerian Landscape in Isabelle Eberhardt's *Les Nouvelles*", *Journal of Postcolonial Cultures and Societies* 1&2 (Jan.-Apr. 2011): 78-102.

<sup>2</sup> Laura Rice, "'Nomad Thought': Isabelle Eberhardt and the Colonial Project", *Cultural Critique* 17 (Winter 1990-1991): 151-176.

<sup>3</sup> Ali Behdad, *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Borrowing it from Michel Serrès, Behdad uses the concept of "noise" to refer to an effect of disorder that causes a system of power (like Orientalism) to revise itself.

the Russian writer's subversion of power, however, it considers her toing and froing between the two sides of the conflict in the light of her own quest for power. Despite the obvious sincerity of her interventions in favour of "her Muslim brothers", biographical evidence shows not only that such interventions were often silenced, or moderated, by her eagerness to avoid the suspicion of the colonial authorities, but also that they were chiefly urged by the advice of well-established writers, who saw in the colonial experience an original literary material that could launch the writing career to which she was aspiring. Her very decision to settle in the Maghreb was widely motivated by literary ambition, although the kind of literary material she had in mind was less the colonial reality than the more traditional exoticism she herself relished in writers like Pierre Loti.<sup>5</sup> In this regard, the desert, relatively unspoilt by the "corrupting" advent of Western civilisation, was the most recommended place.

One of the concerns of this chapter is precisely to highlight the multi-faceted way in which the desert-space functioned as a site of power for Eberhardt. Apart from the material it provided for her literary aspirations and the individual physical and moral empowerment which its "Spartan" environment allows (and which Eberhardt explicitly admitted seeking), her exotic writings, for which it serves as a background, are an exercise in domination not only because they transform the natives into mere objects of study, but because the Orientalist project in which they participate is, as Edward Said has famously argued, in turn part and parcel of the imperialist enterprise.<sup>6</sup> At a more symbolic level, the vastness of the desert itself acts as a metaphor for a will-to-grandeur, while its emptiness offers perspectives for future exploration and conquest. Simultaneously, the Eberhardtian attraction to the immutability of the desert rather than to urbanised landscapes says much not only about her contempt for civilisation, which she recurrently and explicitly voices, but also, less expectedly, about the ethics of distance that underpin her world-vision. Beyond an alternative to the hybridity of the "corrupt" colonial cities of the North, what the desert, through its silence and desolateness, incarnates, is the solitude that Eberhardt thought to be the noblest condition of man.

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<sup>5</sup> Loti was Eberhardt's favourite writer. Her personal writings teem with quotations from his best-known novels, *Aziyadé* (1879) and *Le Roman d'un spahi* (1881).

<sup>6</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* [1978] (London: Penguin, 1995).

The anti-carnavalesque stance underlying Eberhardt's focus on solitude and contempt for hybridity is reflected even in her rendering of supposedly carnivalesque venues. Despite their being sites of racial and cultural *mélange par excellence*, the market-place, traditional festivals, and the headquarters of the *Légion Etrangère* are, in the Eberhardtian text, stripped of their carnivalesque dimension in many ways. Instead of the joyful philosophy so central in Bakhtin's definition of the carnivalesque, what marks Eberhardtian chronotopes is a precarious "gaité d'emprunt".<sup>7</sup> As such, it quickly fades away; however, this is not because the carnival itself comes to end, but because joy, as she shows it, seems to be incompatible with human inclinations. When the supposedly festive encounters do not, under the effect of wine and the passion-loosening ambience, end in fights and blood, such tragic denouements are avoided only thanks to the opportune intrusion of a higher authority into the carnival. In the carnivalesque world-vision as defined by Bakhtin, it is the intrusion of hierarchy and artificial barriers which brings the free and joyful primordial human state to an end; in Eberhardt's, joy is simply alien to the human condition, and the only alternatives offered to mankind are a(n) (anti-) carnival of blood and the acceptance of authority.

Eberhardt's anti-carnavalesque stance also manifests itself in her obviously hierarchised approach to race. In the racial mix that she describes, and which is made up of Arabs, Kabyles, Jews, blacks, and Westerners, these different constituents do not stand on an equal footing. This chapter seeks to highlight the Russian writer's biased and stereotyped rendering of racial categories, showing that what is often hailed as her positive representation of the natives only applies for the Arabs. If the blacks are, as critics like Lamia Zayzafoun have noted, the object of her scarcely veiled repulsion,<sup>8</sup> the Jews remain trapped in the age-old stereotype of mercantilism and greed, while Kabyles are often despised as easy candidates for assimilation and accomplices in the coloniser's cruelties. Eberhardt's racial hierarchy, in which the Arab and the (educated and humane) Westerner reign supreme, is indicative as much of the admiration in which she holds power as of her condemnation of racial and cultural hybridity. Because only Arabs and Westerners can pride themselves on a history made of warfare and conquests, only these races are entitled

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<sup>7</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "La Foggara" [1920, posthumous], *Œuvres Complètes II: Ecrits sur le sable (nouvelles et roman)* (Paris: Grasset, 1990), 355-358, 355.

<sup>8</sup> Lamia Ben Youcef Zayzafoun, "Isabelle Eberhardt, ou 'La Roumia Convertie': A Case Study in Female Orientalism", *The Production of the Muslim Woman: Negotiating Text, History, and Ideology* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2005): 31-63, 48.



to occupy the top of her hierarchy; similarly, her contempt for Kabyles has much to do with their supposed assimilability. More important, Eberhardt's stereotyped rendering of race makes her the unwitting accomplice of colonisation, whose divisive discourse, which aimed at weakening the native population by setting Arabs against Berbers and Muslims against Jews, she takes up.

This chapter argues that this ethics of distance intervened no less significantly than her will-to-power in shaping her complex positioning *vis-à-vis* colonialism. Focusing on her cooperation with General Lyautey, in particular, it explains that it was made possible as much by personal interest – gaining access to otherwise forbidden Southern territories and sealing her contribution to the all-powerful French Empire – as by the appeal for her of Lyautey's strategy of association. Unlike the more traditional assimilation policy, which preached a total fusion of the colonised into the coloniser's culture, the latter matched her valorisation of cultural distance in that it favoured a “pacific penetration” based on economic partnership and respect of local geographical and cultural specificities. Despite this undeniable support for Lyautey's policy, however, the very same belief in the impossibility of racial and cultural rapprochement often makes her voice her scepticism as to the success of the colonial enterprise. In discussing Eberhardt's politics, this chapter thus joins the work of authors like Michael Heffernan<sup>9</sup> in deconstructing the traditional myth which defines “leftism” as essentially anti-colonialist and associates pro-colonialism with conservatism.

## 1.1. “Exile and the Kingdom”<sup>10</sup>

### 1.1.1. Exile

#### 1.1.1.1. In quest of a name

In *Infelicities*, Peter Mason explains that the exotic is a home-made product to which the real existence of what this product is supposed to describe has little relevance: the traveller empties, as it were, the exotic object so as to fill it with meanings of his/her own

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Heffernan, “The French Right and the Overseas Empire”, *The Right in France: From Revolution to Le Pen*, Nicholas Atkin and Frank Tellet eds (London: I. B. Tauris, 2003): 89-114.

<sup>10</sup> This title is borrowed from Albert Camus, who chose it in 1957 for a collection of six short stories featuring six “exiled” Westerners (both in the literal meaning of the word and in the figurative sense of outsiders). The representation of exile as necessary in the quest for power (the kingdom) in these stories makes the title particularly relevant to this discussion of Eberhardt's presence in North Africa.

construction, thus making of it simultaneously a vacant and saturated category.<sup>11</sup> In such a fabrication-process, the desert is a particularly convenient place. Originally a “blank sheet”,<sup>12</sup> whose poverty of landscape and vegetation seemingly offers few writing possibilities, this characteristic emptiness not only facilitates but also provides a justification for the ensuing task of filling it semantically. It is this capacity to elicit multiple textual responses that David H. Scott analyses in a chapter of his *Semiotics of Travel*: for some writers, Scott shows, the desert is little more than a metaphor for the Bible; for others, a purely aesthetic phenomenon; for a third category, it unveils its semiological instability, making them recognise the impossibility of a fixed reading of its signs.<sup>13</sup>

The identification of the desert as simultaneously an absence and a (promise of) presence has made it a traditional space both for creation and *self*-creation. A seemingly useless space, the desert has, as Chantal Dagon and Mohammed Kacimi note in *Naissance du désert*, never ceased to serve as a site for constructed myths, divine revelations, or heroic conquests.<sup>14</sup> If the ancient Greeks dismissed it as the “[t]erritoire insoumis à la narration”<sup>15</sup> of the uncivilised, and indeed monstrous, Other<sup>16</sup> and the Jews made it the abode of a superior Other – the God Who makes His apparition to Moses on Mount Sinai<sup>17</sup> – other history-makers like Alexander the Great appropriated it as a site for their own access to godliness. The Macedonian conqueror was already reigning supreme over Greece, Persia, Phrygia, and Phoenicia; but such an exploit, however great, was thought to be accessible to humans. Within the boundaries of the “familiar” world, he was an unhappy mortal, and only subduing the (supposedly) unconquerable desert could grant him the dreamed-of divine status.<sup>18</sup> As he triumphantly arrived in the Libyan desert, Alexander had

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<sup>11</sup> Peter Mason, *Infelicities: Representations of the Exotic* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 153-160.

<sup>12</sup> David H. Scott, *Semiotics of Travel: From Gautier to Baudrillard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 137.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 142-160. Scott takes Chateaubriand, Fromentin, and Baudrillard respectively as examples of these categories.

<sup>14</sup> Chantal Dagon and Mohammed Kacimi, *Naissance du désert* (Paris: Balland, 1992), 11.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-73.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 74-75.

indeed no doubt that the oracle of Amon would confirm his self-invented identity: that he was his son – a *god's* son.<sup>19</sup>

Whether dismissed, as it is by the Greeks, as “unwritable” or rewritten as a scene of self-reinvention as in the two other examples, the desert often functions as a site of empowerment – either a confirmation of one’s sense of superiority or a compensation for an original weakness. Eberhardt’s own interest in it was akin both to the Jewish quest for self-enfranchisement and to Alexander’s spirit of conquest. The illegitimate daughter of an unknown father, this truncated identity was for her an ever-lasting trauma, the compensation for which was a life-long and restless quest, as shown by the proliferation of pseudonyms with which she signed her works and her letters,<sup>20</sup> and her constant revision of her filial identity. This name-obsession finds a perfect illustration in “La Nuit”, in which, like Eberhardt, the protagonist, Stolz, “avait une histoire dont le drame l’avait emmené là”:<sup>21</sup> he is denied the privilege of a patronymic name. Receiving the necessary education and material care from his father, he nonetheless profoundly resents the contempt and insulting pity with which he is constantly treated. Partly to flee a Germany where he is nothing other than “un exclu de la société, un paria”,<sup>22</sup> and partly to arouse his father’s compassion, he undertakes to join the *Légion Etrangère* in the Algerian South. Yet the father is not softened by this “acte désespéré”.<sup>23</sup> A letter from him expressing a firm refusal to grant Stolz the desired name and asking him to write no more leads the latter to a still more desperate act – suicide.

In the desert, Stolz hopes not only to flee the long-endured non-recognition of his father and his fellow countrymen but also to substitute for it a new form of recognition; indeed, his colleagues and his superiors acknowledge his merit as a “soldat modèle, d’un entrain et d’une patience rares”.<sup>24</sup> Yet this recognition fails to conquer his sense of alienation. Unable to love his new dwelling-place, Stolz feels for it nothing but unpleasant uneasiness, and it is implied that his presence in this God-forsaken land is justified only

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>20</sup> These pseudonyms include, among others, Mériem Bent Abdellah, Nicolas Podolinsky, and Mahmoud Saadi. Ironically, this classical case of excess compensating for an original lack is taken up even posthumously by her critics. On the literally anonymous woman is heaped an overload of compensatory names: “the Passionate Nomad”, “the Horsewoman of the Sands”, and “the Wandering Slave”, among so many others.

<sup>21</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “La Nuit” [1903], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 347-350, 347.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 348.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

inasmuch as he is himself forsaken (by his father and society). Apart from its being a “terre déshéritée”,<sup>25</sup> which, as such, fits Stolz’s own disinherited condition, only one affinity relates the desert to the otherwise extraneous “homme du nord”: the attraction of death. The young man’s reflections on the gloominess of “la terre sans eau où aucune vie ne germerait jamais”,<sup>26</sup> indeed herald his ultimate tragic gesture.

The strong autobiographical element in “La Nuit” hardly needs demonstration. Eberhardt shares with Stolz his quest for a name, his subsequent sense of non-belonging in the West, and his attempts at self-redefinition in the Algerian South. However, Eberhardt’s otherness is sharper and more multi-faceted than that of her protagonist. To the trauma of name-loss, Eberhardt added that of homelessness. If Stolz calls himself a “*Heimatlos*” on account of his sense of being an outsider in his native Germany, the term takes on, in the case of Eberhardt, a more literal meaning; born in Switzerland, she was never to see Russia, her mother-country. Like the unknown name, the lost homeland was always the presence-absence, its trace haunting Eberhardt’s imagination despite its physical remoteness.<sup>27</sup>

This exile was marked by the sense of isolation and rejection traditionally associated with such an experience. While Switzerland welcomed an important number of European immigrants – especially from Turkey and Russia – these were often met with the contempt and suspicion commonly reserved for foreigners, and the political agitation with which the Russians were associated made them still more suspect. The acquaintances of the Trophimowsky-Eberhardt-De Moerder family seemed to include few, if any, Swiss nationals. Neither did those of Eberhardt; the few friends she ever mentions are Turkish, Bulgarian, or Russian.<sup>28</sup> However, Eberhardt’s sense of isolation was probably still more acute than that of most fellow exiles. Her family might have had very few Swiss friends, but friends of any nationality were scarce anyway. A concatenation of elements, made of her family’s *fausse situation*, her tutor’s ideological disapproval of conventional lifestyles,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 350.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 349.

<sup>27</sup> Eberhardt was familiar with developments on the Russian political scene as much through her frequent discussions with fellow Russian refugees/exiles in Geneva as through her own involvement in it. Eberhardt’s brother, Augustin, was involved in anarchist activities, and, according to some biographers, so was Eberhardt herself.

<sup>28</sup> These friends are Rechid Bey, “Chouchia”, and Véra, respectively.

and his paranoiac tendencies<sup>29</sup> condemned her to almost total seclusion in the large and shabby Villa Neuve, as the family house was named.

Eberhardt's exile was, thus, a triple experience: besides the literal exile of being a Russian in Switzerland, her illegitimate birth sealed her marginality not only in the Western culture by and large, but also within the smaller boundaries of her own family. Of the six children brought up in the Villa Neuve, only she was not a "De Moerder". She shared neither their name nor their "Russian experience" of social prestige and aristocratic comfort to which, rebelling against Trophimowsky's diktat, the eldest was to return,<sup>30</sup> biographical evidence and Eberhardt's own brief references to them actually present her siblings as malevolent enemies.<sup>31</sup> Given this background, the recurrence of the themes of exile and human solitude in Eberhardt's texts is hardly surprising. In her personal writings, the Villa Neuve is invariably associated with suffering and solitude, while Switzerland, and indeed, Europe by and large, is "la terre d'exil".

Eberhardt's sense of non-belonging and its relation to her re-territorialisation in North Africa has been emphasised by critics like Hedi Abdel-Jaouad, who, relying on her texts "Silhouettes d'Afrique" (1898) and "Trimardeur",<sup>32</sup> develops the argument that North Africa functioned for her as a compensation for the original loss of the home country, Russia. This compensation, he explains, finds evidence in her re-territorialisation of all her Russian characters on Algerian soil, the recurrent analogy she draws between Algerian Fellahs and Russian Mujiks, and the fact that her numerous pseudonyms are all either Arabic or Russian names.<sup>33</sup> As an exile, Abdel-Jaouad explains, Eberhardt "longed for a people and a community which she could call her own";<sup>34</sup> this the Maghreb was to provide.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Instances of Trophimowsky's paranoia are provided by Annette Kobak. See her *Isabelle: the Life of Isabelle Eberhardt* [1988] (New York: Vintage, 1990).

<sup>30</sup> Nicholas de Moerder was indeed to occupy a high position in the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>31</sup> Eberhardt mainly accuses her eldest brothers and her sister of persecuting her and debauching her brother Augustin. See Isabelle Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes* [1991, posthumous] (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2003), 82-83.

<sup>32</sup> Eberhardt started a serial publication of this novel in the newspaper *Al-Akhbar* in 1903, but she died before completing it. It was first published in book form in 1922.

<sup>33</sup> Abdel-Jaouad, "Portrait", 98-99 and 106.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>35</sup> Without resorting to the support of Eberhardt's texts, Sidonie Smith makes a claim similar to Abdel-Jaouad's. Sidonie Smith, *Moving Lives: 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Women's Travel Writing* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2001), 39-41, 34.

Abdel-Jaouad's thesis seems to be further corroborated by Eberhardt's own voiced belief that the Maghreb will be the final station in her wanderings: "je crois [...] ou plutôt je commence à croire que j'ai [...] trouvé mon port."<sup>36</sup> However, the formulation of this rare instance of Eberhardtian optimism as a hesitant hope rather than as a definite affirmation says much about her lingering scepticism. Indeed, in North Africa no less than in Europe, she saw her condition as one of exile and loneliness. Her early comments on the desert contradict Abdel-Jaouad's argument in that they reveal not only that she had no intention to be one of the natives, but also that her relation to the place – at the beginning, at least – was one of interest rather than attachment. In particular, the desert was expected to fulfil her literary ambitions. Besides providing her with an interesting, because unfamiliar, writing-subject,<sup>37</sup> remote and desolate Ouargla, where she initially planned to live,<sup>38</sup> was expected to enhance her literary productivity by allowing her to acquire strength of will and self-discipline – "une conscience, une intelligence, une volonté"<sup>39</sup> – and by isolating her from the usual distractions of social life:

Mon Dieu, si je trouvais seulement le courage, étant arrivé à Ouargla, de me créer ce nid qui me manque tant, ce nid de hibou solitaire, et d'y rester, au moins six mois, et surtout d'y travailler.

[...]

Il faut, en route, noter soigneusement, non seulement les *renseignements*, mais bien aussi les *impressions*. Il faut, de cette traversée de la mer, puis de l'Algérie tellienne et de l'*oued* Rir'h, pouvoir faire un voyage intéressant, pittoresque – première chose à rédiger là-bas.

Puis, dans l'oasis, tout noter; commencer par tout visiter et faire un plan détaillé avec notes aussi complètes que possible. Après, commencer un *journal littéraire* de mon séjour là-bas. Entre tout, il faudra faire de *Rakhil* ce qu'il doit être surtout – une œuvre d'art.

Il faut écrire, en russe ou pour le russe [*sic*], la rédaction de mon voyage d'automne dans le Sahel, et quelques *nouvelles*.

Somme écrasante de travail, dont dépend la possibilité de salut. Après, la *Villa Neuve* liquidée, si j'en ai les moyens, aller à Paris; y mener une toute autre vie qu'avant et me jeter dans la lutte acharnée pour arriver avec le bagage que j'apporterai.

Voilà le seul plan raisonnable que je puisse établir à présent...<sup>40</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, *Journaliers* [1923, posthumous] (Paris: Joëlle Losfeld, 2002), 78. Eberhardt's emphasis.

<sup>37</sup> In a letter to her brother Augustin, Eberhardt writes: "Ce pays [the Algerian South] est *absolument inédit*, il n'est nullement semblable au Tell et sa vie est inconnue du public français." Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 301. Eberhardt's emphasis.

<sup>38</sup> Having been refused the French authorities' permission to head to Ouargla, Eberhardt eventually changed her direction for El-Oued.

<sup>39</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 34.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-48. Eberhardt's emphasis.

Eberhardt's Saharan stay was, thus, not a "call of the heart" but a rational project; an arduous but necessary passage in her planned journey towards (literary) fame and success, which, in her view, had to end in Europe; with a few months of hard work in the desert, she was "sûre de devenir quelqu'un".<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, it is, interestingly, by constantly evoking the supposedly hated Switzerland that she "lulled away" the harshness of the *coin perdu* where she had landed. The mere sight of a titmouse evokes vague memories of her native land (Switzerland);<sup>42</sup> in African autumns she sees "les étés de là-bas";<sup>43</sup> in a *chott*<sup>44</sup> surrounded by palm-trees, she imagines "les grands bois du Rhône".<sup>45</sup> What these passages, among others, show is that Eberhardt's motivation in heading for the desert was a quest not for a compensatory home, but for recognition in the West itself; and as her dreams of literary creation quickly begin to dwindle, thus compromising the hoped-for triumphant return, it is with bitterness that she voices her disappointment at her failure: "Venir, après tant de grands rêves, tant de vicissitudes, échouer dans un oasis perdu au fond du désert!..."<sup>46</sup>

Obviously, the desert was for Eberhardt anything but the place where she had hoped to spend the rest of her life. The temptation of a home and a community mentioned by Abdel-Jaouad was but a brief and fragile moment in her North African experience, which coincided chiefly with the intrusion into her life of Slimène Ehni and her acceptance by the Qadiriya brotherhood,<sup>47</sup> to which he introduced her. However, not even the alleviating effect that these events brought to her sense of isolation prevented her from lucidly acknowledging her non-belonging in the environment where she had come to settle: "Et s'il est écrit, si mon destin est de mourir ici, dans le désert chenu, pas une main fraternelle ne s'étendra sur mes yeux morts... Au dernier instant terrestre, pas une bouche fraternelle ne s'ouvrira pour la consolation et la caresse..."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>44</sup> A *Chott* is a sort of salt-water lake typical of the Maghreb's Southern landscapes.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>47</sup> The Qadiriya is one of the most prominent Sufi communities. Eberhardt joined it in 1900.

<sup>48</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 104. Eberhardt wrote these lines in the military hospital at El Oued, where she was recovering from an assault perpetrated on her by a fanatical native. At that time, her relationship with Slimène was supposed to be at its strongest, and she was already a member of the Qadiriya. The assault will be discussed in the next chapter.

### 1.1.1.2. The call of death

While manifesting itself mainly through the quest for a literary name, Eberhardt's desire to escape her condition of disempowerment had a flip-side: the will-to-death. Although she seems to disapprove of the relative facility with which her protagonist in "La Nuit" abandons himself to it and to deplore the fact that his character "faible et doux" prevented him from being "le révolté que, fort, il eût dû être",<sup>49</sup> she was herself obsessively tempted by suicide. In her diary, she writes that, should the inner happiness in her soul evaporate, she would opt for "une mort très calme et très froidement envisagée."<sup>50</sup> Her condemnation of her character's weakness therefore sounds very much like an attempt to overcome her own inclinations. Indeed, her diary and her correspondence reveal that she often endeavoured to overcome the temptation of suicide by deploying a rhetoric of strength and pride. In her letters to Ali Abd El Wahab,<sup>51</sup> she explains that it is only "par orgueil"<sup>52</sup> that she chooses not to surrender to the "grand charme de la Mort".<sup>53</sup> Despite such efforts, however, the death-drive in her was to intensify with her growing sense of isolation and non-belonging.<sup>54</sup>

Eberhardt's (seemingly) contradictory drives could only be reconciled in a quest for heroism. As represented in ancient mythologies and in more contemporary studies, heroism is simultaneously a will-to-die and a will-to-power, the latter culminating precisely in the conquest of death itself by "leaving something behind" – a name associated in posthumous records with a fearless confrontation of danger.<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, two characteristics that seem to be common to both mythological and historical heroic figures are "anomalous" birth and/or an unknown father. This finds evidence not only in

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<sup>49</sup> Eberhardt, "La Nuit", 348. This fragility is still more emphasised in another version of this story, published in the same year and eloquently entitled "Un Cœur faible". See *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 351-354.

<sup>50</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 108.

<sup>51</sup> The young heir of an aristocratic Tunisian family, Ali Abd El Wahab was put in epistolary contact with Eberhardt in 1897 by "Abou Naddhara", an exiled Egyptian Orientalist to whom the young Russian had taken the initiative to write. For two years, Abd El Wahab was to act as a correspondent, a friend, and a confidant for the young woman; however, their relationship deteriorated quickly after Eberhardt's arrival in Tunisia.

<sup>52</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 122. Eberhardt's emphasis.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

<sup>54</sup> Indeed, as many authors have advanced, her very death in the desert flood is likely to have been chosen. The fact that her husband, who was with her at the time of the event, came through it unharmed makes it possible to suppose that she, too, could have escaped her tragic fate, had she wished to. See, for example, Cecily Mackworth, *The Destiny of Isabelle Eberhardt* [1951] (New York: Ecco, 1975), 223; and Denise Brahimi, "Le Voyage sans retour", 60 and 66.

<sup>55</sup> Dean A. Miller, *The Epic Hero* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 382-383.



mythological examples like Theseus and Heraklès,<sup>56</sup> but also in the central figures of the three major monotheistic religions and in more “secular” figures like the already mentioned Alexander the Great and, much closer to us, T. E. Lawrence.<sup>57</sup> Though the first feature (anomalous birth) can take other forms than illegitimacy – that, for example, of an incestuous or hybrid conception between a human and a deity, or a human and an animal<sup>58</sup> – the absence of a (human) father often presents the hero to the world as illegitimate.<sup>59</sup> In all cases, the hero is born of a transgression of some sort, a transgression for which he makes up either through death or through fulfilling the exploit of triumphing over it,<sup>60</sup> both of which often occur in battle.

Eberhardt’s attraction for the desert may be read precisely in relation to her simultaneous quest for death as an atonement for the “original sin” of her birth and her wish to conquer it by gaining access to glory. If, in the collective imagination, the desert by and large is the very negation of life – the land of hardship and thirst, where no vegetation grows and where few, if any, people live<sup>61</sup> – the Algerian South increases this death-potential, as it were, by being a space of exchanged violence between the French occupier and native tribes (and indeed, between the latter themselves). A short time after her arrival in North Africa, Eberhardt took part in a native students’ demonstration against the colonial administration<sup>62</sup> and, as Annette Kobak suggests, this involvement was motivated as much by the voluptuousness produced in her by the proximity of death as by her sympathy for fellow Muslims. As a friend of hers, covered in blood, struggled against four armed policemen, it was not with fear, but with a delicious sensation that she rushed to his defence: “I felt the savage intoxication of battle, bloody and primitive [...] I knew the consuming voluptuousness of consuming blood”.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> For details on these and for further examples, see *ibid.*, 71-76, 81-84, and 98-99.

<sup>57</sup> As a brief reminder: Moses was, from his earliest infancy, brought up among the Egyptians, far from his genitors; Muhammad was an orphan whose father died before his birth; the Christian tradition assigns divine paternity to Jesus Christ; Alexander believed in his own semi-divine birth, and T. E. Lawrence was an illegitimate child.

<sup>58</sup> Miller, *The Epic Hero*, 71-84.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>60</sup> An example, mentioned by Dean Miller, is that of the legendary Scandinavian king Helgi, who, to atone for the incestuous intercourse he had with a woman he did not know to be his daughter, went off immediately to seek death in battle. *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>61</sup> This association of the desert with death is well-illustrated in the paintings of nineteenth-century artists like Fromentin’s *Le Pays de La Soif* (1869) and Johan Viktor Kramer’s *View of Tangier* (1890).

<sup>62</sup> Kobak, *Isabelle*, 62-64.

<sup>63</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 64.

Overall, however, the North of the territory was, to a large extent, under Western control – pacified and, as such, peaceful. The South, by contrast, was still under military control and marked by frequent skirmishes between hostile tribes and the colonial army, and it is there that the young Russian wanted to be: “aller où on se bat, dans le Sud-Ouest, et chercher la mort à tout prix”.<sup>64</sup> With little coherence, she wished to fight in turn for one side in the conflict and then the other. Having long sung the praises of martyrdom and expressed her wish to die under the banner of Islam, she eventually abandoned this dream to espouse, with equal enthusiasm, the cause of the French imperialist mission. What mattered was dying for a “noble cause”; the cause in itself mattered little. Despite the glaring contradiction between the two ideals mentioned above, they converged in that they enabled the transformation into a sign of strength of the very surrender to the attraction of death which is despised as an act of weakness when it takes the shape of a suicide of the sort committed by Stolz. More important, unlike her character’s choice of death, a heroic death would ensure her the “name”, respectability, and recognition that she was denied at birth and that she had lost hope of attaining through literary achievement.

### 1.1.2. The kingdom

#### 1.1.2.1. Appropriation

Unlike the already subdued North, moreover, the South was still very much a space to conquer. If, as discussed above, the original “blankness” of the desert makes it a “fillable” space, this filling-potential is no less physical than semiotic. In other words, this empty space which, as such, proposes itself for semantic (over)-filling also seems to invite physical occupation. In this connection, Eberhardt’s attraction to the desert is reminiscent of Marlow’s fascination for blank spaces on maps in *Heart of Darkness*.<sup>65</sup> This passage has often been read as indicative of the colonialist impulse underlying Conrad’s narrative,<sup>66</sup> an impulse from which, despite the traditional association of her name with anti-colonialism, Eberhardt herself was not free. Long before her active involvement in the colonial project through her cooperation with General Lyautey, Eberhardt dreamt of herself and her family as prospering *colons* in North Africa. As early as 1896, dismayed by her brother

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<sup>64</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 187.

<sup>65</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* [1899] (Béjaïa: Talantikit, 2004), 21.

<sup>66</sup> See, for example, Richard Phillips, *Mapping Men and Empire: a Geography of Adventure* (London: Routledge, 1997), 3; and Ernst Van Alphen, “Africa as Textual Play”, *Africa and its Significant Others: Forty Years of Intercultural Entanglement*, Isabel Hoving, Frans-Willem Korsten, and Ernst Van Alphen eds (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003): 121-130, 126.

Augustin's socially disgraceful enrolment in the *Légion Etrangère*, she wrote to him in an alarmed tone, urging him to renounce his Russian citizenship,<sup>67</sup> settle in Algeria as a French *colon*, and run an orange-growing business.<sup>68</sup> Some two years later, she herself envisaged settling in Tunisia and realising the typically colonialist project of running a school for young female natives.<sup>69</sup>

In the chapter he devotes to the Russian writer in his *Belated Travelers*, Ali Behdad highlights the colonialism latent in Eberhardtian discourse, pointing to the “language of empire” – words like “power”, “stronghold”, and “empire” itself – which pervades it.<sup>70</sup> In the example he provides, these words are associated with the abstract figure of the nomad, referred to in the third person; however, Eberhardt's texts also teem with more explicit occurrences in which Eberhardt refers to herself as the almighty master or owner of the desert's vastness,<sup>71</sup> a tendency that goes together with that of using possessives for anything that pertains to the desert: “mon grand désert splendide”,<sup>72</sup> “mon Sahara, mon horizon vague et onduleux, mes doux levers d'aurore sur l'infini grisâtre et mes couchers de soleil [...], mon pauvre Souf<sup>73</sup> [...], ma défroque saharienne, ma liberté et mes rêves!”<sup>74</sup>

One interesting instance of this unconscious manifestation of Eberhardt's colonialist thrust occurs in her *récit* “Dans la dune” in which the first-person narrator – Eberhardt herself in her usual disguise as Mahmoud Saadi – having tried in vain to find her way back to her tent, arrives in an area, “étonnamment verte”, that she calls “mon île de Robinson”.<sup>75</sup> The author's colonialist stance is revealed no less in her immediate appropriation of the discovered place than in her explicit identification with the prototype of the coloniser that is Robinson Crusoe. This identification is reinforced by the fact that, far from being a mere incidental evocation, her reference to Defoe's character is very probably part of a conscious involvement in an intertextual relation with the eponymous novel. Indeed, as she duly undertakes to explore “her” island, the repellent sight of ashes and (hare) bones which

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<sup>67</sup> Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 41.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>70</sup> Behdad, *Belated Travelers*, 117.

<sup>71</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 129.

<sup>72</sup> Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 190.

<sup>73</sup> Souf is Eberhardt's horse. Eberhardt named him after the region where she bought it, “Souf” being also an abbreviation of “Oued Souf”, the full name of El Oued.

<sup>74</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Vers les horizons bleus” [1908, posthumous], *Œuvres complètes I: Ecrits sur le Sable (récits, notes et journaliers)* (Paris: Grasset, 1988), 67-108, 105.

<sup>75</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Dans la dune” [1905, posthumous], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 144-156, 147.

anticipate her encounter with the wild and “primitive” hunters of the desert echoes her literary antecedent’s discovery of the remains of a (cannibal) feast shortly before first meeting the “primitive” Friday.<sup>76</sup> This very name is, in a sense, taken up: one of the rough hunters the female Robinson meets is called “Boudjema”, a native name derived from the word “Djema” – Friday, in Arabic.

Before this unexpected encounter, the narrator explains that she had wandered for a long time while trying to find her way back, shuttling undecidedly between the southern and the northern directions:

Mais je demeurais perplexe... Où fallait-il me diriger? En effet, je ne pouvais pas savoir si je me trouvais au-dessus ou au-dessous de la route, c’est-à-dire si j’avais passé au nord ou au sud du camp. Je risquais donc de m’égarer définitivement. Cependant, je me décidai à prendre résolument la direction du nord, la moins dangereuse dans tous les cas.  
 Mais, là encore, je n’aboutis à rien [...] alors, je redescendis vers le sud.  
 Il était trois heures après midi, déjà, et ma mésaventure ne m’amusait plus [...] Je commençais à me demander ce que j’allais devenir si je ne retrouvais pas mon chemin avant la nuit.<sup>77</sup>

While this is supposed to be an account of an authentic experience, it is also possible to read it as a metaphor for Eberhardt’s own oscillation between Europe and Africa (these being represented, of course, by the northern and the southern directions respectively), and, indeed, as an implicit explanation of her decision to settle in the latter. Read as such, her “avowal” that she had first opted for the North, thinking it safer, is in convergence with the argument that Eberhardt arrived in the desert with the intention of returning to the North of her birth, in which she foresaw a possibility of recognition and empowerment (through literary success). It is only as she realises that elle “n’abouti[rait] à rien” there that she eventually opts for the South, in which, having worried for a while over “ce qu’elle allait devenir”, she discovers the “île de Robinson” that she is so prompt to appropriate. From the acknowledgement of loss, to the dream of a successful return to the North, to her ultimate settlement in the role of a conqueror, her meanderings “*dans la dune*” sum up well the major steps of her longer, intercontinental, peregrinations.

“Dans la dune” offers a further possibility of metaphoric reading in the narrator’s “strategic” choice, as she is simultaneously endeavouring to find her way back and looking

<sup>76</sup> Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* [1719] (London: IBS, 2008), 52-53.

<sup>77</sup> Eberhardt, “Dans la dune”, 146.

for an appropriate place to spend the night, to stand on the highest dune (“la dune la plus élevée de la région”<sup>78</sup>) so as to ensure a dominating view of the surroundings. Occurring in a context in which she is attempting to situate herself in an unknown environment, the elevated space-positioning functions as an illustration in miniature of the attitude all too often adopted by Westerners in “exotic” spaces like Africa or the Orient and which David Spurr, in *The Rhetoric of Empire*, has called “the convention of the commanding view”.<sup>79</sup> Henri Morton Stanley describing the African landscape of Unyamwezi from the top of a rocky hill and V.S. Naipaul commenting on the modernisation of Yamossoukro from the “sealed glass window” of his hotel room are illustrations of Spurr’s concept.<sup>80</sup>

### 1.1.2.2. Oriental colours

Of course, there is more to this “commanding view” than the simple occupation of an elevated geographical point. If, in sheer technical terms, s/he who gazes from the top of a mountain (or a sealed glass window) can indulge in seeing without being seen, it is also in these terms that the (Western) coloniser/(non-Western) colonised relation is often defined. As has been widely argued since Said’s *Orientalism*, the non-Westerner is, in such a relation, turned into an object of gaze and study by the Western studying subject. Far from being an objective account, this “study”, enabling power as much as it is enabled by it, fabricates a strictly Eurocentric narrative of the Other, the latter being silenced in the process.

Echoing the Saidian thesis on the relation between the Orientalist narrative and Western imperialism, Spurr draws an interesting analogy between writing and colonialism, both of which, he argues, consist in inscribing one’s own presence on a blank space (or one seen as blank).<sup>81</sup> Because of the necessity to adapt itself to the unstable mechanisms of the power it seeks to secure, this inscription involves a rich profusion of rhetorical forms which often clash with each other<sup>82</sup> and which Spurr attempts to unfold and categorise. Eberhardt’s vision of the North African space, and of the desert in particular, as a site of

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and the Colonial Administration* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 15. For her part, Mary Louise Pratt has termed the all-commanding look of the Westerner abroad “the monarch-of-all-I-survey”. See her *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>80</sup> Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire*, 17-19. Although Naipaul is a Trinidadian writer of Hindu parentage, Spurr explains that he has inherited the conventions of his Western “literary and journalistic antecedents”.

<sup>81</sup> Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire*, 7.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

power manifests itself in her writing of this space not only because such writing is itself an act of “epistemic violence”<sup>83</sup> which imposes its own knowledge-perspective, but also because it reproduces many of the discursive traits analysed by Spurr – and, before him, by Said – and which include, among others, appropriation, eroticisation, and surveillance.

Eberhardt’s descriptions of the desert are predictably similar throughout her writings. The opening paragraph of “Un Cœur faible”, a variant of “La Nuit”, itself discussed above, provides a typical sample:

Depuis la veille, le vent de l’ouest avait soufflé en tempête, roulant à travers la plaine des vagues de poussière *fauves*. Maintenant le jour finissait et le vent s’était calmé [...]  
 Vers l’ouest, au-delà de la plaine *nue*, la silhouette rectiligne, puissante, El Djebel Antar, se profilait, tout en *or* [...]  
 A gauche, sur les hauteurs, la nouvelle redoute *grise*, morose, *solitaire*.<sup>84</sup>

More often than with dust, the “fauve” quality is, in other texts, associated with the sand, the dunes, the natives’ *burnouses*,<sup>85</sup> or any other detail of their dress or physical appearance; the golden colour may equally be that of the sun or a mosque-dome; the nudity may be that of a mountain, a hill, or simply a wall; the greyness, that of the clouds, the shabby houses, or once again, the dunes. But these adjectives are all so inseparable from Eberhardt’s evocation of the desert that providing examples for each of these variants would almost come to citing the totality of Eberhardt’s works. The simultaneous recurrence and redistribution of these “favourite” adjectives testifies to their metaphorical significance; to their being more than a mere indication of the writer’s influence by impressionist painting.<sup>86</sup> If the colour of dust *is* something close to “fauve”, its almost random application to desert constituents as varied as those mentioned above makes it obvious that there is more to it than mere colour description; an argument which also holds for the other qualifiers.

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<sup>83</sup> Gayatri Spivak uses this phrase (which she borrows from Foucault) to refer to the way the West imposes its ways of knowing, thus condemning non-Westerners (especially female ones) to effacement by dismissing their epistemic perspective as inadequate.

<sup>84</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Un Cœur faible” [1903], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 351-354, 351. My emphasis.

<sup>85</sup> A *burnous* is a hooded cloak-like garment worn by male North Africans.

<sup>86</sup> Quoting a passage similar to the one inserted above, Hanane Mounib fails to read its colonialist underpinnings, seeing in it no more than a reflection of “cette richesse du regard de peintre que porte l’écrivain occidentale [*sic*] sur la nature saharienne.” Hanane Mounib, *Isabelle Eberhardt, la suspecte* (Paris: Alfabarre, 2008), 113.

While the “greyness” and the “loneliness” of the redoubt obviously stand for Eberhardt’s dark outlook and her sense of solitude, the gold, nudity, and felinity associated with it are not without colonialist/Orientalist implications. The gold that seems to irradiate from the desert-sky and carpet its soil might well stand for the wealth brought about/expected from the colony, thus joining the rhetoric of appropriation that marks her writing of the desert. Indeed, her failed dreams of a “salut matériel”<sup>87</sup> through literary success give way to “un grand rêve de bonheur et pourquoi pas de *richesse*”<sup>88</sup> in the form of a palm grove, a vegetable garden, a café, and “un magasin indigène, épicerie, bazaar et importation-commission”, no less.<sup>89</sup> In this connection, the Eberhardtian gold-trope fulfils a metaphoric function similar to that of ivory in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*; it is what both the protagonist and what s/he stands for (the West) expect from the colonised African space. As in Conrad’s novella, moreover, African wealth is often symbolised through the description of its daughters, “the jewelled beauty” being, as Rana Kabbani notes, a recurrent motif in imperialist literature.<sup>90</sup> If Kurtz’s “savage and superb” native mistress is decked out in “brass leggings to the knee, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow, [...] innumerable necklaces of glass beads around her neck, (and other) bizarre things [...] that glittered and trembled at every step”,<sup>91</sup> Eberhardt’s desert women “avaient, retombant de leur coiffure, des chaînettes d’argent, de grands anneaux d’oreilles, des pièces d’or, des parures de corail [...] et des cercles d’argent minces ou larges à gros clous rivés aux poignets. Leurs chevilles étaient enfermées en de larges anneaux d’argent ajouré.”<sup>92</sup>

Besides symbolising the African riches coveted by the Western imperialist, Kurtz’s mistress also embodies the construction of Africa as a site of sexual recreation shared by so many late nineteenth-century Westerners. In *L’Immoraliste*, for example, Eberhardt’s contemporary André Gide celebrated the very Algerian South in which Eberhardt had settled as a space of health and freedom, as opposed to the sickly and stifling morality and civilisation of Europe. In the company of youthful and lively male natives, the protagonist learns to treasure his long-neglected body and its pleasures; and though his fascination with them is presented as purely aesthetic, critics have been alert to the sexual

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<sup>87</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 58.

<sup>88</sup> Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 288. Eberhardt’s emphasis.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> Rana Kabbani, *Imperial Fictions: Europe’s Myths of Orient* [1986] (London: Saqi, 2008), 189.

<sup>91</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 99.

<sup>92</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Trimardeur” [1922, posthumous], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 391-513, 490.

underpinnings of the narrative.<sup>93</sup> One fairly explicit indication of these sexual undertones is the passage rendering the protagonist's first encounter with Bachir, a pre-adolescent native boy. A quasi-obsession with nakedness – the boy is stark naked under his *djellaba* and both his feet and shoulders are bare(d) – adds itself to the “*grâce animale et câline*”<sup>94</sup> assigned to the boy, while the protagonist's expressed desire to touch the latter's bared shoulder leaves little ambiguity regarding the nature of his impulses. Eberhardt's own overuse of the trope of naked landscape can be read in a very similar light.<sup>95</sup> Her construction of the Orient as a site of desire is evidenced by her legendary concupiscence which, interestingly, seems to have been “unleashed” mostly on North African soil, and almost exclusively with native partners.<sup>96</sup> Like Gide and Wilde, both of whom first acknowledged and performed their homosexuality in the Algerian South (with male natives), and Flaubert, whose “boasting” of his sexual exploits in Egypt served as illustrations for Said's analysis of Orientalism,<sup>97</sup> what Eberhardt saw in the Orient was a “heterotopia”; an “other space” in which she could free herself from the constraints of the civilised world.<sup>98</sup> Despite these writers' aestheticisation of this space and their denigration of their own culture, the sexual fulfilment associated with this space is pre-conditioned by the Europeanness of its celebrators. It is only inasmuch as they are Westerners (hence, symbolic colonisers) that they can afford to transgress the land's cultural code – one which, for its own people, is no less rigid than that of the West – and transform the natives into sexual objects. The enactments of power and desire are, in other words, unavoidably intertwined.

The colonial implications of Eberhardt's description can also be perceived in the felinity trope conveyed through the adjective “*fauve*”. Commenting on two passages in which natives are compared to “rabbits” and “wild animals” respectively, Spurr argues that this metaphoric animality evokes colonial relations in that it triggers territoriality and

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<sup>93</sup> See, for example, Albert J. Guerard, *André Gide* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969); and Phyllis Clark, “Gide's Africa”, *South Central Review* 14, 1 (Spring 1997): 56-73.

<sup>94</sup> André Gide, *L'Immoraliste* [1902] (Réghaïa: ENAD, 1995), 25.

<sup>95</sup> In the quoted passage, however, the association of nudity with that of the “rectiligne, puissante” mountain, and the very name of the *djebel* (Antar being a male Arab name) suggest a heterosexual orientation, unlike Gide's. Eberhardt's (complex) negotiation of race and sexuality will be discussed in Chapter 3.

<sup>96</sup> In this connection, Eberhardt writes that the only Westerner she was ever attracted to was her correspondent Eugène Letord.

<sup>97</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 184-190.

<sup>98</sup> The concept of heterotopia was first coined by Michel Foucault. See his *Le Corps utopique: Les hétérotopies* [1984] (Paris: Nouvelles Editions Lignes, 2009).



predation.<sup>99</sup> However, Spurr's reading can be expanded upon by considering the choice of the animal associated with the natives. Unlike the "rabbits" and the frightened "wild animals" of his examples, which place the natives in a position of helpless vulnerability, felines are a traditional figure of animal strength and aggression. Thus, while making herself the accomplice of colonisation through her discursive construction of this space as one of power and desire, the recurrence of this image suggests a mitigation of the subjection to which the colonialist (and colonialist discourse) attempts to reduce the natives.

## 1.2. Deconstructed carnivals

This ambiguity is also conveyed through Eberhardt's writing of race. Marked by the same ethics of distance as that revealed by her insistence on her being an outsider in the desert despite her life among its natives, Eberhardt's rendering of interracial contact also displays the perspective of power already pointed to in her colonialist rhetoric of appropriation and eroticisation. Despite being a multi-racial space in which Caucasian, Semitic, and black races cohabit, this seemingly carnivalesque dimension of the desert is soon deconstructed as Eberhardt shows the impossibility of a naturally harmonious, power-free, relation between races, and indeed between humans by and large: a semblance of harmony can only be obtained with order, which, in turn, involves (racial) distance and hierarchy. While Eberhardt's *parti pris* for racial separation may be read as a disavowal of colonisation, which necessarily entails some degree of racial fusion, her hierarchisation of the races she describes reproduces a major trait of colonialist discourse, as I shall now outline.

### 1.2.1. Carnavalesque venues?

#### 1.2.1.1. The *Légion Etrangère*

A site of racial *mélange par excellence*, the *Légion Etrangère* also provides a profusion of carnivalesque scenes through the wild amusements of its soldiers. In "Dimanche au village", Eberhardt describes the ambience of the taverns which harbour such amusements. In these venues, which have names like La Mère du soldat – a rather

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<sup>99</sup> Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire*, 20-21.

irreverent appellation which, as such, is itself not free from carnivalesque undertones – L’Etoile du sud, and Au Retour de Béchar,

L’absinthe coule et le sirocco souffle.

On commence par s’échauffer, et c’est maintenant la Babel des chants, des lents patois germaniques et bataves, des gazouillements italiens, des rauques syllabes heurtées des dialectes espagnols.

Puis, tout à coup, sans raison apparente, ce sont des effusions [...]

Des embrassades commencent entre les hommes ivres [...]<sup>100</sup>

Simultaneously, in the *cafés maures*, lively card and domino games go on, in the midst of the songs and joyous shouts of “la vague bleu sombre des tirailleurs, [...] l’entassement écarlate des spahis coiffés de hauts turbans blancs à cordelettes fauves ou noires, [...] les *burnous* bleus du *Makhzen* [...] et les *burnous* blancs, terreux des bédouins.”<sup>101</sup> This abolition of distance, symbolically embodied in the profusion of colour, reaches a peak as one *tirailleur*, borrowing two silken scarves, starts a female dance, imitating the lascivious movements of the Djebel Amour women in the midst of general laughter. Shortly afterwards, drawn “par un besoin de mouvement et d’ivresse”<sup>102</sup> and, one might add, of human contact,<sup>103</sup> other soldiers roll on the floor, wrestling playfully, “comme des enfants”.<sup>104</sup> While the dancer’s borrowing of a female identity disrupts gender barriers, thus helping to complete the carnivalesque picture left imperfect by the absence of the female element, the evocation of children triggers in the reader’s mind the “childhood” of humanity – Dionysian times preceding the tearing of mankind into separate and hierarchised individualities.<sup>105</sup> These tropes echo that, previously evoked, of the Tower of Babel, which, likewise, suggests an “unsophisticated” stage of humanity, before it was divided and “scattered upon the whole face of the Earth”.

<sup>100</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Dimanche au village” [1908], *Sud Oranais* (Paris: Joëlle Losfeld, 2003), 41-43, 42.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> The need for human contact is made more explicit in an unpublished draft version of this text: “Puis, par le besoin de crisper leurs mains avides sur de la chair vivante, les soldats, grisés de fumée [...] luttent et se roulent furieusement sur les nattes, sur les bancs, avec de grands cris”. This version, like all Eberhardt’s surviving manuscripts, is available at the Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer, in Aix-en-Provence, France.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> In opposition to the Apollonian principle of individuation, the Dionysian state, as defined by Nietzsche, is that which reunites men, regardless of their age or social condition, in an atmosphere of drunkenness and intoxication. In incarnating the supposedly original “Primal Unity” of mankind, the Dionysian condition is very comparable to Bakhtin’s carnivalesque. The two states are also similar in that both are dominated by a mood of joy. For more on the Apollonian and Dionysian principles, see Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* [1872] trans. Clifton P. Fadiman (New York: Dover, 1995).

Ironically, however, these images which, following the Bakhtinian definition of the carnivalesque, seem to bring together, to unify<sup>106</sup> are belied in several ways. Eberhardt's Babel is one that is curiously limited; the multitude of voices it reunites leaves no room for Oriental accents, and this racial separation is not only highlighted in "Dimanche au village". In "Reflets de guerre", although the amusements of the Arab and European soldiers are brought slightly closer in that they both occur within the same space of the local café, they are not shared. While the former listen to the ever-wailing "*rhaïta*"<sup>107</sup> africaine", the latter enjoy other songs of their own: "les deux mondes voisins, le monde européen et le monde arabe, se coudoient, se mêlent *sans jamais se confondre*."<sup>108</sup> Despite its claims to disrupt barriers, the carnivalesque, as pictured by Eberhardt, accommodates those of race.

Far from being a mere description of a reality shaped by the colonial context, this racial distance was something to which the writer herself subscribed. Her contempt for racial mixing is recurrent in several of her texts. One of the reasons she chose the Sahara is, she explains, its remoteness from the large cities, with their "êtres hideux, produits bâtards de la dégénérescence et d'une race métissée".<sup>109</sup> Yet, even in the desert, hybridity is present in the form of inter-ethnic native marriages, and, for these, too, she feels nothing but distaste. Her descriptions strive to distinguish between those who are of a "race pure", often aestheticised, and the "races abâtardies". For instance, "[I]es Soudanais de la *zaouïa*, tant que leur race reste pure, sont robustes et souvent beaux, d'une beauté toute arabe, qui contraste singulièrement avec le noir ébène de leur peau. Ceux qui sont issus de métissage avec les *kharatines* sont, au contraire, ordinairement chétifs et laids, avec des visages anguleux, les membres grêles et disproportionnés".<sup>110</sup>

Moreover, Eberhardt shows the impossibility of carnivalesque moments even within the boundaries of a shared race. Instead of the joyousness which characterises the carnivalesque spirit, an insidious sadness pervades Eberhardt's rendering of the European *légionnaires*' very manifestations of gaiety. As she mentions their sudden "embrassades", her comment is that they "à première vue, paraissent drôles" but that they are "au fond,

<sup>106</sup> "Carnival brings together, unifies". Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* [1929] trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 123.

<sup>107</sup> A sort of flute, the *rhaïta* is a popular instrument in the music of the Algerian South.

<sup>108</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "Reflets de guerre" [1908], *Sud Oranais*, 14-20, 15. My emphasis.

<sup>109</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "Au Pays des sables" [1901], *Ecrits sur le sable I*, 41-44, 43-44.

<sup>110</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "Esclaves" [1906, posthumous], *Sud Oranais*, 180-182, 181.

tristes à pleurer, parce qu'elles montent du plus profond de la douleur humaine".<sup>111</sup> Similarly, in the neighbouring cafés, the native soldiers' shouts and laughter are dominated by the sad, feverish complaint of the *rhaita*. Indeed, the soldiers know well not only that their boisterous pleasures are but a brief interlude in an otherwise harsh life of deprivation, obedience, and rigid orders, but also that the surveillance to which they are daily subjected is maintained even in their moments of wild drinking and supposed liberation: outside the refreshment rooms, the patrol waits gravely for the festivities to end. However, while, in the Bakhtinian definition, it is the intervention of authority which kills the carnivalesque moment, Eberhardt shows its demise as inevitable because it results from the antagonism between such moments and man's natural inclinations. What the patrol is waiting for is not the time when it can cut short the men's enjoyment, but the moment when it will have to intervene in "les rixes prévues, les inévitables chutes."<sup>112</sup> Indeed, the soldiers have already started to give early signs of such violence. In *La Mère du soldat*, "ils renversent les bancs, ils cassent et chavirent tout",<sup>113</sup> and further trouble is only prevented thanks to the intervention of the bar-owner, who evicts the most violent customers; in the other taverns, the very hugging described above is predicted to end "par des disputes et des coups, quelquefois par du sang."<sup>114</sup>

The carnivalesque moment is, for Eberhardt, one in which violence, not joy and universal love, is unleashed. It is such violent instincts, not the intervention of authority, which, in her view, makes the carnivalesque impossible; if anything, the artificial codes decried by Bakhtin are salutary in that they can prevent the tragedies in which such "moments of freedom" would have otherwise ended. In the Bakhtinian vision, "[l]aughter must liberate the gay truth of the world from the veils of [...] suffering and violence";<sup>115</sup> in that of Eberhardt, it is laughter which becomes the veil, though a very thin one, from beneath which suffering and violence unavoidably force their way.

### 1.2.1.2. The market-place

A similar scepticism marks Eberhardt's rendering of market venues. A *lieu* of popular gatherings, filled with a multitude of colours, sounds, and aromas, the market-place is, for

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<sup>111</sup> Eberhardt, "Dimanche au village", 42.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>115</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* [1965] (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 174.

Bakhtin, a typical carnivalesque space.<sup>116</sup> It is precisely such an atmosphere that is described in “Marché d’Aïn Sefra”:

C’est là [au marché] qu’on se rencontre et qu’on se réunit, c’est là qu’on apprend les nouvelles, et c’est là surtout qu’on gagne un peu d’argent.  
 Dès l’aube, entre un terrain vague entre le village et le quartier de cavalerie, la foule s’amasse avec un grand bruit qui ira croissant jusqu’à midi.  
 Les chameaux s’agenouillent en grondant sourdement, les chevaux attachés aux acacias grêles du boulevard s’ébrouent et hennissent aux juments qui passent. Les hommes se démènent et crient.  
 Dominant tout ce tapage, le bêlement plaintif des moutons amarrés les uns aux autres par le cou, et le mugissement des petits bœufs et des vaches noires, à peine plus grosses que des veaux.  
 A terre, les marchandises du Sud s’accumulent en un superbe désordre...<sup>117</sup>

In addition to the presentation of the market as a friendly place where people can meet up and exchange news, the crowd and the hubbub of human and animal sounds reproduce the Bakhtinian image of the fair’s “loudness”, while the disorder of the spread-out merchandise, besides reflecting the spirit of the marketplace itself, may be seen to stand for the carnivalesque potential of subversion of the established order (with its constitutive power relations). However, this picture is undermined by the image of the sheep, whose bleating, likened to pleadings, recalls the complaint of the *rhaita* in the soldiers’ amusements. In both cases, the sad “tune” is said to dominate the merrier background sounds, thus belying the impression of carnivalesque joy. Simultaneously, the freedom usually associated with the Bakhtinian concept is subtly mocked through the attention drawn to the animals’ small frame and to the fact that they are chained; two details, which, together, symbolise the impossibility of erasing the instincts of violence and domination.

Such a reading is confirmed by the hostile relations between the market attendees. Until lately, the place was at the mercy of the Béni Guil outlaws – anti-colonial dissidents from the Moroccan frontier. “Pacified” at last, they have been allowed access both to the market and to the neighbouring village; yet their relations with their enemies – those who have surrendered to the colonial authority – remain very tense. The Béni Guil “entrent dans les boutiques avec méfiance, en bande” ;<sup>118</sup> they are redoubtable hagglers, and:

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Marché d’Aïn Sefra” [1908], *Sud Oranais*, 118-120, 118-119.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

pour la moindre contestation, des disputes éclatent et on devine ce qu'il doit en être en *bled es siba*<sup>119</sup> marocain, loin de toute surveillance. Là-bas, sur ces marchés encore plus tumultueux, la poudre parle, des cadavres roulent parmi les marchandises et du sang coule sur la terre battue. Ici, les Béni Guil se contentent de gestes échevelés et d'injures épiques : "Attends, fils d'infidèle, enfant du péché! [...] Attends que nous soyons au-delà de Fortassa..."<sup>120</sup>

Although abusive language like that of the Beni Guil is typical of the market-place, it is, here, mitigated neither by the affectionate tone nor by the simultaneous presence of laudatory speech which marks the market's speech-forms.<sup>121</sup> As a result, it gives this supposedly carnivalesque space an unambiguous hostility at odds with the positive spirit of universal gaiety assigned to it by Bakhtin. As in the case of the *légionnaires*' recreation, only the intervention of authority prevents this hostility from reaching tragic proportions – the "powder-speech", the bloodshed, and the corpses – it does attain in the "freer" Moroccan territory. Eberhardt's portrayal of carnivalesque venues thus neither celebrates freedom nor fulfils the traditional carnivalesque function of subverting authority; rather, it implicitly voices support for the latter by invariably showing its absence to result in violence. And because this implicitly lauded authority is, both in the present case and in that of the *légionnaires*, represented by the French authorities, this anti-carnivalesque stance carries obvious colonialist implications.

Eberhardt displays a puzzlingly ambivalent relation to this violence, which, in her view, constitutes the primordial human condition. While obviously fascinated by it, as shown by her involvement in the 1899 riots, she also often contemptuously sees in it a mark of inferior intellect and unrefined instincts.<sup>122</sup> As a result, her ethical stance regarding popular revolt is, most surprisingly for someone seen as the very incarnation of the rebel-figure, one of condemnation. If her public protests against the accusation of setting the natives against the French can be dismissed as a mere discursive strategy meant to calm the

<sup>119</sup> "Bled es siba" means "the country of disorder" in Arabic.

<sup>120</sup> Eberhardt, "Marché d'Aïn Sefra", 120.

<sup>121</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 167-171.

<sup>122</sup> This ambivalence is well illustrated in the novel "Trimardeur", where the protagonist, having fled the intellectualism and stifling organisation of a group of anarchists of which he used to be an influential member, sojourns for a while in the city of Marseilles, where he works as a docker, and soon becomes involuntarily involved in a movement of anger launched by his "colleagues" to protest against the arrival of cheaper hands from Italy. Orschanov is appalled by the amount of hostile passion unleashed by his friends, whom he calls "êtres stupides", but is himself eventually caught up in the "beauté sauvage de la foule" and even ends up killing a policeman. Eberhardt, "Trimardeur", 466-471.

colonial authorities so as to avoid expulsion,<sup>123</sup> her standpoint is also well expressed in a letter she sent to her husband Slimène, urging him to further his education so as to belie colonialist assumptions regarding the natives' supposed inferiority. She adds: "C'est comme cela qu'il faut servir l'Islam et la patrie arabe, et non pas en fomentant des révoltes inutiles, sanglantes".<sup>124</sup> In "Le Marché d'Aïn Sefra" itself, this stance is made obvious in the dismissal of the frontier-dwelling rebels as "détrousseurs" and trouble-makers, and the congratulatory tone with which the "news" of restored peace is announced: "les détrousseurs ont rentré leurs ongles crochus. Ils circulent dans le village, déjà moins déguenillés, sinon moins farouches qu'au début."<sup>125</sup>

Such stripping of native violence of its dimension of resistance is all too common in Eberhardtian discourse: the country has always been "*bled el baroud*" – the land of powder – and what seems to be acts of rebellion against the coloniser is but a new manifestation of its people's age-old bellicosity: "[I]es tribus de la vague frontière se sont toujours raziées les unes les autres", while the rebels are no more than "[d]es voleurs, des bandits".<sup>126</sup> Eberhardt thus rehearses the familiar colonialist rhetorical strategy that Ranajit Guha has termed "the prose of counter-insurgency".<sup>127</sup> Analysing historians' treatment of peasant revolts in colonial India, Guha shows how they tend to represent these insurgencies as spontaneous, unprepared events or assign them to factors that are external to the peasants' conscious will. At the rhetorical level, this manifests itself through privileging metaphor, or "the functionality of being", over "the functionality of doing" – metonym – when referring to the insurgents.<sup>128</sup> Consequently, epithets predominate at the expense of verbs, and are employed in such a way as to hide the political significance of the rebels' gesture; instead of resistance, the latter becomes defiance of authority or, worse, "wanton atrocities".<sup>129</sup> It is precisely such rhetoric that Eberhardt deploys when she redefines the frontier rebels as "détrousseurs" and "bandits". Simultaneously, her assignment of the latter's revolts to their supposedly inherent violent inclinations participates not only in the colonial task, described by Guha, of denying the native the ability to undertake a

<sup>123</sup> See Eberhardt's letter to *La Dépêche algérienne*, written on July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1901. Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 151-154.

<sup>124</sup> Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 359.

<sup>125</sup> Eberhardt, "Marché d'Aïn Sefra", 119.

<sup>126</sup> Eberhardt, "Reflets de guerre", 17.

<sup>127</sup> Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency", *Selected Subaltern Studies*, Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak eds (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 45-84.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

consciously willed action, but also in the Orientalist dichotomy which associates the West with reason and the Orient/Africa with instinct.

### 1.2.1.3. Festivals

A similar departure from the carnivalesque's supposed challenge to the established order marks her description of a popular festival in "Fête soudanaise". The event features typical carnivalesque elements: black slaves and white children dance and laugh together in the midst of drum-beats, silver castanets and "une mélodie mi-arabe mi-soudanaise, coupées de refrains criards".<sup>130</sup> This spirit of carnivalesque *mélange*, embodied in the involvement of white children in the supposedly black feast and, more symbolically, in the hybrid song, adds itself to the "loudness" and the prevailing atmosphere of Dionysian wildness, marked by ecstasy and self-oblivion.<sup>131</sup> Emulating the ancient Maenads, an ecstatic dancer, carried away by the feast's "ivresses barbares",<sup>132</sup> "s'excite jusqu'à la folie" and "pousse des hurlements inarticulés qui sont des cris de joie sauvage."<sup>133</sup>

Yet, as in the previous examples, the deceptive character of such an image is pointed to in its very description. Reminiscent of the image of the chained animals in "Marché d'Ain Sefra", the "laughing" castanets are, symbolically, said to be "liées aux poignets",<sup>134</sup> an image which might well stand for the very musicians handling these instruments. Indeed, as the title of the text indicates, the festival described is an old black tradition that dates back to the days of primitive fetishism, which the Sudanese have preserved throughout the centuries of their North African slavery. Illustrating the Nietzschean affirmation that, in the midst of Dionysian drunkenness, "the slave is free; now all the stubborn, hostile barriers which necessity, caprice, or 'shameless fashion' have erected between man and man, are broken down",<sup>135</sup> the Sudanese dancers seem to have forgotten their unhappy condition in the frenzy of their wild cries and unrestrained movements: "Tout leur vieux sang nègre se réveille et déborde, triomphant des habitudes artificielles de réserve imposées par l'esclavage."<sup>136</sup> However, this impression is soon belied with the appearance of the *marabout* Sidi Brahim. Having collapsed on the ground from exhaustion

<sup>130</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "Fête soudanaise" [1906], *Sud Oranais*, 215-217, 216.

<sup>131</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 12.

<sup>132</sup> Eberhardt, "Fête soudanaise", 216.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 216-217.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>135</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 4.

<sup>136</sup> Eberhardt, "Fête soudanaise", 216.



brought on the physical and emotional excesses involved in their celebration, the performers nonetheless manage to overcome their tiredness as they suddenly seem to remember a neglected duty towards him: “ils se redressent à demi, s'accroupissent péniblement, tournés vers Sidi Brahim.”<sup>137</sup>

The slaves' hunkering position mocks the presentation of the festival as an interruption of their enslavement. The event would not have been possible without the permission of the “*maître de cérémonie*”, Sidi Brahim himself; indeed, the whole performance seems to have been held in his honour. In a gesture of reward, the *marabout* bestows his blessing on the blacks, but soon extends it to embrace not only all the members of his religious community – the Ziania – and the inhabitants of Knadsa, but also every Muslim man and woman, including the Algerian *M'zani*<sup>138</sup> Eberhardt. While such an ecumenical gesture fits within the carnivalesque aspiration of breaking artificial boundaries, this aspiration is thwarted by the very presence of the authority by virtue of which the blessings are dispensed. The most carnivalesque moments thus seem to be caught up in the chains of authority and hierarchy. Still more relevant to our purpose, this hierarchy is not only social and religious, but also racial. Because the power exercised by Sidi Brahim over the Sudanese performers is as much that of a white (or, more exactly, brown) man over black men as that of the head of a community over his “subjects”, it is also shared by other, socially inferior members of his race. One interesting example is the previously mentioned participation of Maghrebian children in the Sudanese festival, which, while seeming to participate in the carnivalesque project of erasing artificial racial distance, ironically reinforces it by reaffirming the whites' superiority through the equation implicitly drawn between black adults and white children. The childlike character of the performers is actually explicitly evoked, and is juxtaposed to other clichés relating to the black race: “Ils redeviennent eux-mêmes, à la fois naïfs et farouches, avides de jeux enfantins et d'ivresses barbares, très proches de l'animalité primitive.”<sup>139</sup>

This trope of animality pervades Eberhardt's descriptions of the blacks. The ape-like character assigned to them in “Fête soudanaise” through the reference to their dance as “des bonds de singes” and “des gesticulations qui [eurent leur] plein sens dans les forêts

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>138</sup> “M'zani” means “religious renegade”.

<sup>139</sup> Eberhardt, “Fête soudanaise”, 216.

profondes”<sup>140</sup> also occurs in “Esclaves”, where the writer explains “[l]’impression inquiétante et répugnante que produisent sur [elle] les Nègres” by the “singulière mobilité de leurs visages aux yeux fuyants, aux traits tirillés sans cesse par des tics et des grimaces”.<sup>141</sup> In taking up the thesis of the Africans’ primitiveness and animality, Eberhardt appropriates the then prevailing “scientific” discourse on race, which, in turn, was often relied on as a justification for the Western imperialist project, particularly the so-called “Scramble for Africa”,<sup>142</sup> thus making herself the accomplice of the colonial enterprise.

### 1.2.2. Eberhardt’s racial hierarchy

What emerges from the analysis of Eberhardt’s supposedly carnivalesque venues is not only her belief in the usefulness of order and authority in restraining the otherwise inherent violence of man, but also that her distribution of authority is racialised: its holders are white and/or Western. Despite its seeming validity, the argument that this is merely a faithful description of race relations as she saw them is belied by the writer’s own hierarchised representation of ethnicity, of which her derogatory comments on the blacks, illustrated above, is an example. Indeed, Eberhardt’s texts are filled with typically colonialist clichés about all the racial constituents of North Africa; Arabs, Berbers, and Jews are no less stereotyped than the African blacks. With Arabs, she associates an antique aristocratic code made up of chivalry, passion, and manly honour; with Berbers and Jews, a more “modern” mercantile spirit and a European-like adaptability.

#### 1.2.2.1. Arabian knights

In “Silhouettes d’Afrique”, the narrator contrasts the “banality” of the European part of the city with the calm grandeur of the Arab quarter: “Dans la maison, une grande paix régnait, presque solennelle, et en cette paix profonde, il y avait quelque chose de suranné, de très archaïque... Et quand, quittant la ville banale et tumultueuse des *Naçaras*,<sup>143</sup> l’on s’y plongeait, c’était comme un brusque recul dans l’abîme insondée des durées

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Eberhardt, “Esclaves”, 181.

<sup>142</sup> Some of the numerous nineteenth-century proponents of the thesis of the blacks’ animality and, more specifically, ape-like character are Isidore Geoffroy de Saint-Hilaire (1805-1861), Robert Knox (1791-1862), Ernest Haeckel (1834-1919), and Karl Vogt (1818-1895). On this theory and its interconnectedness with the imperialist project, see Gustav Jahoda, *Images of Savages: Ancients [sic] Roots of Modern Prejudice in Western Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 63-74.

<sup>143</sup> “*Naçaras*” is the plural form of “noursani”, which means “Christian” in Arabic.

abolies...”<sup>144</sup> The inhabitants of the peaceful quarter have no wish to relinquish their archaic lifestyle:

Ils aimaient profondément leur vie arabe et sa berceuse immobilité; très étrangers et surtout très dédaigneusement indifférents au “Mouvement” européen [...]

“Que l’on ne change point notre Afrique et l’antique patrie, là-bas, notre Yémen et notre Hedjaz [...] Que l’on ne remplace point nos beaux chevaux par leurs chemins de fer imbéciles, fils de la hâte et de l’agitation insensée!”<sup>145</sup>

The Arabs’ disdain for Western technological progress is thus presented as an aesthetic choice – one which the writer shares. The world she describes bathes in a “delicious” atmosphere of all-pervading beauty which equally characterises the landscapes and their amiable inhabitants.

Far from the softness of the “civilised” city of Annaba (in which “Silhouettes d’Afrique” is set), the Arabs of the desert are “frustes”, and their voices are guttural; yet they are no less aesthetised. They seem to be aggrandized in this space, seen as their natural milieu both because it is their ancestors’ birth place and because they share its silence and immutability:

Ici, le Sahara âpre et silencieux [...] a conservé jalousement la race rêveuse et fanatique venue jadis des déserts lointains de sa patrie asiatique.

Et ils sont très grands et très beaux ainsi, les nomades aux vêtements et aux attitudes bibliques, qui s’en vont prier le Dieu unique, et dont aucun doute n’effleurera jamais les âmes saines et frustes.

Et ils sont bien à leur place là, dans la grandeur vide de leur horizon illimité où règne et vit, splendide, la souveraine lumière...<sup>146</sup>

While phrases like “conservé jalousement”, “jadis”, and “attitudes bibliques” associate the tough nomads with recalcitrance to change, the past they are made to embody is in turn magnified through an overstatement of the nomads’ handsome looks and the vastness of their desert. As if adjectives like “beaux” and “grands” did not do justice to the stateliness of these archaic beings, the author uses them in their intensified form (“très grands et très beaux”), before abandoning them for the more hyperbolic “souveraine” and “splendide”.

Elsewhere, Eberhardt writes no less admiringly of the nomads’ “grand calme réfléchi”,<sup>147</sup> their equally “majestueux costume”,<sup>148</sup> and their “belle prestance [et leur]

<sup>144</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Silhouettes d’Afrique”, *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 58-67, 61.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>146</sup> Eberhardt, “Au Pays des sables”, 44.

robustesse souple”.<sup>149</sup> This aestheticised portrayal contrasts with what she saw as the vulgarity of “l’Europe enfiévrée et morbide”,<sup>150</sup> for which she so recurrently voiced her contempt. In “L’Age du Néant”, she draws a most harsh portrait of this world trapped in greed and bourgeois superficiality. From the costumes and make-up of the *mondaines* to the perfidious look of the *parvenus*, everything seems to breathe ugliness; their very effort, dictated by convention, to present an agreeable exterior results in a mask “sans grâce esthétique et d’un attrait purement matériel, en [sa] vulgarité absolue”.<sup>151</sup> Minds are no less ugly than faces, filled as they are by nothing more than the desire to satisfy an ever-increasing number of needs which, though superfluous, are raised by materialist logic into the rank of absolute necessities. Along with this vulgarity goes a profound weariness. In its mad race for wealth and comfort, Europe has profaned gods and blasphemed Nature, preferring to them “le culte effrayant que professent les civilisés modernes, agenouillés, lamentables, devant le spectre menaçant du Néant.”<sup>152</sup> In sacrificing all ideals, nihilism ends in a loss of inner conviction, strength and energy, leaving the Westerners a nerveless and “tired” race. No artificial mask could dissimulate “la terrible usure héréditaire”:<sup>153</sup> the bourgeois are “us[é]s de bonne heure par une vie mesquine et étroite”,<sup>154</sup> the faces of the “protelarians” are desperate and submissive, and on those, still wearier, of the intellectuals, linger marks of a gloomy, tortured mind.

Free from the European *mal-de-vivre*, Arabs preserve a force and energy that Eberhardt seems to perceive in each of their physical traits: she endows them with “têtes énergiques”<sup>155</sup> and “yeux énergiques”.<sup>156</sup> But these qualities are also manifested in their wild lifestyle. The desert described above as their natural dwelling-place is not only a vast, silent, and immobile landscape; in this “*bled el baroud*”, games, love, and war are equally valid pretexts for violence and bloodshed. If “les Arabes apportent [de la passion] au jeu”,<sup>157</sup> it is on war and love that their lives – and Eberhardt’s writings – centre, and into both, they put just as much passion. Though, as has been shown, Eberhardt would, in her

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<sup>147</sup> Eberhardt, “Silhouettes d’Afrique”, 63.

<sup>148</sup> Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 276.

<sup>149</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Beni Ounif” [1908], *Sud Oranais*, 33-37, 36.

<sup>150</sup> Eberhardt, “Silhouettes d’Afrique”, 64.

<sup>151</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “L’Age du néant” [1900], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 529-533, 529.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 530.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 529.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Fantasia” [1901], *Ecrits sur le sable I*, 77-82, 78.

<sup>156</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Vision du Moghreb” [1895], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 28-37, 32.

<sup>157</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Pour tuer le temps” [1906], *Sud Oranais*, 183-174, 173.

later writings, slip into a rhetoric of debasement, referring to the warlike natives as “pilleurs” and “détrousseurs” who disturb the harmony that the colonial authorities seek to establish, there is obvious admiration in her rendering of their warlike exploits. Her evocations of the Islamic call to prayer are occasions not only to pay tribute to the strength of the Arabs’ faith, but also to highlight their spirit of conquest by recalling their first impulse, centuries ago, to undertake the conquest of the world.

From these remote ancestors, the Arabs she herself knew had retained an exceptional gift for equestrian skills, which she poignantly renders in texts like “Fiancée”, in which her character Touhami heads to war with an ecstatic combination of joy and pride. War, as he sees it, is nothing but “une fantasia très dangereuse.”<sup>158</sup> However, what he has imagined to be an exciting experience proves disappointing. Instead of the expected heated battles and daring exploits – of war, as he and his people understand it – what he finds is a sullen, tactical confrontation, made up of long and tedious marches and occasional fusillades. “[D]écidément, ou bien les *roumis* avaient peur [...] ou bien ils ne savaient pas faire la guerre”!<sup>159</sup>

Completing this picture of an ancient aristocratic ethos, Eberhardt matches this prowess in war and horse-riding with exploits in love. While, though “avide[s] de jouir”, the Westerners have lost “le divin frisson de volupté”,<sup>160</sup> Arabs combine voluptuousness, an intensity of attachment, and a “passion [...] tourmentée, jalouse, qui souvent prend les apparences de la folie, jetant les hommes hors de leur impassibilité apparente ordinaire.”<sup>161</sup> On Emmbarka, his beloved, if socially marginalised, prostitute, Touhami is not content with showering his generosity – “cette insouciance générosité arabe qui touche à la prodigalité”;<sup>162</sup> he overtly defies the wrath of his own father, promising her nothing less than an invitation from the latter. In their obsolete arts of love and horsemanship as well as in their prodigal generosity, the Arabs contrast with the calculating spirit and prudent conformism which had triumphed in nineteenth-century Europe. In voicing her admiration for them, Eberhardt reveals an unmistakably reactionary, aristocratic outlook, which might well be related to her own aristocratic background. However, it is also possible to see in this admiration a fascination for power: through the strength of their faith and passions as

<sup>158</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Fiancée” [1904], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 371-374, 372.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 373.

<sup>160</sup> Eberhardt, “L’Age du néant”, 530.

<sup>161</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Douar du Makhzen” [1903], *Sud Oranais*, 60-72, 62.

<sup>162</sup> Eberhardt, “Fiancée”, 371.

well as through their past of conquest and warfare, Arabs incarnated for Eberhardt an appealing form of power in that, unlike that of the modern West, it was not “vulgarly” mercantile.

### 1.2.2.2. Assimilable Berbers

One major trait by which Eberhardt’s Berber characters differ from Arabs is the weakness of their faith. Devoid of religious fervour, they are repetitively said to disregard, and indeed sometimes to distort, religious instructions. Commenting on the lifestyle of the mountain-dwelling Cheulha, she writes that “La piété [des] tribus berbères [...] est tiède, et leur ignorance de l’Islam est profonde. Les vieillards seuls s’acquittent des prières, traditionnellement”.<sup>163</sup> Elsewhere, a similar ignorance is assigned to the Chaouis: “Les Chaouïyas, ceux de l’Aurès surtout, sont une race pauvre, fruste, au caractère obstiné, ils n’aiment point leurs voisins de la plaine, les Arabes et, quoique musulmans, ils ont conservé les usages et les mœurs de leurs ancêtres.”<sup>164</sup> The epithets used to refer to the “dark side” of these tribes contrasts with the aestheticisation that marks the writer’s treatment of the Arabs’ very similar traits. What characterises them is not noble passion and strength but obstinacy and primitive coarseness; and their poverty does not have the advantage of the spiritual wealth which compensates for that of their *frères ennemis*.

Deprived of “inner riches”, Eberhardt’s Berbers seem to be led by material gain alone. In contrast to the Arab’s aristocratic prodigality, “Le Chaoui, comme le Kabyle et le Mozabite, est âpre au gain et avare.”<sup>165</sup> This greedy nature is poignantly illustrated in “Fellah”, where, caught between the duty of feeding his family, the obligation to pay taxes, and the need to buy seeds for the new sowing-season, the protagonist – himself a Berber – is left with no other alternative than resorting to money-lenders; all he has to decide is whether to address himself “au *roumi* de Ténès ou aux Kabyles des villages.”<sup>166</sup> Not that it makes much difference; as he knows well, M. Faguet, the “*roumi*”, would supply him with the needed seeds for twice their ordinary price, while the Kabyles would make him sign a debt-acknowledgement for twice the actually lent sum. The helpless fellah eventually opts for a Kabyle usurer and, as he has anticipated, is asked to sign for thirty-two francs while receiving sixteen. His entreaties leave the lender unmoved.

<sup>163</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Fellah” [1902], *Ecrits sur le Sable II*, 251-265, 255.

<sup>164</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Tessaadit” [1915, posthumous], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 210-226, 211.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>166</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Fellah”, 257.

Not content with profiting from their fellow countrymen's vulnerability, Kabyles themselves provoke such a state, as shown by the case of the secondary character Aïcha, lured by a "Zouaoui"<sup>167</sup> to buy handkerchiefs with the promise that she will not be requested to pay for them before the end of the month. Not only does the merchant break this promise, but he claims twelve francs instead of the eight the woman actually owes him. In the face of her inability to pay, he threatens to sue her in court, a threat which adds itself to that of her angry husband, who now considers repudiating her. What eventually becomes of her is not known; but the fate of Mohammed (the protagonist) and his family is certainly tragic. Money grows even more scarce as the harvest is ruined by disastrous weather; the field is sold and "le produit partagé entre M. Faguet, les Kabyles et le *beylek*<sup>168</sup> pour les impôts."<sup>169</sup> Having also lost his son, who dies of an untreated illness, Mohammed gradually falls into madness, while his younger brother, overwhelmed by so many difficulties, leaves his family behind to settle in a large city, where he tries to reinvent himself as a horse-groom.

In emphasising the Kabyles' responsibility in the tragedy of the protagonist's family, "Fellah" presents them as the accomplices of the coloniser's injustices, a complicity also symbolically pointed to through the syntagmatic order which places the word "Kabyles" between the name of a French usurer – M. Faguet – and a word referring to the French administration. Kabyles are indeed recurrently presented as the servile agents of colonialist domination. In "Sous le joug", the eagerness of the local guard, with his "plat visage de Kabyle",<sup>170</sup> to please his colonial masters is such that he displays even more cruelty than the latter towards fellow natives. Quick to report the tiniest of native prisoners' mistakes, he also excels at transforming the subsequent orders to inflict punishment into an opportunity for self-enrichment. When Lavaux, the French lieutenant, having been told of a (real or fictitious) fruit-theft committed by prisoner Ahmed, orders his punishment, the Kabyle subaltern hastens to inform the prisoner's father of the lieutenant's wrath, requesting "cent sous" in return for an intervention to save his son's life. It is also this Kabyle who convinces Lavaux to take Tessaadit, whom he knows to be the "woman" of

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<sup>167</sup> The word "Zouaoui" is commonly used to refer to Kabyles in the Algerian West.

<sup>168</sup> Literally meaning "the governor's property", this Turkish word is used in Algerian dialects to refer to the State as an impersonal category.

<sup>169</sup> Eberhardt, "Fellah", 262.

<sup>170</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "Sous le joug" [1902], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 177-189, 183.

the *spahi* Abdellkader, for his own pleasure, insisting on the “beauté de cette fille de sa race qu’il vendait au chef *roumi*.”<sup>171</sup>

Unlike Arabs, who speak their own “belle langue, musicale et sonore,” Kabyles are seldom shown to speak their native tongues. The guard of “Sous le joug” expresses himself in broken French which presents him as a comic figure and ridicules the zeal he puts into serving the colonial authorities by highlighting his obvious alienation from them. Similar images of incongruous hybridity are often conveyed through the recurrent description of “affreux Kabyles, en costume européen”.<sup>172</sup> Kabyles, in short, are an acculturated race, and in this adaptability, no less than in their moral deficiency – in their greed, in particular – and their lukewarm faith, Eberhardt sees a mark of weakness. As is common with her, this weakness is translated into their physical particularities. While the Arabs’ aptitude for power is symbolised through the bird-of-prey faces, eagle profiles, and strong voices with which she endows them throughout her texts, the Kabyles’ “visage[s] plat[s]” and “voix grêles”<sup>173</sup> stand for an effaced character unfit for conquest as well as for resistance.

Eberhardt’s portrayal of these two main constituents of the native population is ambivalent. While her contempt for the “colonisable” Berbers and her association of Arabs, whom she obviously admires, with resistance shows her stance to be clearly anti-colonialist, the dichotomic character of her representation is typical of French colonialist discourse, in which the myth of the pro-French Kabyles is prominent. Seen as closer to Europeans than Arabs, whom they supposedly hated as the old enemy which had forced them back to the forbidding mountains, and as only superficially Muslims,<sup>174</sup> they were thought to be “les premiers à s’assimiler si jamais des musulmans s’assimilent.”<sup>175</sup> The assimilated Kabyles, the colonial authorities assumed, would prove useful auxiliaries in the colonial project by serving as intermediaries between them and the wilder, more recalcitrant Arabs.<sup>176</sup> Despite the obvious failure of such colonial projects – Kabyles having displayed far greater resistance to attempts at gallicisation and Christianisation than

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>172</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 224.

<sup>173</sup> Interestingly, Eberhardt also assigns this kind of voice to black slaves (Eberhardt, “Esclaves”, *Sud Oranais*, 180), and to the Jews (Eberhardt, “Dans le Mellah” [1906], *Sud Oranais*, 238-244, 239).

<sup>174</sup> Abdelmadjid Hannoum, “Faut-il brûler l’orientalisme? On French Scholarship of North Africa”, *Cultural Dynamics* 16, 1 (Jul. 2004): 71-91, 78-79; and Mahfoud Keddache, “L’Utilisation du fait berbère comme facteur politique dans l’Algérie coloniale”, <http://oumma.com/L-utilisation-du-fait-berbere>. 27 août 2008. March 2011.

<sup>175</sup> Quoted in Keddache, “L’Utilisation du fait berbère”.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.



expected – the “Kabyle myth” survived as late as the last years of the Liberation War.<sup>177</sup> Obviously, Eberhardt departs from the champions of colonialist discourse, who affirmed the superiority of the Kabyles’ values and lifestyle over the Arabs’, and sought to construct an effective colonial policy accordingly,<sup>178</sup> in that it is for the “resistant” Arabs that she voiced her own sympathy. However, her stereotyped rendering of the two racial categories not only betrays a striking blindness to historical counter-evidence,<sup>179</sup> but also gives support to the colonial policy of “divide and rule”.

### 1.2.2.3. “Beni Israel”,<sup>180</sup>

Strong Judeophobia marked nineteenth-century France. If suspicion towards the Jews had long been fed on the old Christian accusation of deicide, it now took a more secular direction with intellectual figures like François Fourier and his disciple Alphonse Toussenel. While the former condemned the “shocking” granting of French citizenship to those he called the “leprosy and ruin of the body politic,”<sup>181</sup> the latter, in *Les Juifs, rois de l’époque* (1845) used “Jews” as a synonym for bankers and usurers, accused them of subduing France – and indeed the whole of Europe – through a system of “financial feudalism”, and found in this accusation of cupidity a justification for the long persecution to which the race has historically been subjected.<sup>182</sup> Later in the century, Edouard Drumont’s *La France juive* (1886), in which the author held the similar thesis that modern France was subjugated by the Jews in the political as well as in the cultural spheres, proved to be an astounding bestseller; and, twelve years later, the famed *Affaire Dreyfus*<sup>183</sup> gave, if needed, further evidence of the scope and strength of anti-Jewish feelings.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Keddache, “L’Utilisation du fait berbère”; and Patricia Lorcin, *Imperial Identities: Stereotyping, Prejudice and Race in Colonial Algeria* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), 74.

<sup>179</sup> By the time of Eberhardt’s arrival in Algeria, Kabylia had already witnessed notable anti-colonial revolts, like those of Lella Fatma N’Soumer in 1857 and of El Mokrani in 1871.

<sup>180</sup> “Beni Israel” [1908] is the title of one of Eberhardt’s texts. See Eberhardt, *Sud Oranais*, 100-105.

<sup>181</sup> Quoted in Robert S. Wistrich, “Radical Antisemitism in France and Germany (1840-1880)”, *Modern Judaism* 15, 2 (May 1995): 109-135, 115.

<sup>182</sup> Edmund Silberner, “The Attitude of the Fourierist School towards the Jews”, *Jewish Social Studies* 9, 4 (Oct. 1947): 339-362, 341-342; and Wistrich, “Radical Antisemitism”, 114-115.

<sup>183</sup> In 1894, Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a French officer of Jewish descent, was sentenced to life imprisonment for having allegedly given away military secrets to the German Embassy in Paris. Despite evidence exonerating him from this charge, high-ranking military officials conspired to protect the actual culprit and maintain Dreyfus in prison. For more on this affair, see George R. Whyte, *The Dreyfus Affair: a Chronological History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

Eberhardt intervened modestly in the Dreyfus debate by publishing a letter in the journal *L'Athénée*, in which she succinctly vented her disagreement with two previously published anti-Semitic papers, “Conspuez Zola”<sup>184</sup> and “La Juiverie de France”.<sup>185</sup> However, this did not prevent her, years later, from being labelled an anti-Semite by the French press, which was then also looking askance at her friendly relations with the Arab natives. Although Eberhardt constantly denied such charges, they find some justification in her invariably derogatory portrayal of the Jews. In accordance with the dominant discourse of her time, her Jewish characters incarnate the mercantile spirit. Like Kabyles, their chief occupations are commerce and money-lending.<sup>186</sup> In “Fellah”, the indebted protagonist emphasises his vision of usury as immoral by telling his money-lender that “[c]e sont les Juifs qui [lui] ont appris ce métier-là”;<sup>187</sup> in a similar way, it is by referring to it as “un trafic de Juif”<sup>188</sup> that he expresses his shock at the high interest-rate the “Kabyle” imposes on him.

Involved either in trade or as goldsmiths, the Jews are unfailingly associated with money-making in Eberhardt’s work. In the novel *Rakhil*,<sup>189</sup> this image reaches a most repellent degree of depravity. Written, as she explains to Ali Abd El Wahab, to highlight the “rôle de la Juive dans la société Maure d’Algérie – rôle immense et néfaste”,<sup>190</sup> *Rakhil* recounts the story of a handsome young Jewess who finds in prostitution a convenient way to satisfy her taste for luxury. Far from being an isolated case, this “trade” seems to be the Jewish community’s principal source of income. Not only are Rakhil’s parents – a *receleur* and a “femme à mœurs très louches”<sup>191</sup> – aware of their daughter’s occupation, but they themselves urged her to take it up, when she was barely thirteen. The family house serves as a shelter for this commerce, in which, we learn, Rakhil’s dull-witted sister was also involved, before she was imprisoned for a sordid infanticide. This debasing image is

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<sup>184</sup> Emile Zola is known to have played a pivotal role in the affair with his letter “J’accuse”, in which he gave evidence of the government’s anti-Semitism and proclaimed Dreyfus’s innocence.

<sup>185</sup> For the full text of the letter, see Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 231-233.

<sup>186</sup> Usury is forbidden in Islam; this, according to Jacques Taieb, explains why “les métiers d’argent” were widely practised by the Jews. However, Taieb adds, not only were money-related jobs also practised by Europeans and, sometimes, even by Muslims, but the Jews were also involved in a wide range of other professions, like tailoring, carpentry, shoe-making, and artistic occupations. Jacques Taieb, *Sociétés juives du Maghreb moderne, 1500-1900* (Paris: Maison Neuve et la Rose, 2000), 120-123.

<sup>187</sup> Eberhardt, “Fellah”, 258.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>189</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, *Rakhil* (Paris: La Boîte à Documents, 1990).

<sup>190</sup> Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 242.

<sup>191</sup> Eberhardt, *Rakhil*, 47.

completed by the parents literally begging for the generosity of their daughter's "clients": "Fais-nous l'aumône, Sidi, donne-nous de quoi nous libérer de nos dettes!"<sup>192</sup>

Besides reinforcing – and indeed darkening – the image prevailing in colonialist France, Eberhardt's representation of the North African Jews provides an unwitting support to the colonialist project by, once again, subscribing to its divisive strategies. Taking advantage of the differences between the Muslim and the Jewish communities was a common method both for the colonial administration and the *Français d'Algérie*, as the European settlers were referred to. Planning to draw them to the side of the colonisers, the French government granted Jews privileges that were denied to the Muslims – particularly the systematic right to French citizenship accorded to them by the Décrets Crémieux.<sup>193</sup> The policy proved much more successful in this particular case than it was with Kabyles: the Jews responded favourably to the colonial process of Westernisation, adopting European economic practices, lifestyle and structures of thought, and widening the gap between themselves and the Muslims, with whom they had previously shared a common cultural environment, despite their different creeds.<sup>194</sup>

The relations between the two communities, hitherto peaceful overall, took a new turn, marked by a tension and a hostility exacerbated by colonial discrimination.<sup>195</sup> Moreover, the "emancipation" of the Jews came up against the hostility of the colonists, and indeed seemed to aggravate anti-Semitic feelings, which soon became "une véritable idéologie de masse, mobilisant toutes les couches de la population pied-noire."<sup>196</sup> No less than the colonial administration, the European settlers, in their search for control, sought to feed enmity between the two religious groups; reversing the government's policy, they sought to set the Arab population against their Jewish fellow countrymen, though Muslims, it seems, remained unresponsive to anti-Semitism.<sup>197</sup> Eberhardt's unsympathetic portrayal of the Jews fuels the arguments of both constituencies. On the one hand, it sanctions, albeit

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>193</sup> Adopted in 1870, government order number 136 granted full citizenship to about 37000 Algerian Jews and to European Pieds-Noirs, while *Décret* 137, which completed it, maintained the Muslim majority in their status of *indigènes*. The Décrets Crémieux were to be abrogated in 1940, under the Vichy regime, and restored in October 1943.

<sup>194</sup> Taieb, *Sociétés juives*, 199.

<sup>195</sup> Jacques Magen, "Juifs rapatriés d'Algérie. Une minorité dans une minorité ?", *L'Histoire des minorités est-elle une histoire marginale?* Stéphanie Laithier and Vincent Vilmain eds (Paris: Presses de L'Université Paris Sorbonne, 2008), 107-119, 111.

<sup>196</sup> Michel Abitbol, quoted in *ibid.*, 113.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

unintentionally, the settlers' anti-Semitic campaign by confirming their prejudices; on the other, the "commercial instinct" she emphasises in the Jews makes them appear close to the cold, calculating pragmatism she loathes in the West, thus justifying, in a sense, the colonial discrimination in favour of the Jewish community.

Lamia Zayzafoun has justifiably drawn an analogy between the Eberhardtian attitude to race and Arthur de Gobineau's well-known racial classification;<sup>198</sup> indeed, the "roumia's" hierarchised vision is all too clear in her portrayals of the different components of the native population. At the apex of her racial pyramid, the Arabs, noble and enlightened, reign supreme; the Berbers and the Jews are treated as inferior, because ignorant and morally corrupt; while the blacks are confined to a state close to animality. Interestingly, however, the Gobineau to whom she is compared was far from an unconditional advocate of colonialism; although he thought it "natural" that superior races should dominate inferior ones, he looked with anxiety on the racial *mélange* that colonial situations necessarily produced.<sup>199</sup> Eberhardt's sharing of both his belief in racial hierarchy and his contempt for hybridity resulted in a similarly ambivalent outlook. As will be developed below, while her conviction as regards "l'inégalité des races" manifested itself in a subscription to the civilising mission, her scepticism as to the possibility of bridging ethnic and cultural distances in turn leads to a lack of faith in the future of colonisation.

### 1.3. Colonisers and colonised

In September 1900, General Dechizelle, responsible for the military subdivision of Batna,<sup>200</sup> received an anonymous letter warning him that "Mademoiselle Eberhardt" was an *intrigante* who had a murky past made up of altercations with the Russian and Swiss authorities, and who had now settled in the French colony with the purpose of setting the Arabs against the colonial administration.<sup>201</sup> The letter served to confirm the suspicions that the writer's notorious friendship with the natives had fed, and she was placed under discreet surveillance. Yet Eberhardt's relish in the company of the natives was certainly not part of the anti-French scheme the colonial administration feared. Enjoined to

<sup>198</sup> Zayzafoun, "La Roumia Convertie", 48.

<sup>199</sup> Laurent Dubreuil, "L'Impossible généalogie du métissage", *Genres et postcolonialisme*, Anne Berger and Eleni Varikas eds (Paris: Editions des archives contemporaines, 2011): 159-168, 160.

<sup>200</sup> Batna is a city in the Algerian East. It has grown up around what was initially a mere military camp established in the 1840s.

<sup>201</sup> See Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 278-279.

investigate the letter's allegations, Capitaine Cauvet submitted a report which exonerated her and depicted her as a harmless, if eccentric, figure.<sup>202</sup> Nor is there any biographical evidence indicating that she was involved in a conspiracy seeking to provoke popular rebellion.

What, then, explains, this constant "hanging around" with the natives? Eberhardt admitted feeling far more at ease with "le peuple" than in more sophisticated *milieux* like those of the Western *beau monde*, of which she scathingly criticised the hypocrisy and stiff conventionality. But feeling at ease with the natives does not necessarily imply that they were seen as equals; quite the contrary. For one who, like Eberhardt, was ill-prepared for *mondanités* both by the unconventional education she had received and the isolation to which she was confined in Geneva, imposing oneself in European salons was no easy task; she tried, and had to admit her failure.<sup>203</sup> The task was certainly easier among the illiterate *peuple*, whom she surpassed in knowledge and who knew her to hold the privileged status of a *roumia*. Obviously, she could not but appreciate their treatment of her "en camarade lettré et un peu supérieur".<sup>204</sup>

Another manifestation of this quest for power is her perception of the natives as an object of study, a perception in tune with the literary ambition that brought her to North Africa. Soon after her arrival in the Algerian South, Eberhardt made an enemy in the French administration by rejecting Lieutenant Subsielle's offer to accompany her to the oasis-town of Touggourt. Although she had initially given her consent, she changed her mind on learning that he was hated among the natives, whom he reportedly treated with cruelty and contempt. Yet in this gesture, biographer Cecily Mackworth does not see an obvious instance of her siding with the natives; rather, she explains it in relation to the writer's eagerness not to lose the precious source of native knowledge that she had come to seek.<sup>205</sup> In this connection, Eberhardt herself recurrently explains that "[c]'est une grave

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 289-293.

<sup>203</sup> In 1900, before deciding to return to North Africa, Eberhardt spent a few months in Paris, where she hoped to launch her career by being introduced to some influential names. For this part of her life, see, among other biographies, Mackworth, *The Destiny of Isabelle Eberhardt*, 70-78.

<sup>204</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "Dernières visions" [1908], *Sud Oranais*, 114-118, 116.

This reading of Eberhardt's relationship with the natives is reminiscent of Alec Hargreaves' comment on the preference Loti (Eberhardt's favourite writer, it should be recalled) had for the company of the humble: "Loti enjoys the company of humble folk in many parts of the world precisely because their lack of egoism [...] ministers to his own enormously egocentric attitudes". Alec Hargreaves, *The Colonial Experience in French Fiction: a Study of Pierre Loti, Ernest Psichari and Pierre Mille* (London: Macmillan, 1981), 76.

<sup>205</sup> Mackworth, *The Destiny of Isabelle Eberhardt*, 58.

erreur [...] que de croire que l'on peut faire des études de mœurs populaires sans se mêler au milieu que l'on étudie, sans vivre de leur vie..."<sup>206</sup> It is this typically Orientalist vision of the natives as primarily an object of study that accounts for her otherwise perplexing participation in the coercive task of assisting a colonial agent in collecting native taxes and even imprisoning, or confiscating the lands of, those who failed to pay.<sup>207</sup>

### 1.3.1. "The Wretched of the Earth"

#### 1.3.1.1. Denunciations

As she thus "studied" the natives, Eberhardt noticed, and disapproved of, the ill-treatment to which they were subjected by Westerners. As early as her first sojourn in Annaba with her mother (in 1897), she wrote to her friend Ali, "Ce qui m'écœure ici, c'est l'odieuse conduite des Européens envers les Arabes, ce peuple que j'aime et qui sera, *Inch'Allah*, mon peuple à moi."<sup>208</sup> However, in her very next letter, she indicated her intention to leave Algeria, where "il est impossible de rien faire", in order to seek other Muslim brothers in Tunisia or Egypt.<sup>209</sup> Meanwhile, she took care not to anger the colonial authorities: "Ici, je ne bouge pas, je ne cause pas. J'étudie et j'écris. Je ne vais naturellement pas sortir sur les places publiques pour déblatérer contre les Français, ce qui ne servirait qu'à me f... dedans tout à fait et à *entraver mes plans d'avenir*."<sup>210</sup> In effect, Eberhardt abstained for a long time from any form of public and specifically literary condemnation of colonial injustices, and when she did, tardily, decide to write on the subject,<sup>211</sup> her denunciatory texts seem to have been urged by two friends. During her "French exile", following her expulsion in 1901,<sup>212</sup> Eugène Brioux, an established writer, replied to her expressed worries about the originality of her writings by advising her to seek it in the literary material offered by the colonial situation,<sup>213</sup> and Victor Barrucand's

<sup>206</sup> Eberhardt, "Amara le forçat" [1903], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 232-235, 232.

<sup>207</sup> This episode has been signalled by several critics and biographers. See, for example, Catherine Stoll-Simon, *Si Mahmoud ou la renaissance d'Isabelle Eberhardt* (Léchelle: Emina Soleil, 2006), 88-90; and Ali Behdad, *Belated Travelers*, 120. Both authors read the experience as one that allowed Eberhardt to witness and, later, denounce, the inhumanity of the colonial machine, overlooking the objectification of the natives necessarily involved in the process.

<sup>208</sup> Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 74. Eberhardt's emphasis.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-78. My emphasis.

<sup>211</sup> Almost all Eberhardt's texts that discuss the wrongs of the colonial system were written between 1902 and 1903.

<sup>212</sup> Eberhardt was expelled from Algeria shortly after the sword assault of which she was victim in January 1901 and the sentencing of its perpetrator.

<sup>213</sup> Kobak, *Isabelle*, 186.

offer, a few months later, to work as a reporter for his “humanistic” journal *Al-Akhbar*<sup>214</sup> seems to have decided her.<sup>215</sup>

Although Eberhardt’s “speaking for the natives” did not emerge as an inner impulse, once she had taken on the role, she was to fulfil it in a most forceful way. In “Ilots du Sud”, for example, she decries the inhumane conditions of natives imprisoned for the most trivial motives and forced to work for the French intruder by “cette puissance redoutable, qui broie et écrase toute leur race”.<sup>216</sup> “A l’Aube” offers a still grimmer image of “[des prisonniers] Arabes enchaînés, pieds nus, obligés de marcher au milieu de la route, sur des cailloux aigus.”<sup>217</sup> This image, which calls to mind the chained black “shadows” described by Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*,<sup>218</sup> is accompanied by a comment no less reminiscent of Conrad’s castigation of the hypocrisy of the Western civilising mission:

Et tous ces hommes que, civils comme militaires, aucune juridiction régulière n’a jugés, qui sont livrés au bon plaisir des chefs hiérarchiques et d’administrateurs qui les condamnent sans appel, en dehors de toutes les formes élaborées par les codes, s’en vont mornes, l’œil sombre, le visage poussiéreux et ruisselant de sueur vers les géhennes obscures du Sud, où leurs souffrances sont sans témoins et leurs plaintes sans écho. Démenti flagrant jeté à la vantardise et à l’orgueil de l’hypocrite civilisation !<sup>219</sup>

The Algerian desert described by Eberhardt is, like Conrad’s African wilderness, transformed into “une géhenne obscure” – a hellish heart of darkness – by the sufferings inflicted on the natives by Western arrogance. Eberhardt’s Southern world is, however, less gloomy than Conrad’s in that it is not filled only with cruelty, greed, and indifference. Her idealistic characters arrive in the colonised Maghreb imbued with humanist ideals and an eagerness to offer their help and friendship to its people. One example is that of Jacques in the short story “Le Major”. A physician in the French army brought to the Algerian South by the sheer duty to feed his family, he soon finds himself estranged among his cold,

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<sup>214</sup> For an account of the encounter between Barrucand and Eberhardt, see *ibid.*, 189-190.

<sup>215</sup> Margaret McColley explains Eberhardt’s sudden literary interest in the colonial situation by the inner change produced in her by the sword-attack which brought Eberhardt very close to death in 1901. McColley, “Environmental Destruction”, 80-82. This argument fails to be convincing not only because a year elapsed after the assault before Eberhardt started depicting colonial reality, but also because nothing, in the writer’s personal writings, makes McColley’s idea plausible. Rather, Eberhardt’s diary shows that the change produced on her by the Behima episode was of a mystical kind, leading into an interest in mysticism, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

<sup>216</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Ilots du Sud” [1903], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 138-140, 140.

<sup>217</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “A l’Aube” [1903], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 331-332, 332.

<sup>218</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 33.

<sup>219</sup> Eberhardt, “A l’Aube”, 332.

if courteous, colleagues and disillusioned by the reality of what he had (naively) believed to be a noble civilising mission:

Jacques avait rêvé du rôle civilisateur de la France, il avait cru qu'il trouverait [...] des hommes conscients de leurs « missions », préoccupés d'améliorer ceux que, si entièrement, ils administraient... Mais, au contraire, il s'aperçut vite que le système en vigueur avait pour but le maintien du *statu quo*.

Ne provoquer aucune pensée chez l'indigène, ne lui inspirer aucun désir, aucune espérance surtout d'un sort meilleur. Non seulement ne pas chercher à les [*sic*] rapprocher de nous, mais, au contraire, les éloigner, les maintenir dans l'ombre, tout en bas... Rester leurs gardiens et non pas devenir leurs éducateurs.<sup>220</sup>

In denouncing the “betrayal” of the civilising mission, the passage, interestingly, also reveals the limitations of the best-disposed Westerners arriving in colonised territories. Much like Conrad’s Marlow, who decries imperial atrocities without questioning the assumption of the natives’ inferiority, Jacques’s very belief in a noble, civilising mission betrays a subscription to this prejudice. While his deploring the fact that natives are maintained “en bas” implies that they were initially in that position, his plea for educating them smacks of traditional Western paternalism, which can also be perceived in the suggestion that the colonised need the coloniser’s intervention to learn to think on their own and envisage change; that they are, in other words, unable to fashion their own destiny.

Defying the colonialist “grande machine à dominer”<sup>221</sup> and seeking to implant his own vision of colonial relations, the young doctor undertakes to learn Arabic; a language which, he hopes, will allow him to communicate with “ces hommes qui, les yeux baissés, le cœur fermé farouchement, se levaient soumis, et le saluaient au passage.”<sup>222</sup> For a time, he seems to have succeeded: the patients who used to rise painfully to give him the military greeting and in whose eyes he often read suspicion start, under the effect of his benevolent and casual manner, to forget the “siècles de méfiance et d’asservissement”,<sup>223</sup> to address him as a friend, and to seek his company. So much so that Jacques soon notices that they are now taking too much liberty with him, that they are “moins empressés à le servir, moins dociles, désobéissant à ses ordres, et l’avouant sans peur, car il ne voulait pas user

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<sup>220</sup> Eberhardt, “Le Major” [1944, posthumous], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 157-175, 163.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.



du droit de punir”.<sup>224</sup> Worse still, his efforts to improve their lot are met by “l’ingratitude de beaucoup”.<sup>225</sup>

In his “Portrait du colonisateur”, Albert Memmi excludes the possibility of a “colonial” – a settler – who would not also be a coloniser, arguing that the Westerner arriving in a colonised territory automatically gains access to colonial privileges, whether these have been asked for or not. As a result, unless, appalled by the power disequilibrium that marks the colonial situation, he retreats back to the metropolis, the newcomer is condemned to be an accomplice of colonisation. At best, he can be a “*colonisateur de bonne volonté*”, denouncing the colonial system while enjoying its advantages, that is, unwittingly contradicting himself.<sup>226</sup> In accepting to be obeyed and served by the natives while claiming to free them from servitude, Jacques illustrates these contradictions; and yet, for all his idealist discourse, he is *less* than a “*colonisateur de bonne volonté*”. If the activism of the latter, as Memmi explains, is timidly confined to occasional protest actions or petition-signing in favour of the natives’ enfranchisement,<sup>227</sup> even such mild forms remain very remote from Jacques’ thoughts. Indeed, what he questions is not so much the subjection of the natives – which is why he deplores the lack of enthusiasm they put into serving him – than the method employed to concretise this objective: “pourquoi *règner par la terreur?*”<sup>228</sup> Softer strategies of domination are, he thinks, possible; it is only on this point that his views diverge from those of fellow soldiers.

Ironically, the natives’ reaction to his methods somehow proves his colleagues right: they (the natives) respect nothing but severity. Indeed, if the fact that they display less docility towards him than towards other *roumis* can be justified, as Jacques himself indulgently does, as a legitimate wish to savour a long-confiscated freedom, a similar argument could hardly apply to the ingratitude with which they are said to reward his kindness. Those he puts so much eagerness into defending prove still more disappointing in the face of the colonial authorities’ threats. While Jacques unflinchingly resists the warnings and intimidation to which he is constantly subjected by his immediate superiors, his “*protégés*” are prompt to turn their back on him, avoid his company, and resume a stiff,

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>226</sup> Albert Memmi, *Portrait du colonisé, précédé du Portrait du colonisateur* [1957] (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), 45-49.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>228</sup> Eberhardt, “Le Major”, 168. My emphasis.

formal attitude: “il avait suffi au capitaine et à ses adjoints de dire devant les chefs indigènes combien ils condamnaient l’attitude du docteur et combien sa fréquentation était peu désirable pour ses chefs pour qu’ils fussent obligés, dans leur subordination absolue, de l’abandonner...”<sup>229</sup> Thus, Jacques’s condescending assumption that the natives are unable to change their lot without the benevolent intervention of a Westerner proves wrong, but in an ironic way: the natives are unable to rise above their “subordination absolue” *with or without* help.

Ultimately, “Le Major” proves to be a colonialist text. Eberhardt does not distance herself from her protagonist’s faith in the Westerner’s paternalist role of educating and “elevating” the natives; indeed, she herself shares this belief. In her *Journaliers*, for instance, she regrets that what has been implanted in the colonies is “[n]on pas la civilisation du goût, de l’art, de la pensée, celle de l’élite européenne, mais celle, odieuse là-bas, effrayante, des grouillements infâmes d’en dessous”.<sup>230</sup> However, another, more subtle mark of her subscription to the colonial project lies in her portrayal of natives who, with *mauvaise volonté*, resist Jacques’ efforts to improve their quality of life and hygiene standards instead of resisting the ill-treatment inflicted on them. With such a representation, she seems once again to emulate Conrad by demonstrating the colonisability of the natives even as she claims to dismantle colonialist practices.

### 1.3.1.2. Rebellions

When such images of native passivity are contradicted, this tends to be by individual actions rather than collective rebellions. “Criminel” shares with “Le Major” the strength with which it denounces colonial abuses, this time through a rendering of the land-confiscation to which the Bou-Achour farming tribe is submitted. Most of the narrative is devoted to the description of the farmers, who, having agreed to give away their lands – their only riches – in return for tiny compensations dangled as baits before “leurs yeux avides”,<sup>231</sup> are now waiting meekly in the administrative premises to be paid for their sale. Recurrent focus is placed on their bent, submissive heads and on their “regard effaré et tristement stupide des moutons à l’abattoir.”<sup>232</sup> Except in a single regard, when they dare request explanations about price discrepancies and when they are quickly dismissed with

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>230</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 225.

<sup>231</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Criminel” [1903], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 287-292, 288.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 290.

the answer that the administration is merely applying “higher” instructions, they unquestioningly take whatever amount of money is given to them. Less submissive than his fellow farmers, Mohammed Achouri, alone, protests from time to time; it is he who has urged them to ask for explanations. He is already regretting his having agreed to sell, and his regrets increase as he receives the price that the “*beylek*” had chosen for him: two *sous*. In vain, Mohammed points out the injustice and claims his rights; he is quickly ejected. For a while, he works as a manservant for M. Gaillard, the *colon* who is now the owner of his tribe’s erstwhile lands. But the sight of his lost wealth in the hands of the man he now has to work for is too much for him. Enacting the only rebellion-gesture in the narrative, he sets fire to Gaillard’s barn and grindstones.

Received by the community of European settlers as a denunciation of their privileges and a justification of “barbarous” native acts, “Criminel” met with an aggressive reaction which was not altogether unjustified.<sup>233</sup> Indeed, it is possible to read the writer’s over-emphasis on the farmers’ patience and resignation as evidence that an act of rebellion on their part can only be provoked by an intolerable degree of oppression and discrimination. This reading is confirmed by the affirmation, which closes the text, that “le crime est souvent, surtout chez les humiliés, le dernier geste de liberté”;<sup>234</sup> an affirmation which calls to mind Frantz Fanon’s statement that “the naked truth of decolonisation evokes the searing bullets and bloodstained knives that emanate from it.”<sup>235</sup> What Eberhardt’s description of colonial malpractices and the ensuing explosion of native anger illustrates is indeed nothing but the Fanonian argument that the violence of the colonised is the unavoidable outcome of the anterior violence – colonisation itself, with the humiliation, exploitation, and undoing of native economic and social forms it implies – that has long been inflicted on them.<sup>236</sup>

Nevertheless, Eberhardt’s stance departs from Fanon’s in many ways. While Fanon voices unambiguous support for the natives’ “*devoir de violence*”,<sup>237</sup> Eberhardt adopts a

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<sup>233</sup> See Marie-Odile Delacour and Jean-René Huleu’s comment on the short story in Eberhardt, *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 292.

<sup>234</sup> Eberhardt, “Criminel”, 291.

<sup>235</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* [1961], trans. Constance Farrington (London: Penguin, 1990), 28.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>237</sup> Apart from the discursive support he provides in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon, as is well-known, took part actively in the Algerian struggle for independence as a member of the FLN (National Liberation

much more prudent attitude. Her previously noted ethical condemnation of violence is confirmed not only by sentences like “Mohammed Achouri continuait à considérer [l’attentat] comme une œuvre de justice”,<sup>238</sup> which expresses the distance she takes from her protagonist’s gesture, but also by the sympathy she displays for the assaulted settler, described as “un brave homme [...] bon et honnête.”<sup>239</sup> Mohammed’s wrath may be justified, but it is, in her view, directed at the wrong target: it is the colonial administration alone which ought to be blamed for his misery. Overlooking the fact that it is this “bon M. Gaillard” who has benefited from the land-confiscation she decries, it is without irony that she writes that “le colon se demandait avec une stupeur douloureuse ce qu’il avait fait à cet Arabe à qui il avait donné du travail pour en être haï à ce point”.<sup>240</sup> Unlike Fanon, for whom the settler is a central agent in colonial guilt, and who, as such, is neatly opposed to the native victim,<sup>241</sup> Eberhardt presents him as a benefactor and, in a rather “diplomatic” stance, reunites the two in a shared victim-status: “Ils ne se doutaient guère, l’un et l’autre [M. Gaillard et Mohammed Achouri] qu’ils étaient maintenant les solidaires victimes d’une même iniquité grotesquement triste!”<sup>242</sup>

Eberhardt’s vision also differs from Fanon’s in that it strips native anger of its political dimension. When she does not, as has already been discussed, dismiss it as banditry or as a mere manifestation of the Easterner’s natural taste for violence,<sup>243</sup> she shows such a response, as she does here, to be the result of faulty judgement born out of blind anger rather than as part of a consciously thought-out project of liberation. For Fanon, the violence of the colonised stems from their full awareness that this is the only language the coloniser understands; that violence only bends in the face of a yet greater violence.<sup>244</sup> Eberhardt, for her part, assigns it to the native’s “esprit obtus d’homme simple.”<sup>245</sup> Thus, while Fanon argues that native revolt reverses colonialist prejudices – according to which

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Front). The phrase “le devoir de violence” is borrowed from the Malian writer Yambo Ouologuem, who chooses it as a title for his 1968 novel. Yambo Ouologuem, *Le Devoir de violence* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1968).

<sup>238</sup> Eberhardt, “Criminel”, 291.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid. My emphasis.

<sup>241</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 28.

<sup>242</sup> Eberhardt, “Criminel”, 291. The supposed common victimhood of settlers and natives was, decades later, to become a regular *piéd-noir* theme.

<sup>243</sup> By contrast, Fanon explains natives’ feuds and tribal warfare as an explosion of the long-repressed tension created by their condition as colonised. *The Wretched of the Earth*, 42.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 47-48.

<sup>245</sup> Eberhardt, “Criminel”, 291.

it is the native who understands no other language than violence<sup>246</sup> – Eberhardt sees in it nothing but the confirmation of one such prejudice: the native’s intellectual limitation, previously signalled in the comparison she draws between them and “stupid sheep”. For Fanon, moreover, the colonised is overwhelmed but not submissive; his natural physical state is one of tense muscles, that is, that of a man ready to act but discerningly waiting for the propitious moment to do so.<sup>247</sup> In the same way as this tense-muscle image emphasises the premeditated, planned aspect of the colonised’s uprising, Eberhardt’s focus on the Algerians’ utter submission and fatalistic attitudes indicates the absence of any project of self-enfranchisement on their part. In this connection, it is interesting to note that, in opposition to the Fanonian focus on the national character of native revolt,<sup>248</sup> it is always an isolated act in Eberhardt’s writings.

This understatement of native revolts is all the more surprising given the context in which Eberhardt wrote her “colonisation texts”. In addition to the wave of student revolts which marked the late 1890s and in one of which she herself took part, Eberhardt’s residence in Algeria was also contemporary with the so-called Marguerite Revolt. In April 1901, the small and hitherto peaceful locality of Marguerite<sup>249</sup> became the arena of one of the most tragic episodes of pre-revolution colonial Algeria as around 125 armed native farmers (who were eventually overcome and arrested) besieged the village, threatening to kill the settlers. In one of the rare full-length books devoted to the subject,<sup>250</sup> the revolt is shown to have been not only a long-prepared action, but, in conformity with the Fanonian thesis of native violence, a reduced version of an initially broader liberation project. The event also illustrates Fanon’s view that only violence allows the oppressed to make themselves heard. In the French capital, voices rose to denounce the economic and political subjection in which the *indigènes* were maintained, and under the pressure of public disapproval – in the metropolis, of course; the settlers, for their part, demanded nothing less than lynching the culprits prior to any legal process – the trial, which lasted no less than two years, ended in a relatively lenient verdict which consisted in 81 verdicts of not

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<sup>246</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 66.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>249</sup> Marguerite (also spelled Margueritte), renamed “Aïn Torki” after Algeria’s accession to independence, is located around 150 km south of the capital city, Algiers.

<sup>250</sup> Ahmed Bencherif, *Marguerite* Vols. I & II (Paris: Publibook, 2008). The book is written as a historical novel.

guilty and a range of sentences essentially between five and fifteen years.<sup>251</sup> While sympathising with the natives, however, the French “humanists” saw in the rebellion not a well thought-out plan aiming at changing the farmers’ lot, but the desperate gesture of a down-trodden population. The resemblance between their reading and Eberhardt’s representation of revolt in “Criminel” says much about her perspective, which, despite her life among the natives, is eventually that of a remote, if benevolent, Westerner.

On Marguerite itself Eberhardt had next-to-nothing to say. Although short stories like “Criminel” and “Fellah” provide an intense account of the context which favoured the revolt, she never deals with the events as such, and the name “Marguerite” only occurs in two of her short stories.<sup>252</sup> While, in “Marabout”, the revolt is curtly evoked as a “triste et sombre affaire”,<sup>253</sup> “Exploits indigènes”, one of her most ironic texts, relates its aftermath from the standpoint of the settlers, which it ridicules in many ways. Taking a goose-theft perpetrated by two of the European employees of M. Perez – the town councillor – as a starting-point, Eberhardt mocks the settlers’ prejudices as regards the natives. Indeed, the theft is immediately assigned to “les bicots” and, this being the second theft in six months, Perez decides that action needs to be taken: the clemency with which the “assassins de Marguerite”<sup>254</sup> have been treated is, he thinks, behind this increase in “native banditry”, and “[s]i ça allait sur ce train, la colonisation était fichue, il n’y avait plus qu’à s’en aller.”<sup>255</sup> The action in question, which takes the form of a letter written with fellow settlers to decry the terror in which they live as a result of the natives’ sense of impunity, becomes a pretext for further mockery. Apart from the obviously denigrating intention in the narrator’s focus on their poor writing skills and the excessively long time needed to complete the letter, this lack of literary competence is further ironised through the name “Alfred de Musset” chosen for the settlers’ district. By portraying settlers with as little education as discernment, Eberhardt implicitly questions their privileges over their natives, which no superiority seems to justify. However, while distancing herself from these privileged Westerners, it is their voice alone that she makes heard. The natives’ experience

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<sup>251</sup> Christian Phéline, *L’Aube d’une révolution: Margueritte, Algérie, 26 avril 1901* (Paris: Privat, 2012), 150-152.

<sup>252</sup> Marguerite also occurs in Eberhardt’s previously mentioned letter to her husband, with an unambiguously condemnatory comment. See Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 359.

<sup>253</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Marabout” [1903], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 307-311, 310.

<sup>254</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Exploits indigènes” [1903], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 293-296, 294.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

of the revolt and its aftermath is silenced, although, as a journalist, giving voice to it was very much her task.

### 1.3.2. Involvement

#### 1.3.2.1. Assimilation or association?

Despite her virulent castigation of the abuses of the colonial administration and her sympathy with the down-trodden natives, both Eberhardt's denigration of native revolt and her uncritical stance towards the concept of the civilising mission in texts like "Le Major" suggest that, while she disapproved of its methods, she was no opponent of the colonial project as such. However, what she loathed in it did not only relate to its inhumane aspect. In "Le Major", precisely, it is interesting to note that the natives who are portrayed as desperately submissive are also suspicious and uncommunicative. More than in their "cœur fermé farouchement", this uncommunicativeness is emphasised through Embarka, the native woman with whom the protagonist is involved in a love relationship and whom he sees as the embodiment of her country and her race.<sup>256</sup> Despite months of intimacy with Jacques, Embarka "était restée silencieuse, discrète, d'une soumission absolue, sans s'ouvrir pourtant".<sup>257</sup> Interestingly, instead of provoking any resentment in the young doctor, the silence and mystery in which she remains wrapped seem rather to appeal to him: "il l'aimait ainsi inexplicée, inconnue".<sup>258</sup> The Jacques/Embarka relationship seems to incarnate the Eberhardtian vision of the colonial encounter, which, in her view, should subject the natives while maintaining racial distance.

Obviously, such a standpoint is at odds with her subscription to the educational mission of the West, which "Le Major" also hails. It is this contradiction that makes Lamia Zayzafoun argue that Eberhardt was a partisan of both assimilation and association, the two major French colonial policies.<sup>259</sup> In *The Colonial Unconscious*, Elizabeth Ezra sums up the difference between the two as one between a vision in which the colonies are part of a greater France and one in which, thought to be inassimilable to French standards of civilisation, they are seen as *a separate* France.<sup>260</sup> Founded on Enlightenment-born

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<sup>256</sup> Eberhardt, "Le Major", 169.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>259</sup> Zayzafoun, "La Roumia Convertie", 37.

<sup>260</sup> Elizabeth Ezra, *The Colonial Unconscious: Race and Culture in Interwar France* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2000), 4.

universalism and the Republican principles of equality and brotherhood (though not on that of freedom, obviously), the assimilation policy rested on the ambition of winning all the colonial subjects to the French model of civilisation as a prerequisite to placing them on an equal footing with the white inhabitants of *l'Hexagone*. At the cultural level, this passed chiefly through education, charged with the mission of inculcating both the language and the cultural norms of the metropolis; at the administrative level, this meant centralised control, as opposed to the different forms of local government privileged by Great Britain, France's main imperial competitor.

Although assimilation prevailed throughout the history of French colonialism, it started to be abandoned at the turn of the twentieth century as voices rose to criticise the unrealistic aspiration to transpose French models to geographical, racial, and cultural contexts that were not suitable for them; the British, these critics remarked, did not commit such folly.<sup>261</sup> Seeking precisely to follow the example of their rivals, men like Jules Harmand<sup>262</sup> proposed a colonial approach that would respect the cultural specificities of the colonised population and abandon exploitation in favour of a system of mutual assistance.<sup>263</sup> However, as Michael Crowder notes, the new policy of association that was implemented was a far cry from Harmand's ideas. Despite the acknowledgment of its failure, the assimilationist project was not abandoned but merely reduced in scope and ambition.<sup>264</sup> The civilising mission was maintained, as was administrative centralisation; and while France now opted for negotiating her interests with local chiefs, these representatives, now appointed by the French themselves, were not always those who would have been chosen had the natives' traditional criteria been strictly applied. Besides, they were maintained in the role of subordinates to French officers.<sup>265</sup>

The theoretical assimilation/association dichotomy thus proved rather fragile when confronted with colonial reality, a reality which was in fact even more complex than Crowder shows it to be. If the move towards association stumbled over the persistence of

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<sup>261</sup> Martin D. Lewis, "One Hundred Million Frenchmen: the Assimilation Theory in French Colonial Policy". *Historical Problems of Colonial Africa*, Vol. 2, Robert O. Collins ed. (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 2007): 137-150, 137.

<sup>262</sup> Jules Harmand (1845-1921) was a French doctor, explorer, and diplomat. He took part in several civil and military campaigns in Indo-China.

<sup>263</sup> Michael Crowder, "Indirect Rule: French and British Style", *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 34, 3 (July 1964): 197-205, 202-203.

<sup>264</sup> For example, while education was scarce, its content reproduced the coloniser's knowledge and children were made to speak French on their very first day at school. *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.



assimilationist reflexes, assimilation itself had often been blocked by “defence mechanisms” which, as Eberhardt herself shows in “Le Major”, sought *not* to assimilate the colonised. Because the principles of assimilation stipulated that the natives’ “rise” to Frenchness was to be a ticket towards political and social equality, the colonisers would rather not have them rise, after all; as Memmi explains, “[t]he colonialist never planned to transform the colony into the image of his homeland, or to remake the colonised into his own image: he cannot allow such an equation – it would destroy the principle of his privileges”.<sup>266</sup> Besides, hybridity was not the mark of French colonial policy alone. Although Crowder opposes the “faulty” French policy of association to what he sees as the more “genuine” British model, the latter was not free from hybridity either. The civilising motive in it may have been less salient than in French colonialism, but it was not non-existent. Both the French and the British implanted their language and some aspects of their lifestyle in different parts of their respective empires and both profited from the support of religious missions.

Ambiguity also marks the ideological orientation behind the two concepts. If the idea of enlightening the world, which is central to assimilation, betrays a narcissistic vision and contempt for the racial and cultural Other, the seemingly less “narrow-minded” associationist approach can be seen as equally, if not actually more, conservative. Indeed, the lukewarm attitude of the British to assimilation might equally stem from pragmatism or a sense of superiority,<sup>267</sup> which would entail the inability of other races to rise to their cultural standards and explain their reluctance to mix with these races. *Sur le terrain*, the British displayed more respect than their French counterparts for the indigenous populations, allowing them to keep their traditional political system, tolerating teaching in the vernacular, and even urging their officials to learn the natives’ language(s);<sup>268</sup> but the natives had, with such a policy, few opportunities to gain access to any form of political power apart from the local, while, under the French system, successful candidates for assimilation (who were, it must be said, not very numerous) did sometimes reach high positions in the administration.<sup>269</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Quoted in Ezra, *The Colonial Unconscious*, 5.

<sup>267</sup> William J. Duiker and Jackson J. Spielvogel, *The Essential World History* (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2008), 449.

<sup>268</sup> Crowder, “Indirect Rule”, 203.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, 203-204.

Trying to demonstrate the superiority of one policy over the other in terms of profitability for the natives would prove vain; as Laura Rice nicely sums it up, both of them end up marginalising the natives:

In short, the framework for colonial expectations set up a zero-sum game for the colonised on a lose-lose model: if they were “other,” they were descended into mere alterity – a state of separation from that norm that precluded any reciprocity – and so could be denied equality on the grounds of being “primitive,” “backward,” and different.” If, on the other hand, they excelled at merging into the European model, they were alienated from their cultural roots while existing only on the margin of colonial society. At the most basic level, they looked different, and that embodied difference bred distrust.<sup>270</sup>

The above reflection introduces a discussion of Eberhardt’s own intervention in the colonial sphere. Roughly, Rice’s reading of it is that, as a “nomadic spirit”, she was opposed to any system of codification and subjection, including colonialism, but that she had to play the game of the colonial power-holders if she wanted to preserve the privilege of roaming the “free” desert-space which fed this spirit. Although she acknowledges the “nomad’s” discursive support of the civilising mission and her opposition to violent rebellion, Rice dismisses the former as a position dictated by the fear of reprisals<sup>271</sup> and the latter as resulting from the naïve wish that Westerners would eventually come to understand and respect Islamic culture as she had done herself.<sup>272</sup> However, such arguments fail to be convincing not only because the *roumia*’s defence of the civilising mission manifested itself recurrently, in different ways, and certainly *not* always under duress, but also because, despite the myth attached to her name, Eberhardt ethically believed in order and authority and, hence, necessarily, systems of codification and power. As has been shown, it is these which determine the degree of respect/contempt she reserves for racial groups.

Zayzafoun’s argument, mentioned above, seems to be a more plausible conclusion to the discussions carried out throughout this chapter; inasmuch as Eberhardt believed in the Western ideal of “educating” the natives, Zayzafoun’s claim that she subscribed to the policy of assimilation is obviously justified. However, Eberhardt’s acknowledgment of a distinct native civilisation and indeed the genuine respect she voiced for it – for its Arabic and Islamic constituents, at least – brings her closer to the principle of association, whose

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<sup>270</sup> Laura Rice, “Nomad Thought”, 153.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 169-170.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

ethics of distance resembles her own. Indeed, she emphasised the necessity of preserving native specificities even in her most “assimilationist” projects. When she wrote to Ali Abd El Wahab about her desire to settle in Tunisia and run a school for native girls, she insisted that they be taught Arabic and Islamic history in addition to French;<sup>273</sup> and when, later, she urged her husband to enhance his knowledge of French and French literature so as to pass the exam that was to guarantee him a post as a civil servant, she emphatically warned him against the possible “negative influence” on his faith of the atheist Zola.<sup>274</sup> In the end, assimilation could not be of great appeal for one who laid such great emphasis on racial distinctions, and it is with the policy of association that she was to be concretely involved, through her partnership with General Lyautey and her zealous proselytising for his methods.

### 1.3.2.2. A “hero” named Lyautey

When Hubert Lyautey arrived in North Africa in 1903, he already had behind him an appreciable experience of warfare, which he acquired first in Indo-Chinese Tonkin, then in Madagascar, under the guidance of General Joseph Gallieni. Appointed by the latter to be the military commander of the southern part of the island, one of his earliest requests was to establish a protectorate in the area under his command. Although the French official policy in Madagascar was one of direct rule, he believed that making use of the natives’ already existing forms of social and political organisation would be an efficient way of saving personnel as well as the time that the destroyed traditional structures would otherwise take to be replaced.<sup>275</sup> Lyautey’s next steps were “pacifying” the region, that is, conquering rebel groups, disarming the natives to discourage possible future rebellions, and, most important of all, introducing a “colonial market” – “one which, under the protection of [French] rifles and cannons, offered [French] products and attracted local goods.”<sup>276</sup> And it is a very similar “tactic of economic penetration”<sup>277</sup> that he was to transpose to North Africa. Soon after his arrival there, he undertook to neutralise the bellicose dissenting tribes which, a few months earlier, had caused the death of many

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<sup>273</sup> Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 147.

<sup>274</sup> Mackworth, *The Destiny of Isabelle Eberhardt*, 141.

<sup>275</sup> William A. Hoisington, *Lyautey and the French Conquest of Morocco* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995), 17-18.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*

French soldiers in the so-called Moungar attack.<sup>278</sup> Having demonstrated the scope of France's power by conquering the rebels, the next step consisted in winning them over to the new order by reintegrating them in the region's economic life – the market-place – as illustrated in Eberhardt's previously discussed "Marché d'Aïn Sefra".

These bare historical facts invalidate Ali Behdad's argument that it was under the influence of the "pro-native" Eberhardt that the General abandoned the classical colonialist strategies in favour of ones which were more "respectful" and peaceful:<sup>279</sup> it is the writer who was won over to the military man's methods rather than the contrary. There is, in this connection, probably more validity in Behdad's additional claim, namely that Eberhardt's promptness to accept the cooperation was motivated by the rare opportunity it offered to "explore" colonial territories that would otherwise be barred to her.<sup>280</sup> On the other hand, Lyautey was quick to understand that the writer who knew the natives so well could prove very useful in his mission. Though the General did not shun military action whenever it proved necessary, what he favoured was a "gentler" conquest which consisted in gaining, one after the other, the confidence of the native tribes.<sup>281</sup> With her good command of the latter's language, her familiarity with their customs and religion, and the friendship they were likely to grant her on account of her conversion, she was perfectly well-placed for the role of a liaison agent.

Taking on this role with eagerness, Eberhardt also assumed that of a propagandist, lauding her new friend's strategy as efficient and "moral":

Et ce fut le grand art et la grande habileté de ceux qui vinrent commencer la longue et pénible pacification du Sud Oranais que d'avoir su comprendre [les] musulmans [...] que d'avoir su s'en faire estimer et aimer, sans s'en contenter d'en faire craindre [...]

<sup>278</sup> In September 1903, about 400 Daoui Menïa and Ouled Djerir – two dissenting tribes – attacked a military detachment on the plain of El Moungar, not far from the Southern region of Béchar. In the ensuing battle, which lasted seven hours, most of the *légionnaires* were injured, and many, including their leader, Captain Vauchez, were killed. It was precisely in an attempt to turn the tide that Lyautey was appointed as the head of the sector.

<sup>279</sup> Behdad, *Belated Travelers*, 130-131. Behdad, however, moderates his argument by adding that he "want[s] to avoid hyperbolising Eberhardt's influence on Lyautey".

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, 129-130; and Rice "'Nomad Thought'", 173. Both Rice and Behdad assign Eberhardt's wish to penetrate off-limit spaces to her desire to immerse herself in Islamic culture, though Behdad adds another motive: the nomad's death drive. While this chapter takes up the latter point, the other argument calls for some qualification. As has been explained, the writer's interest in the natives owed less to her wish to be one of them than to her construction of them as an object of study.

<sup>281</sup> Barnett Singer, "Lyautey: An Interpretation of the Man and French Imperialism", *Journal of Contemporary History* 26, 1 (Jan. 1991): 137-151, 137.

[C]e n'était pas de raids retentissants et inutiles que ces braves gens rêvaient mais de prudentes et adroites mesures pour empêcher le sang de couler, les gens de se battre et les rôdeurs de nuit de tuer, pour attirer la confiance et l'estime des gens paisibles de Figuig,<sup>282</sup> pour capter par l'intérêt les nomades, les grands enfants turbulents, versatiles et batailleurs...<sup>283</sup>

More than simple praise, Eberhardt displays a surprising tolerance of the less glorious side of this method, including the particularly inhumane forms of violence it sometimes deployed. The reintegration of “les grand enfants batailleurs”, which she hails as a manifestation of Lyautey’s and his men’s magnanimity, had in fact been made possible by the starvation he had imposed on them by destroying or confiscating the crops to which they could have had access.<sup>284</sup> And though she congratulates herself on the fact that the “bandits” “renaissent à la vie, après l’effrayante misère qu’ils ont subie l’an dernier tandis qu’ils tenaient la montagne”,<sup>285</sup> she finds nothing to decry in a strategy which reduces her supposedly “beloved” natives to a state of famine: another silence which probably has something to do with the “explorer’s” interest in not endangering her relations with the French General.

Laura Rice explains the friendship and cooperation between Eberhardt and Lyautey by their very similar characters.<sup>286</sup> Certainly, Eberhardt was not so cynical as to espouse a cause or assume a friend’s role *only* to secure her own interests – no matter how non-material the nature of these interests might be – and no less certain was the fact that the General shared Eberhardt’s inclination to romanticism and was, like her, impatient with routine and constraints.<sup>287</sup> However, what Rice forgets to signal is that this “nomadic spirit” that she wants to assign to both friends was only one side of their equally complex personalities. Just as Eberhardt’s romantic wanderings went along with a conservative respect for order – including, of course, the power structures of hierarchy and authority<sup>288</sup> – Lyautey, who is chiefly known for having challenged traditional French colonial methods, was, in other aspects, a staunch traditionalist. A fervent Catholic,<sup>289</sup> he was also a

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<sup>282</sup> Figuig is a Moroccan town close to the Algerian frontier.

<sup>283</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Légionnaires” [1908], *Sud Oranais*, 84-88, 86-88.

<sup>284</sup> For more details, see Hoisington, *Lyautey and the French Conquest*, 82.

<sup>285</sup> Eberhardt, “Marché d’Aïn Sefra”, 119.

<sup>286</sup> Rice, “Nomad Thought”, 175.

<sup>287</sup> Singer, “Lyautey”, 138.

<sup>288</sup> The ideological implications of Eberhardt’s wanderings will be fully discussed in the final chapter of this study.

<sup>289</sup> Lyautey’s faith was such that he is reported to have been gnawed with guilt for having neglected his prayers for eight days running. Singer, “Lyautey”, 143.

supporter of the monarchy and the aristocracy, and held the French Revolution in deep contempt;<sup>290</sup> indeed, as he himself admitted, he had “une haine féroce, celle du désordre, de la révolution.”<sup>291</sup>

Barnett Singer argues that Lyautey’s conservatism dwindled somewhat as he took his distance from his native France. His imperial experience in North Africa, in particular, seems to have made him a more tolerant man, who spent time with the natives, took pains to learn their language,<sup>292</sup> occasionally dressed after their fashion, and displayed a genuine respect for their religion. Indeed, not content with preserving local manners and customs, he went as far as forbidding Christian proselytising:<sup>293</sup> the general was simply “horrified” at the idea of making Morocco a mere extension of France.<sup>294</sup> Yet such an attitude is not necessarily a sign that he moved away from conservatism, nor, of course, that he sided with the natives. On the one hand, refusing a (thorough) Europeanisation of Morocco reflects a certain conservative ethics of distance, which looks askance at racial and cultural *mélange*, and which Lyautey illustrates through his aesthetic distaste for “hybrid” cities like Algiers, which, very much like Eberhardt, he thought to be too “Frenchified”.<sup>295</sup> On the other, respecting one’s adversaries is in accordance with the old, aristocratic ethos,<sup>296</sup> and Lyautey also applied it to the English rival. While he admitted to being an Anglophobe and looked approvingly at the old Franco-English “enmity”, he acknowledged the British “colonial” qualities of energy and contempt for routine, and relished a number of English words and phrases, using them extensively in his correspondence.<sup>297</sup> Besides, the very conservatism of the colonised – here, Muslim – culture is likely to be attractive to one who, though belonging to another culture, is himself/herself a conservative.<sup>298</sup> Such an attitude

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>291</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>292</sup> Lyautey, however, found the task rather difficult and accordingly confided to his disciples the task of acquiring fluency in both Arabic and Berber. Singer, “Lyautey”, 138.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>296</sup> This ethical feature is well summed up by Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morals*: “What respect for his enemies is found, forsooth, in an aristocratic man – and such reverence is already a bridge to love! [...] He tolerates no other enemy but a man in whose character there is nothing to despise and *much* to honour!” Quoted in David Felty, *Faith and Morals* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1997), 278.

<sup>297</sup> Singer, “Lyautey”, 143.

<sup>298</sup> In this connection Lawrence E. Cahoon writes that “most Americans of conservative temperament would be ultimately more comfortable with religious Hindus as neighbours than with European-Americans who have sublimated the religion of their grandparents into careerism or hedonism.” *Civil Society: the Conservative Meaning of Liberal Politics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 153. Of course, Cahoon’s

was far from uncommon among colonialists known to be reactionary. To take but one example, T. E. Lawrence, the “old-fashioned romantic”<sup>299</sup> who was fascinated by the past and admired the Crusades,<sup>300</sup> displayed more readiness than most Westerners to immerse himself in the manners and lifestyle of Middle Easterners, wearing their clothes, riding their camels, and “show[ing] a contempt for pain which would win the respect of the most savage tribesman”.<sup>301</sup>

The comparison between Lyautey’s attitudes to his two adversaries – the North Africans and the English – is, however, somewhat misleading. After all, natives were only natives, and despite his respect for their customs and lifestyle, his attitude towards them was not free from the usual European condescension. In a speech delivered in Madagascar, the General explained to his native listeners that the French owed their grandeur to their hard work and urged them to *try to* emulate them. He often complained, in this regard, that the natives’ “paresse” was the greatest impediment in the progress of their mission.<sup>302</sup> His opinion of Morocco was even less indulgent. For him, this part of the world was not a nation, but “une poussière humaine, une nébuleuse, un puzzle de tribus indépendantes et batailleuses”<sup>303</sup> which, as such, needed to be civilised. This civilising task included not only an intensive investment in “modern” infrastructures like hospitals, roads and railways, and the introduction of electricity, but also moral and intellectual enhancement, with Lyautey undertaking to improve the hitherto corrupt justice-system and promote education.<sup>304</sup> In the accomplishment of all these tasks, he displayed the paternalistic attitude<sup>305</sup> so typical of the “benevolent” Westerner abroad.

Lawrence Cahoon has summed up the conservative’s attitude towards Otherness as follows:

The modern conservative says to someone from another culture, “Although my tradition includes both civility, which leads me to treat you with humane respect,

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Americans and Hindus are only meant as an illustration of cultural Otherness, and could well be replaced by Europeans and Muslims, two categories which are more relevant to our discussion.

<sup>299</sup> Irving Howe, “T. E. Lawrence: the Problem of Heroism”, *The Hudson Review* 15, 13 (August 1962): 333-364, 351.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, 336.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 345.

<sup>302</sup> Singer, “Lyautey”, 140.

<sup>303</sup> Quoted in Marquis de Segonzac, “Lyautey. L’évolution marocaine”, *Journal of the African Royal Society*, 33, 133 (Oct. 1934): 321-328, 321.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 324.

<sup>305</sup> Singer, “Lyautey”, 140.

and a recognition of the value of traditional life, which leads me to honour your faithfulness to your own ways, I nevertheless assert my own tradition's ultimate rightness. I hope we can find common ground at some important level, with respect to whatever purposes lead us to interact. I have faith that we will."<sup>306</sup>

This definition applies well to Lyautey's attitude to Moroccans. His colonial strategy was, in sum, the product of three components: a pragmatic search for a quicker, more economical, and more efficient way of asserting France's power over the natives; a belief in the superiority of France; and a profoundly conservative outlook. At the ethical level, cultural and racial hybridity signalled for him the disorder he abhorred; as an aesthetic category, he viewed it with repulsion. The texts analysed throughout this chapter, many of which were written prior to Eberhardt's encounter with Lyautey, make it obvious that she shared these views. In a sense, however, Eberhardt was more of a conservative than Lyautey, and certainly much more of a pessimist. Despite her multi-faceted involvement in the colonial enterprise, she always kept a rigid scepticism as regards the ultimate success of colonisation. Her statement that "la terre d'Afrique résorbe et mange tout ce qui lui est hostile",<sup>307</sup> despite the extreme passivity which marks her portrayal of the natives, implies that Identity and Otherness are immutable states, independent of human (non-) intervention.

## Conclusion

Read essentially as a narrative of successful integration, Eberhardt's relationship with the North African space and its natives has all too often been idealised. Despite recent academic interest in her complicity with Orientalism/colonialism, this complicity has always been dismissed as unwilling – either imposed on her or resulting from a naïve faith in the benevolence of figures like Lyautey – or less significant than her simultaneous challenge to the colonial order. This chapter has sought to deconstruct this embellished picture by pointing to the intervention of her quest for power in the definition of her position within the native-versus-coloniser confrontation and showing that the compensation for her original exile that she hoped to obtain in the colonised North African space consisted less in a new home than in recognition in her own native space. As her hopes for an outstanding literary name that would make up for the name-gap which marked her birth started to fade, this will-to-power took new directions. After the short-lived dream

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<sup>306</sup> Cahoone, *Civil Society*, 154.

<sup>307</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 222.



of wealth mainly taking the form of a prosperous real estate – a typical settler’s dream – she found in the colonial project a more “heroic” form of power, one which promised to offer an outlet from the name-trauma through the double perspective of consolidating her hitherto unspecified Western identity on the one hand and death, on the other.

Apart from these biographical details, Eberhardt’s very writing of the Maghreb, and of the Algerian desert in particular, confirms her colonialist stance. In her rhetoric of appropriation as well as in her construction of this space as a site of desire and of its people as objects of study, the Russian writer rehearses the Orientalist, commanding attitude all too common in Westerners abroad. Simultaneously, her hyperbolising of the natives’ submissiveness on the one hand and her understatement of their rebellion-gestures on the other reinforces the myth of the colonised’s colonisability, a vision of the natives which matches her undiscerning subscription to the civilising mission. Like her contemporary Conrad, her critique of colonialism targeted its cruel practices while sparing the idea itself, and her very denunciations, far from being spontaneous, were often voiced or withheld depending on the extent to which they were expected to accelerate or slow down the achievement of her ambitions.

In highlighting the Russian writer’s will-to-power, this chapter has questioned another myth associated with Eberhardt – that of the rebel-figure who challenges *l’ordre établi*. While her “scandalous” lifestyle did disturb the peace of the colonial authorities, who viewed it with suspicion, Eberhardt’s moral positioning is unexpectedly conservative. As shown by the analysis of her supposedly carnivalesque venues, her recognition of domination and violence as the essential traits of human nature makes her applaud order and authority, which, alone, prevent the otherwise necessarily tragic consequences of such instincts. It is precisely as such that she presents “pacification” as envisaged by Lyautey: as order triumphing over the trouble makers that anti-colonial dissidents become in her writings. The fact that the holders of authority are, in her texts, invariably *and uncritically* shown to be Western and/or white, makes her subscribe to the racist theories which prevailed in nineteenth-century Western discourse. This subscription, also betrayed by her confirmation of colonialist myths about racial elements like the Kabyles and the Jews, in turn reconciles Eberhardt’s outlook with colonialist discourse, despite the admiration she voices for one constituent of the native population – the Arabs.

In addition to her acceptance of the inequality-of-races thesis, Eberhardt advocated racial and cultural distance, and indeed even believed in its unbridgeability. If this stance makes her prefer Lyautey's policy of association to that of assimilation, even this favoured method was looked upon with pessimism. Because what she likes to call "Africa's soul" – its inherent and immutable features – will, she thinks, eventually thwart all attempts at "denaturation", transposing a foreign "soul" on African land can, at best, only be temporary. Thus, instead of the indictment of "pro-colonialism" traditionally directed at conservatism, Eberhardt's case shows the relation between the two concepts to be more complicated, and not without contradictions. While the advocacy of distance results in a disapproval of colonisation as a promise of racial/cultural encounter, its tendency to hierarchise difference legitimises it by affirming the "superior" coloniser's right to exploit or moral duty to civilise those thought to be inferior.

## Chapter 2:

### Islam: the Not-So-Straight Way to Power<sup>1</sup>

Eberhardt's conversion to Islam was something of a puzzle to the colonial authorities. Despite her open and recurrent proclamations of faith, her statements were seldom taken seriously; rather, they were read either as one of her numerous eccentricities or as a strategic attempt at securing the natives' friendship:<sup>2</sup> what else could urge a Westerner to declare herself a Muslim? My aim in this chapter is precisely to reflect upon the import of Eberhardt's conversion. Although Eberhardt's Islam was much more genuine than fellow Europeans thought it to be, I will argue that her adoption of this new faith also proved an accessible, though somewhat roundabout, road to power. Besides allowing her to substitute for her former marginality in her native Europe the privileged status of a Westerner among the natives, it also became the tool through which she sealed her belonging to France and her subscription to the colonial project: prior to her appointment as a liaison agent between Lyautey and the native tribes – an appointment she owed to her knowledge of Islam – her conversion also allowed her to gain access to French citizenship by marrying Slimène Ehni, a naturalised fellow Muslim.

More than in the colonial project as such, this chapter considers Eberhardt's intervention in the Orientalist discourse from which it is inseparable.<sup>3</sup> Although Eberhardt's panegyric representation of Islam sharply contrasts with the hostile portrayals which have marked Western discourse from Mediaeval times, I will argue that Eberhardt reinforces European clichés about her religion in two ways. The laudatory account she renders of Islam is denied to its followers, seen as primitive and obscure-minded creatures, in convergence with the most worn-out of derogatory Orientalist stereotypes. In discussing this gap between her representations of the Islamic faith and those who profess it, my purpose is to highlight its convenience in Eberhardt's willed, because useful, hybridity: in praising, and professing, Islam, Eberhardt bestowed on herself an Oriental identity;

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<sup>1</sup> This is an allusion to the image of the "straight way" which occurs in the first verses of Quran, in *Surah Al-Fatiha* (*Al-Fatiha* precisely meaning "The Opener").

<sup>2</sup> The anonymous letter accusing Eberhardt of trying to set the natives against the French (and mentioned in the previous chapter) claimed, among other things, that "dans le but d'inspirer plus de confiance aux Musulmans elle [Eberhardt] se fait passer pour musulmane, ce qui n'est pas vrai." See Isabelle Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes: lettres aux trois hommes les plus aimés* [1991, posthumous] (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2003), 279.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* [1978] (London: Penguin, 1995). See, in particular, pages 95-96, 195-197, and 221-224.

however, the superior and critical eye she placed on the natives distanced her from the latter, thus confirming her Europeaness. At once Western and Oriental, Eberhardt retained superiority on account of her being a European and, as such, a power-holder, without, however, being perceived as an enemy by the natives.

Another way through which Eberhardt simultaneously challenged and perpetuated Orientalist myths was her carnivalesque practice of the Islamic religion. In conformity with the Bakhtinian definition of the concept, hers was an Islam that blended high spiritual aspirations with “sinful” kif-addiction, heavy drinking, and sexual promiscuity. In indulging in the most “scandalous” forms of excess while observing religious duties like daily prayers and *Ramadan*-fasting, the Western convert displayed towards her religion an attitude which was at once one of respect and irreverence. As will be developed, this constant move between the holy and the sinful denotes a will to reconcile two facets of the same will-to-power: if religious fervour was *de bon ton* in a culture where piety was venerated and bestowed authority, the excesses she relished signalled a disregard for conventions which was in itself a manifestation of power. Simultaneously, displayed as they were by one who made no secret of her conversion and of her living among the natives, these excesses could only reinforce the clichés of lack of restraint being an essentially Eastern vice and lustfulness being inherent to Islam, thus participating, once again, in the traditional Orientalist narrative.

In her eagerness to reconcile holiness and transgression, Eberhardt looked up to Sufi *maraboutes* as an example to follow. Elevated to the rank of venerated saints on account of their piety, these women came to enjoy such power as to be thoroughly dispensed from the strict obligations to which their fellow female believers were confined; instead of the latter’s constant seclusion, *maraboutes* enjoyed the right of travelling alone and wearing male attire.<sup>4</sup> As a religious expression in which “hierarchical male domination becomes an anathema”,<sup>5</sup> Sufism also offered itself as an alternative to the usual patriarchal subjugation of women in Islamic culture by not excluding them *de facto* from the top of the religious

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<sup>4</sup> Lamia Benyoucef, “Isabelle Eberhardt, ou ‘La Roumia Convertie’: A Case Study in Female Orientalism”, *The Production of the Muslim Woman: Negotiating Text, History, and Ideology* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2005), 50-51.

<sup>5</sup> Sa'diyya Shaikh, “Islam and the Path of the Heart”, *The Religious Consultation on Population, Reproduction Health, and Ethics: Revisiting the World’s Sacred Traditions* (New York: May 6, 2006), [http://www.religiousconsultation.org/Islam\\_and\\_the\\_path\\_of\\_the\\_heart.htm](http://www.religiousconsultation.org/Islam_and_the_path_of_the_heart.htm). November 2010.

hierarchy. Because it places emphasis on developing the spiritual ability to get closer to God rather than on a scrupulous application of religious obligations, Sufism tends to disregard the rigid instructions usually addressed to female believers; and because it believes the latter to be as capable as their male counterparts of spiritual elevation, it is not uncommon for Sufi women to enjoy a religious authority that the *maraboutes* precisely incarnated and to which Eberhardt herself aspired.

Conceived of as a means of power as much as an expression of spiritual evolution and/or cultural integration, religious conversion tends, in the Eberhardtian vision, to be possible only for those who, like the writer herself, suffered subjection or marginality in their original culture. To highlight such a conception, this chapter will consider key texts like “Yasmina” (1902)<sup>6</sup> and “*M'tourni*” (1903), analysing the Western protagonists’ respectively fake and genuine conversions in relation to their social background and their positioning within the power apparatus. In convergence with the overall thesis of this study – and more particularly of this chapter – the analysis will seek to demonstrate that unless it allows for empowerment, “going native” through the adoption of Islam is necessarily a moment of illusion.

## 2.1. Islam as power

### 2.1.1. Aspiring to grandeur

In one of the numerous comments on Islam she inserts in her diary, Eberhardt writes: “Mais le salut de l’homme, c’est la Foi [...] la foi vivante qui rend les âmes fortes, non pas la foi qui brise la volonté et l’énergie, mais celle qui les exalte et les magnifie.”<sup>7</sup> The passage synthesises the Eberhardtian vision of Islam well; instead of the surrender of the will and the passivity that it is often taken to be,<sup>8</sup> Eberhardt re-writes her faith as moral empowerment, self-affirmation, and action. What she means by action, however, is not such daily practices as honest work or charitable behaviour with which “common” believers are wont to content themselves; rather, and as recurrently voiced in her diary, her attachment to Islam goes along with the conviction that it can satisfy her “désir de gloire

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<sup>6</sup> Although published in 1902, “Yasmina” was probably written in 1899, during a trip made by the writer to the Algerian South. See Marie-Odile Delacour’s comment in Isabelle Eberhardt, *Œuvres Complètes II: Ecrits sur le Sable (nouvelles et roman)* (Paris: Grasset, 1990), 118.

<sup>7</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, *Journaliers* [1923, posthumous] (Paris: Joëlle Losfeld, 2002), 178.

<sup>8</sup> The Arabic word “Islam” literally means surrender (to God).

noblement méritée”<sup>9</sup> and enable her to accomplish “de grandes [...] choses”.<sup>10</sup> “Allez Mahmoud, [...] Soyez un héros!”<sup>11</sup> is the sort of encouragement she gives herself; action for her means nothing less than heroism.

As well as words evoking glory and grandeur, Eberhardt recurrently makes use of words which, in French, point to different manifestations of pride, thus departing from the traditional religious valorisation of humility, particularly in the Sufi doctrine that she chose for herself. To express the unshakeable character of her faith, she writes that hers is “un cœur fier et inflexible qui s’est donné tout entier à cette cause [...] islamique pour laquelle [elle] voudrai[t] tant verser un jour ce sang”;<sup>12</sup> to emphasise her unflinching resistance in the face of appalling poverty, she states that she has nothing but “[s]a religion et [s]on orgueil”.<sup>13</sup> While this boasting of her pennilessness is in conformity with the Sufi contempt for worldly wealth, her celebration of pride is much less so: although Sufis often evoke the supposed *hadith*<sup>14</sup> “*Faqri fakhrī*” (my poverty is my pride) to justify their principle of renunciation,<sup>15</sup> Sufi teachings usually treat pride in (what one sees as) one’s moral merit with as much contempt as wealth itself, seeing in the former as in the latter manifestations of *nafs*, or the lower self.<sup>16</sup> But Eberhardt does more than pride herself in her ability to cope with poverty; what she does is erase her very destitution, re-writing it in terms of wealth and power – and not only spiritual ones. A case in point is the following passage, where she compares herself to the prophet Job: “Pauvre, pauvre comme le fut jadis le grand Eyoub, incarnation de la souffrance humaine, je me sentais – et je l’étais – le maître souverain des étendues prestigieuses du désert aimé et des montagnes sauvages de l’Aurès.”<sup>17</sup> To justify such a claim, the “maître souverain” devotes nearly a page to explaining the nature of her wealth:

Assis, tel un vagabond, sur le bord d’une route, auprès du fidèle et humble compagnon inconscient qui, lui aussi, va m’être pris pour jamais, je regardais avec des yeux de châtelain les champs d’or des colzas en fleurs, d’émeraudes des blés et des orges, et d’opale des *chih* aux enivrantes senteurs. Cette richesse-là, seule, la tombe pourra me la prendre et non les hommes ... et même, qui sait,

<sup>9</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 27.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>14</sup> “Hadith” is a report of a saying of the Prophet Muhammad.

<sup>15</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam: an Introduction* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 103.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>17</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 129.

si le *Mektoub* m'accorde le temps d'en formuler quelques fragments, me survivra-t-elle dans la mémoire de quelques-uns.

*Seules, ces formes supérieures de la vie valent la peine d'être vécues*, et le richard avare et imbécile, s'il savait, et "la femme du monde", riche, adulée, se croyant belle, envierait la misérable défroque, les logements pouilleux et la nourriture parcimonieuse de celle qui a trouvé la source d'amour (seul possible et réel, quand aucune des basses questions d'intérêt n'y sont mêlées) et qui sait faire sien, orgueilleusement, le vaste univers et son âme mystérieuse, le posséder et en jouir plus entièrement que n'importe quel autocrate de jadis ne jouit de sa puissance illusoire.

Divine et unique joie de lire, dans le miroir d'un œil humain, l'*absolu* de l'amour terrestre et, dans les vastes horizons du monde, jusqu'aux étoiles les plus vertigineusement lointaines, le *titre de propriété* indiscutable !<sup>18</sup>

In reinventing her material impecuniosity as wealth, Eberhardt distances herself not only from the Sufi espousal of poverty as a mark of religious humility, but even from the less demanding equation of poverty with pride. As a form of weakness, poverty cannot, in the Eberhardtian outlook, be reconciled with the posture of power that pride is; it is therefore with possession – a possession no smaller than the "vast universe" itself – that it is juxtaposed. For all her destitution, Eberhardt renounces neither power, as evidenced by her self-reference as "châtelain" and "maître souverain" in her self-comparison with Job, nor the race for possession, as eloquently summed up in the "mercantile" phrase "*titre de propriété*"; what she does is merely re-define the rules of the race so as to secure victory for herself. Indeed, her self-attribution of divine epithets like "maître souverain" and the associated ownership of "vast horizons" reads as a metaphorical self-deification which strikingly departs from the Sufi emphasis on poverty as a sense of utter destitution, hence of insignificance, in the face of God's limitless possessions.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 129-130. Eberhardt's italics.

<sup>19</sup> Schimmel, *Islam: an Introduction*, 103. Schimmel explains that this metaphorical understanding of poverty came gradually to replace the actual renunciation of wealth, as some Sufis turned into influential landlords and even cooperated with the rulers. It is worth noting, however, that several instances of Sufis' self-deification have been recorded, the most renowned being Mansur Al-Hallaj's exclamation "*ana'l haqq*" ("I am the Truth", Truth being one of the Divine Names in Islam) and Bayezid's Bistami's "Glory to Me! How great is My Majesty!" While both men were accused of blasphemy, mainly by representatives of "orthodox" Islam (Hallaj was even executed on account of this), their supporters among the Sufis held that their statements illustrated the concept of *fana*: a stage when man's self-renunciation is such that he metaphorically passes away (which is precisely what the word *fana* means), thus becoming absorbed in Divine Unity. Read thus, Al-Hallaj's and Bistami's self-deification is an affirmation of the principle of Unity, according to which God is inseparable from His creatures, rather than the Eberhardtian affirmation of power. However, as a compensation for the relinquished worldly power, this aspiration to a fusion with God through self-denial says much about the impossibility of renouncing will-to-power, even among those who, like the Sufis, claim this to be their ultimate goal. On the stories of Al-Hallaj and Bistami and the concept of

Eberhardt's emphasis on her possessions in the passage above echoes the rhetoric of appropriation shown in the previous chapter to mark her writing of North Africa and confirms the affinities signalled between her and Conrad. Indeed, while her evocation of *her* faithful companion, *her* emerald and gold fields, *her* desert is strikingly reminiscent of Kurtz's oft-quoted exclamation in *Heart of Darkness*: "my Intended, my station, my career, my ideas",<sup>20</sup> she also shares with Conrad's protagonist an alertness to the importance of narrative in the construction of power: her self-reinvention through writings, which, she hopes, will preserve this constructed image of wealth for posterity, is similar to the manner whereby Kurtz's eloquence substitutes an image of grandeur for his less glorious self. More importantly, as in Kurtz's case, it is imperialism that enables her (here, symbolic) empowerment. Lamia Zayzafoun argues that the writer's settlement in the Algerian desert was made possible by the protection that she owed to the friendly relations between Russia and the French Empire<sup>21</sup> as well as by the severity of the sentences imposed on those who took the risk of assaulting a European.<sup>22</sup>

### **2.1.2. *Mektoub*: re-writing the "written"**

#### **2.1.2.1. A two-faced concept**

One manifestation of Eberhardt's re-writing both of her faith and religious teachings in terms of power is her approach to the Islamic concept of *Mektoub*<sup>23</sup> – the belief that one's fate is traced by God and cannot, as such, be modified without His will. Although religious scholarship tends to emphasise the non-incompatibility of such a vision with individual action, it is not uncommon, in popular Islamic culture, to associate *Mektoub* with a deterministic passivity justified with another Quranic concept, that of *tawakkul*, or "trust in God".<sup>24</sup> Despite the presence of such divergent ideas in the Islamic world itself, it is the

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*fana*, see Schimmel, *Islam: an Introduction*, 103-109; and John Baldock, *The Essence of Sufism* (London: Arcturus, 2004), 107-111 and 116-119.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* [1899] (Béjaïa: Talantikit, 2004), 110.

<sup>21</sup> Zayzafoun, "*La Roumia Convertie*", 39.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>23</sup> *Mektoub* literally means "written", in Arabic.

<sup>24</sup> The popular understanding of *Mektoub* as passive fatalism is refuted by several scholars. What *Tawakkul* means, for them, is undertaking action as demanded by circumstances while also trusting in God's help. Instead of this positive term, they employ the negative term "*tawaakul*" to refer to utter surrender to God's will. See, for example, Mostafa Mahmoud, *The Quran: an Attempt at a Modern Reading*, trans. M. M. Enani (Cairo: Dar Al Ma'aref, 2000), 255-259.



second reading that prevails in Western discourse, for which *Mektoub* acts as evidence of the Oriental's allegedly atavistic passivity.<sup>25</sup>

*Tawakkul* is particularly central to Sufi religious teachings, which highlight it with stories that, to take up Annemarie Schimmel's phrase, "often verge on the grotesque".<sup>26</sup> As El-Kharraz, one of the leading Sufi figures of the tenth century defines it, *tawakkul* is a reliance on God that goes as far as "expel[ling] from the heart all anxiety over the affairs of this world, and the means of sustenance (*rizq*), and every matter of which God himself has taken charge".<sup>27</sup> In their eagerness to put such teachings into practice, Sufis travel the desert without any provisions or protection against possible dangers, sometimes meeting death as a result of such negligence.<sup>28</sup> One particularly striking example of this exaggerated trust is that of a returned pilgrim who boasted of his travel to Mecca with a single coin in his pocket (of which he did not even make use), only to be answered that one who really trusted God would not have thought of carrying a coin.<sup>29</sup> Another, still more striking, is that of that Sufi teacher who pushed the cult of passivity as far as forbidding his disciple to stretch out his hand to pick up a melon-skin.<sup>30</sup>

*Mektoub* seems to have been the first Islamic attraction for Eberhardt. In one of her early letters to her correspondent Ali Abd El Wahab, before both her settlement in North Africa and her religious conversion, she writes: "de toutes les vérités de l'islam, j'en ai admis une principalement – admise et reconnue au point qu'elle me devienne familière absolument, la théorie ou plutôt le dogme du *Mektoub*".<sup>31</sup> Such attraction is no surprise in the case of one who suffered not only social anathema but also an insecure family environment and personal tragedies like the death of her mother and the suicide of her brother;<sup>32</sup> the concept which preached acceptance and resignation bore the promise of moral tranquillity for her tortured self. In the very same letter, she explains that *Mektoub*

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<sup>25</sup> See Helmer Ringgren, *Studies in Arabian Fatalism* (Uppsala: Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1955); Raphael Patai, *The Arab Mind* (New York: Scribners, 1973); and Dayla Cohen-Mor, *A Matter of Fate: the Concept of Fate in the Arab World as Reflected in Modern Arabic Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>26</sup> Schimmel, *Islam: an Introduction*, 103.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in W. Montgomery Watt, "Suffering in Sunnite Islam", *Studia Islamica* 50 (1979), 5-19, 17.

<sup>28</sup> One of the masters of *tawakkul* is reported to have been killed by a lion. See *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Baldock, *The Essence of Sufism*, 100.

<sup>30</sup> Watt, "Suffering in Sunnite Islam", 17.

<sup>31</sup> Eberhardt, *Ecrits Intimes*, 100.

<sup>32</sup> Eberhardt's mother died shortly after her arrival in Algeria with her daughter in 1897 and her slow-witted brother Wladimir killed himself a few months later by putting his head in a gas-oven. Eberhardt's favourite brother (indeed, soul-mate), Augustin, would also commit suicide years after her death, as would, later, his daughter.

has liberated her from feeling “si douloureusement révoltée contre les malheurs qui [la] frappent”<sup>33</sup>; in another, that “ [elle], sans religion, fille du hasard et élevée au milieu de l’incrédulité et du malheur, [...] attribue [...] tous [s]es malheurs à ce *Mektoub* mystérieux contre quoi il est parfaitement inutile et insensé de s’insurger.”<sup>34</sup> The invocation of *Mektoub* as a suffering-alleviator pervades her personal writings.

While such acceptance of resignation sounds like an approval of the Sufi version of the *tawakkul* principle, it can also be read as a way of overcoming weakness. Eberhardt’s evocation of fate often occurs in contexts of loss – death, in particular – where intervention as regards events proves impossible. Thus, inasmuch as it enables defeat-transcending or grief-conquering, this concept empowers the believer in an otherwise helplessly disempowering situation. When action *is* possible, *Mektoub* is “recycled” so as to sanction a personal decision or inclination. To explain her propensity to physical pleasure, she writes to her friend Ali that “*Dieu [l]’a créée sensuelle*”;<sup>35</sup> to justify her literary ambition, that “[elle] écrit [...] parce que telle est [s]a destinée”.<sup>36</sup>

A striking example of Eberhardt’s manipulation of the concept of *Mektoub* is her re-writing of the Behima assault as a sign of her predestination to holiness and/or martyrdom. In January 1901, Abdallah, a fanatic from the Tijaniya religious community – the chief rival of the Qadiriya, to which Eberhardt was affiliated – came very close to killing the writer by dealing violent sword-blows to her head and her left arm. Luckily for her, the blow directed at her head was alleviated by a “providential” clothesline, though the other blows left her arm badly injured. As an explanation, all that the criminal had to say was that he had received an order from God urging him to kill the writer, and that, though he did not know her, he would attack her again if set free.<sup>37</sup> Eberhardt soon appropriated her assaulter’s self-reading as a mere agent of divine will, denying him, however, the right to interpret this will. Abdallah was no more than “un instrument aveugle d’une destinée dont il ignore le sens”,<sup>38</sup> but which, it is implied, *she* could explain: God’s will in ordering the assault was to elevate her to a rank close to that of a martyr. Indeed, in total contradiction with the belief of the “blind instrument” that her unconventional behaviour endangered the

<sup>33</sup> Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 100.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 116. The words in italics are inserted in Arabic in the original letter.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>37</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 148.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

Muslim community,<sup>39</sup> she firmly voiced her pride “d’avoir versé [s]on sang pour une foi”.<sup>40</sup> To make sense of such a thesis, Eberhardt protested energetically against the official version, according to which Abdallah’s act was a fanatic gesture perpetrated against one thought to be Christian, insisting that the criminal knew well that she was a Muslim,<sup>41</sup> and further implying that the French might have had a hand in the assault.<sup>42</sup> This is indicated through her expressed hope that the instigators of the crime (whom she never named, however) would be sued together with its executor,<sup>43</sup> and her prediction that this attack, convenient as it was for the French, would remain unpunished.<sup>44</sup>

Ironically, not only did time prove her wrong – Abdallah’s sentence was so heavy that she herself ended up begging for indulgence on his behalf<sup>45</sup> – but her pointing to the French as the orchestrators of the crime contradicted her original thesis that Abdallah was God-sent. Trapped in her own contradictions, Eberhardt attempted to disentangle them by arguing that the crime was indeed urged by “the enemies of Islam”, but that this did not prevent its perpetrator from being “l’envoyé de Dieu” that he claimed to be.<sup>46</sup> However, instead of elevating her to martyrdom, it is rather to her saintliness that he was now thought to have paved the way, while becoming himself a martyr. In the hospital where she was still recovering from her injuries, she wrote lengthily about the change provoked in her by the proximity of death and expressed gratitude to her assailant-benefactor: “Mais l’œuvre d’Abdallah, et le germe qu’il a semé en moi y est resté et je crois fermement qu’il germe déjà et qu’il surgira un jour ou l’autre de l’ombre où je le cache à tous les yeux...”<sup>47</sup> She was indeed so convinced of her saintliness that she endowed herself not only with such marks of religious elevation as faith, disinterestedness, and compassion,<sup>48</sup> but even with

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<sup>39</sup> Abdallah advanced his victim’s cross-dressing as his chief motive: “I received a mission from God, who ordered me to go to the Djrid, passing by Behima, where I was to meet Mademoiselle Eberhardt, who created disorder in the Moslem religion . . . [she] wore masculine dress, which is contrary to our customs, and thus made trouble in our religion.” Quoted in Mackworth, *The Destiny of Isabelle Eberhardt*, 128; and Zayzafoun, “*La Roumia Convertie*”, 44.

<sup>40</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 128.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>42</sup> It is this self-presentation as the Muslim victim of the French “infidel” which gives validity to her claims to martyrdom.

<sup>43</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 151.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>45</sup> See *ibid.*, 158.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

the power of divination usually associated with *marabouts*.<sup>49</sup> Very conveniently, her husband, Slimène, sanctioned this invented saintliness: “la *question maraboutique* [...] germa en mon âme, spontanément, le soir du jour où l’on transféra Abdallah de la prison civile dans la cellule... Et, sans doute par intuition inconsciente provenant de notre grande intimité d’âme, Slimène s’en est douté !...”<sup>50</sup>

### 2.1.2.2. Two literary examples

The opposing conceptions of *Mektoub* as an imperative of passivity and as an assertion of personal will are illustrated in two of Eberhardt’s short stories, “Yasmina” and “Dans la dune” respectively. In the first lines of “Yasmina”, Eberhardt associates her heroine’s inexorable fatalism with the geographical space she occupies: “De la grandeur morne de ces lieux, elle avait pris une surcharge de fatalisme et de rêve”.<sup>51</sup> Although this association may be taken as an essentialising attribution of fatalism to Oriental desert-dwellers in general, the statement, a few words later, that Yasmina was more melancholic than “toutes les filles de sa race”<sup>52</sup> implies that other statements relating to the heroine might well be formulated in comparison with female Easterners alone, to whom the first comment regarding fatalism would, thus, also be confined. Indeed, it is for her inability to escape the predicament of subjection that is hers as a native woman that Yasmina’s belief in fatality acts as a consolation. When her father decides to marry her off to a one-eyed and horrid-looking suitor, she chases away her first reaction of dismay by convincing herself that “c’était écrit”;<sup>53</sup> when, later, her idyll with the Frenchman Jacques (in which she is involved in the months preceding her planned marriage) is abruptly broken by the latter’s transfer to another regiment, her suspicion and wrath are neutralised by the same conviction: “En elle, aucune révolte contre le *Mektoub*, auquel, dès sa plus tendre enfance, elle était habituée à attribuer tout ce qui lui arrivait, en bien ou en mal...”<sup>54</sup> Again, when, shortly after this separation, she is married to a young and handsome but violent husband instead of *Moh Laouar*,<sup>55</sup> she accepts “her fate” with the same passive resignation. Even

<sup>49</sup> “Ibid., 186 and 247.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 167. Eberhardt’s italics. Slimène’s opinion had however, probably more to do with his too accommodating personality than with “l’intimité des âmes” to which his wife assigns it. As she herself writes a page later, “Slimène [la] suivra où [elle] voudr[a]”.

<sup>51</sup> Eberhardt, “Yasmina”, *Ecrits sur le Sable II*, 94.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>55</sup> “Laouar” means one-eyed, in Arabic.

when, engulfed by the discovery that Jacques has betrayed the pledge of love he made before his departure, she is no more than “une loque de chair abandonnée à la maladie et à la mort,” she feels no revolt: “c’était écrit, et il n’y a pas de remède contre ce qui est écrit.”<sup>56</sup>

No less than in “Yasmina”, reference to *Mektoub* either through this word itself or close synonyms like “fate” or “what is written” is recurrent in “Dans la dune”, a short story in which, as mentioned in the previous chapter, “Mahmoud Saadi” recounts her encounter with the rough hunters of the desert as she loses her way while going back to her tent. Beseeched in the name of the religion and religious community he shares with the narrator to tell his story, Hama Srir, one of the hunters, explains that, in breach of the rigid custom that keeps wives and daughters away from men’s gaze, he once accidentally caught sight of a young woman while being treated for snakebite by her grandmother.<sup>57</sup> Although his wish to marry her appears to be thwarted, as he himself expected, by the father’s refusal to give away his daughter to an impoverished and wild-living hunter, his resolution does not flinch: “his destiny” is to marry this woman that God has allowed him to see, and no human can therefore prevent him from fulfilling it. The passage relating the conversation between the suitor and the father is revealing about the wide gap between male and female approaches to adversity in a patriarchal culture:

- Où l’as-tu vue?
- Je ne l’ai pas vue. Des vieilles femmes d’El Oued m’en ont parlé... Telle est la destinée.
- Par la vérité du Coran auguste, tant que je vivrai jamais un vagabond n’aura ma fille!
- Longuement Hama Srir regarda le vieillard.
- Ne jure pas les [*sic*] choses que tu ignores [...] Evite les larmes à tes yeux que Dieu fermera bientôt!
- J’ai juré.
- *Chouf Rabbi!* (Dieu verra) dit Hama Srir.
- Et sans ajouter un mot, il partit.<sup>58</sup>

Of course, when Hama Srir declares that God will decide, it is his own decision that he means to execute. The omnipresent evocation of God (or of his Book) on which the equally determined men rely to support their inflexible positions contrasts sharply with Yasmina’s use of God’s will (*Mektoub*) as a mere consolation. Like her, Saadia, the object of the two

<sup>56</sup> Eberhardt, “Yasmina”, 117.

<sup>57</sup> Aged females are usually dispensed from the veil-obligation in Islamic culture.

<sup>58</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Dans la dune” [1905, posthumous], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 151.

men's conflict, is content with a passive wait for the denouement of the masculine "arm-wrestling". The resolution of the younger man eventually conquers, and Saadia accordingly becomes the wife of "celui que Dieu [lui] a promis",<sup>59</sup> as Hama's own phrase goes.

What the stories of Yasmina and Hama Srir illustrate is how the very same concept which, for the disempowered, becomes a justification of impotence and paralysis is transformed by strong characters into a sanction of individual will and a licence to act. As "that which is written", that is, as a text, *Mektoub* defers its meaning according to the reader, confirming the ambivalent character of writing that Jacques Derrida analyses in *Dissemination*. Drawing on the Egyptian myth of Teuth, the god of writing, as taken up in Plato's *Phaedrus*, Derrida explains that Teuth's gift is presented at once as a beneficial remedy against forgetfulness and a threat to memory, an undecidability conveyed through the polysemy of the Greek word *pharmakon*, which simultaneously means (among other things) "poison" and "medicine".<sup>60</sup> Like the Egyptian god's invention, *Mektoub* acts as a *pharmakon* – either a lethal drug, as it is for Yasmina, or a healing medicine, for which the treatment Hama Srir receives for his physical injury functions as a metaphor.

## 2.2. Eberhardt, Islam, and Orientalist discourse

One interesting point about Eberhardt's representation of Islamic fate in her personal writings and in stories like "Yasmina" and "Dans la dune" is that her own conception is closer to that of the male Hama Srir than to that of the female Yasmina. But although this seems to disrupt the male determination/female passivity dichotomy that comes out of the comparative analysis of the two texts, the fact that Yasmina's passivity is explicitly assigned to all "les filles de sa race" does confirm the gendered character of the Eberhardtian understanding of *Mektoub*. It is therefore plausible to conclude that what the writer's own opting for the empowering version of the *Mektoub* text reveals is less a random distribution of the traits of strength and weakness than an identification with masculinity as the mightier gender category.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>60</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* [1972], trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone, 1993), 65-119.

In the light of this Eberhardtian equation of maleness and power,<sup>61</sup> the analysis that follows discusses the ambivalence of the writer's representation of Islam. What will be shown is that the faith which is masculinised in the new convert's eagerness to define the religion she embraced in terms of strength comes to be re-defined as feminine as she espouses the imperialist cause and seeks to subject the Muslim natives to the coloniser. In this ambivalence, the Eberhardtian vision dovetails with Orientalist discourse. Despite the postulate, commonly accepted in postcolonial studies, that the East is systematically feminised in Western representations, Islam, until the rise of European imperialism, tended to be associated with supposedly male (both positive and negative) features like courage and violence; and such features persisted even in the heyday of the feminisation of the Orient, which culminated in eighteenth and nineteenth-century harem-literature.

### 2.2.1. Islam in the Western imagination

Islam has seldom found favour in Western discourse; on this point scholars seem to be unanimous, though without necessarily agreeing on when this discourse came to be systematised or on how its characteristic hostility ought to be read. While providing evidence that the misrepresentation of the "Mohameddan doctrine" dates back to the Middle Ages, Edward Said argues that what started as an incoherent mass of clichés about Islam gradually came to be more sophisticated and systematised, thus giving the illusion of "objective" knowledge while retaining most of the ancient prejudices. Situating the birth of this methodical study in the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798, Said holds that it was launched for the purpose of controlling the traditional Western fear of Islam.<sup>62</sup> Other critics like Daniel Norman<sup>63</sup> and Daniel J. Vitkus<sup>64</sup> trace Western attempts at a "scholarly" approach to Islam to much older times – to the Middle Ages – and argue that the West's rise to hegemony (which coincided precisely with the Napoleonic campaign) assuaged rather than intensified its hostility towards Islam, as the Saidian thesis runs. Both critics, however, share Said's idea that Islam has been the West's most long-lasting trauma.

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<sup>61</sup> The Eberhardtian association of maleness and power will be more fully discussed in the next chapter.

<sup>62</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 87.

<sup>63</sup> Daniel Norman, *Islam et Occident* [1960], trans. Alain Spiess (Paris: Cerf, 1993).

<sup>64</sup> Daniel J. Vitkus, "Early Modern Orientalism: Representations of Islam in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Europe", *Western Views of Islam in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Perception of Other [sic]*, David R. Blanks and Michael Frassetto eds (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 207-230.

The first traumatic effect of Islam, which started in the seventh century with its rapid spread from its birth-place, the Arabian Peninsula, to reach the Middle East, North Africa, and parts of Europe itself, inaugurated the Muslims' reputation as warlike and violent, and this representation lingered as relations between the Christian West and Islam continued to be marked by constant confrontation. The first Islamic geographical expansion was soon succeeded by the famed Mediaeval Crusades, in which the Muslims not infrequently had the upper hand; in turn, these were followed by another rapid expansion – that of the Ottoman Empire. Although the distribution of power came to be reversed with the rise of European imperialism, the hostile stereotypes survived: the Muslim was still the enemy and despite the weakness into which he had fallen, ancient images of his former strength still haunted the Western psyche.

It is in the Middle Ages that the most distorting images of Islam circulated. Inhering in the Mediaeval Manichean logic which sought to oppose the godly Westerners and their demonic enemies, one extreme manifestation of such distortions consisted in the widespread association between Islam and pagan polytheism. Far removed from the Christians' "enlightenment", the "Saracen"<sup>65</sup> enemies described in *La Chanson de Roland*, for example, are idolaters who worshipped Muhammad (misnamed as Mahound or Mahoun) as the highest deity in a pantheon which also included Termageunt, Apollin, and Jupiter.<sup>66</sup> In other instances, mainly in popular drama, "Mahound" ceases to be a deity to become himself an idolater. While certainly less extravagant, "serious" studies of Islam shared with these grotesque representations their lack of accuracy. Viewing it through the traditional Eurocentric lens, Christian scholars approached Islam not as a religion of its own, but as a mere (and, of course, wrong) version of Christianity. As Said notes, this Eurocentrism – one is tempted to call it "Christocentrism" – is revealed in the very word "Mohamedanism" which is so often used instead of Islam and which originates in an erroneous analogy between Muhammad's status in Islam and that of Jesus in the Christian religion.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Bernard Lewis observes that Europeans "showed a curious reluctance to call the Muslims by any name with a religious connotation, preferring to call them by ethnic names, the obvious purpose of which was to diminish their stature and significance and to reduce them to something local or even tribal." Quoted in Vitkus, "Early Modern Orientalism", 216-217.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 216; and Norman, *Islam et Occident*, 399.

<sup>67</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 60.



Like popular representations, moreover, scholarly discourse dismissed the Islamic doctrine as fake and inauthentic. Launched by Saint John of Damascus, the belief that Muhammad was an impostor who constructed his new faith with “bits” of the Old and the New Testament, which he acquired from an old monk,<sup>68</sup> was widely taken up not only in the Middle Ages but throughout the following centuries. In the supposedly less hostile period of the Enlightenment, Humphrey Prideaux gave his book, an account of Muhammad’s life and of the evolution of Islam, the explicit title *The True Nature of Imposture Display’d*.<sup>69</sup> A few years later, Voltaire innovated only in that he reinforced the old stereotypes about Islam by adding new legends of his own to the already existing stock; as Norman ironically comments, those available did not seem grotesque enough for his purpose.<sup>70</sup> Making “Mahomet” tell his own story in his tragedy *Fanatisme, ou Mahomet le prophète*, Voltaire closes the narrative with the following verses: “Dieu que j’ai fait servir au malheur des humains/Adorable instrument de mes affreux desseins...”<sup>71</sup>

A commonly accepted view was indeed that Muhammad’s purpose in constructing and spreading his new religion was satisfying his personal interest. If, in Voltaire’s lines, this interest lies in self-empowerment – the construction of a solid empire of which he would be the almighty owner – a still more recurrently advanced motive is the satisfaction of more worldly appetites: wealth and, more importantly, lust. Muhammad is thus someone who legitimises his unusual penchant for physical pleasure by relying on the authority of the Quran, falsely presented as divine. An over-used argument in this connection is the Quranic verse authorising the Muslim prophet’s marriage with Zaynab Bint Jahsh. With the usual distortions and confusions – Zaynab’s first husband is sometimes presented as Muhammad’s neighbour rather than as his foster-son<sup>72</sup> – Christian critics cite this story as an example of the double immorality of the prophet, whose lust goes as far as coveting his daughter-in-law, as it were, and who sanctions this lust with the authority of God’s own words.<sup>73</sup>

The accusation of lustfulness is central in Western denigrations not only of Muhammad but of Islam as such. The latter’s tolerance of sexual pleasure ran counter to

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<sup>68</sup> Norman, *Islam et Occident*, 16.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 366. Prideaux’s book was first published in 1723.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 367.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

the Christian valorisation of chastity and was therefore, and once again, often exaggerated, as in Alexandre Dupont's unfounded statement that "Muhammad allowed male believers to have ten wives and women to marry ten times likewise."<sup>74</sup> Christians were particularly shocked by the Islamic conception of Paradise, which promised male believers generous sexual reward in the afterlife.<sup>75</sup> Sex thus added itself to violence in what was to constitute the two permanent features of Western discourse on Islam. As with lust, violence was said to characterise not only the prophet of Islam but the Muslims by and large, and this violence was both internal and external.

At the internal level, the Mahound of Mediaeval drama was a tyrant,<sup>76</sup> and this was also the case with the Muhammad portrayed by Enlightenment writers like Voltaire.<sup>77</sup> This image is present even in supposedly favourable portraits, like that drawn by Edward Gibbon. While taking up the commonly held views about Muhammad's cruelties and injustice, Gibbon justifies these as the unavoidable mistakes of one desperately searching for Truth.<sup>78</sup> At the external level, the battles which marked the history of Islam during its prophet's lifetime and after his death inaugurated the image of Muslims as intolerant believers who imposed their faith with the edge of their swords, an image which was amplified in the context of the repeated defeats undergone by the Christians in the Crusade wars. The very involvement of the Muslims in these Crusades was mentioned as evidence of their bellicosity though, as Norman observes, the Christians were, of course, no less involved in them than their demonised enemies.<sup>79</sup> To highlight the intolerance of the latter, Mediaeval accounts exaggerated the oppression of the Christian and Jewish minorities under Islamic rule, disregarding the fact that, despite their being relegated to the status of second-class citizens, these were granted the right to practise their faith freely.<sup>80</sup> Meanwhile, with regard to the ill-treatment of religious (Muslim and Jewish) minorities within their own (Christian) territories, the authors of such accounts opted for silence.

Islam's reputation of violence and intolerance survived the Middle Ages, reaching a peak in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which were marked not only by

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<sup>74</sup> Vitkus, "Early Modern Orientalism", 223.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>77</sup> Voltaire contrasts what he calls Muslims' bounty with Muhammad's intolerance. Norman, *Islam et Occident*, 368.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 369.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 359.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 359.

widespread Turkish hegemony but also by the piracy practised by the North African Muslims. Emerging as a literary genre in its own right and occupying a large part of the literature on Islam produced at that time, the narratives of Westerners made captives by these corsairs often reproduced not only the clichés of Mediaeval literature but also its plots. Like the Mediaeval romances, in which virtuous Christian knights resisted both the aggression of Muslim males and the temptations of Muslim females,<sup>81</sup> these narratives often boasted of the captives' heroic refusal to convert to Islam despite the ill-treatments that they had to endure in consequence.<sup>82</sup> Such accounts of unyielding Christian faith were not, however, always confirmed by reality. In the Middle Ages as in the following centuries, both religions welcomed new-comers from the other camp, but the number of converts from Christianity was, by far, the more important, a fact that scholars tended to explain by Islam's greater indulgence towards sins of the flesh – the Islamic "lustfulness" discussed above.<sup>83</sup>

The history of pre-imperialist Western representations is one of a long implicit masculinisation of Islam. What comes from the summary provided above is that both the vices and the (few) virtues associated with its followers are typically masculine. No less than the courage and chivalrous behaviour bestowed on figures like Saladin and his army, aggression, tyranny, and a pronounced penchant for sexual pleasure are traditionally assumed to be part of male behaviour. Thus, in opposition to the Saidian claim, the feminisation of the East is not a constant feature of Western discourse; rather, it seems to have been conditional on the distribution of power, which was obviously not, as Said also claimed, always to the advantage of the West. Because, in European patriarchal culture, power is conventionally a masculine attribute, it is the degree of its possession by the East which determined the latter's gendering by Western discourse. The masculinisation of Islam, in particular, only dwindled in the eighteenth century with the Romantic fascination with harems, which, interestingly, also coincided with the decline of Islamic power, and was to reach a peak with the nineteenth-century imperialism on which Said focused his study. However, as a belated discourse, this new feminisation retained the trace of the former representation, so that a simultaneous feminisation and masculinisation of Eberhardt's religion marked nineteenth-century Western Orientalism.

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<sup>81</sup> For examples of such romances, see Rana Kabbani, *Imperial Fictions: Europe's Myths of Orient* [1986] (London: Saqi, 2008), 37-39.

<sup>82</sup> Vitkus, "Early Modern Orientalism", 215.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

## 2.2.2. Eberhardt's Islam

### 2.2.2.1. Masculinising Islam

In several of her writings, Eberhardt emphasises the “virility” of Islam through her description of the male believers’ practice of their religion; a recurrent trope in this regard is that of the *muezzin*’s call to prayer. In her *récit* “La *Zaouïa*”, the *muezzin*’s mighty voice, echoing the strength of the believers’ own faith, triggers in the narrator’s mind the days of bygone Islamic glory:

J’ai ressenti là, à l’ombre antique de cette mosquée sainte de l’Islam, des émotions ineffables au son de la voix haute et forte de l’*imam* psalmodiant ces vieilles paroles de la foi musulmane en cette belle langue arabe, sonore et virile, musicale et puissante comme le vent du désert où elle est née, d’où elle est venue, sous l’impulsion d’une seule volonté humaine, conquérir la moitié de l’Univers...<sup>84</sup>

The Islam-power pair which is highlighted through the range of power-evoking adjectives like “high”, “strong”, “sonorous”, and “powerful” is also pointed out through the implicit celebration of the early Islamic conquests, in which, in accordance with our previous analysis of *Mektoub*, faith as a fulfilment of God’s will converges with “la volonté humaine” towards the enactment of power. In turn, the qualification of the call to prayer as virile completes the Eberhardtian triangular schema by adding masculinity to power and Islam. As powerful as the *muezzin*’s voice is that of the *imam* leading the prayer she describes in her *Journaliers*: “deux voix, l’une devant nous, cassée, vieillotte, mais, peu à peu, devenant *forte et puissante*, et l’autre fusant comme d’en haut, dans les lointains obscurs de la mosquée, à intervalles réguliers, comme un chant de *triomphe* et d’inébranlable foi, radieux ... annonçant la *victoire* à venir, inévitable, de Dieu et de son Prophète...”<sup>85</sup> Supplementing the description in “La *Zaouïa*”, the passage recalls the glorious past of Islam from its “lointains obscurs” but also predicts its forthcoming return.

Similar images of Islam’s constructed masculinity pervade the *récit* “Fantasia”, an account of a grandiose cavalcade held in honour of the venerated *cheikh* Sidi Mohamed Elimane. Both the *marabout* and his believers are made to incarnate the traditional ideal of masculinity through a repetitive and admiring focus on their robust bodies, “taille

<sup>84</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “La *Zaouïa*” [1986, posthumous], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 89-93, 89.

<sup>85</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 56. My emphasis.

géante”,<sup>86</sup> “[t]êtes énergiques et mâles”,<sup>87</sup> and their masterful handling of their mounts and their rifles. Indeed, one of the most poignant images in the text is that in which twelve sturdy horse-riders, having performed, in unison, an old and wild war-song, shoot their guns simultaneously in a simulation of a sudden attack. Echoing their “cris rauques”,<sup>88</sup> another unanimous sound rises from the crowd as the celebrated *marabout* comes close: “Salut et paix à toi, ô Prophète de Dieu! Salut et paix à vous, ô Saints d’entre les créatures de Dieu! Salut à toi, Djilani, Emir des Saints, Maître de Bagdad, dont le nom rayonne à l’Occident et à l’Orient!”<sup>89</sup> As it thus salutes the Prophet and the saints of Islam, the chant is powerful, as if “sorta[n]t de mille poitrines.”<sup>90</sup>

In this culture that she over-masculinised so as to fit her ideal of power, Eberhardt had herself to borrow a male identity without which the empowerment expected from her conversion could not be concretised. To escape the obedience and secluded life which were the common lot of Muslim women, the converted *roumia* roamed the desert in male native attire and introduced herself as a young *taleb* (a student of the Quran and Islamic tradition), a re-definition of herself which, in a patriarchal society marked no less by religiosity than by patriarchy, positioned her *de facto* at the top of the cultural hierarchy. As a learned Arab male, Si Mahmoud was entitled to intervene in matters supposed to be beyond the grasp of the “commoners” and to provide not only the latter but also more enlightened figures like the *marabouts* with always well-listened-to advice.<sup>91</sup>

Interestingly, the Muslims who accepted her as the young *taleb* she claimed to be, thus allowing the authority she bestowed on herself to go unquestioned, were anything but deceived by her disguise, and it is legitimate to suppose that this complaisance had much to do with her privileged status as a Westerner. The rigid Islamic culture of the desert has little patience with female eccentricities; and though several biographers advance that its indulgence towards Eberhardt’s – which were not few in number – is nothing but the

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<sup>86</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Fantasia” [1901], *Œuvres Complètes I: Ecrits sur le Sable (récits, notes et journaliers)* (Paris: Grasset, 1988), 77-82, 79.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> In this connection, Eberhardt’s friend Robert Randau testifies: “Je la vois encore à Ténès, assise sur le trottoir au milieu d’un groupe d’indigènes et pérorant sans fin. Et eux, ahuris et souriants, s’écriaient de temps à autre : ba ba ba ba! et paraissaient pleins d’admiration pour elle.” Robert Randau, *Isabelle Eberhardt: notes et souvenirs* [1945] (Paris: La Boîte à Documents, 1989), 56.

expression of the renowned Islamic courtesy,<sup>92</sup> it is very doubtful that a similarly “surprenante tolérance”<sup>93</sup> would have been shown for a guest who had come from a less powerful part of the world. Because it could be justified neither by the traditional respect for advanced age, nor by her gender category, which they knew to be fake, nor even by what would have been seen as exemplary behaviour, the authority bestowed on the “scandalous” woman by desert-dwellers is nothing but the Westerner’s power in disguise. As Sidonie Smith puts it, Eberhardt “can [...] violate all codes of indigenous culture, codes that Algerian women could not have violated, precisely because she carries her European identification with her into the desert.”<sup>94</sup> In accepting her as Mahmoud Saadi, the natives were the actors in a play whose script *she* had written for them; a manifestation of power which would eventually engender rebellion, in the form of the attack perpetrated against her.

Thus, ironically, the empowerment expected as an alternative to the marginality experienced in Europe could only be effective through the intervention of a supposedly renounced Europeanness. Aware of this, Eberhardt, who unquestionably defined herself as Muslim, never saw herself as an Arab, despite her mastery of Arabic and the affection she manifested for the indigenous population. This is well illustrated in a letter she addressed to Slimène Ehni, her would-be husband, urging him to further his education so as to belie Western assumptions about the indigènes: “Songe qu’en travaillant pour le but que je te trace là tu travailleras pour tous *tes* frères arabes, pour tous *nos* frères musulmans”.<sup>95</sup> The passage is interesting because it underscores not only Eberhardt’s attachment to her non-Arab identity, but also her vision of Westernness as inseparable from power. Because her husband was the Arab, hence the racial subaltern, that she was not, she felt entitled to write for him the scenario of his future life, just as she had written and imposed the “Mahmoud

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<sup>92</sup> See among others, Jacques d’Espagnat, “Sur les Traces d’Isabelle Eberhardt”, *La Revue de France* (15 Aug. 1928): 182-187, 185; and Mackworth, *The Destiny of Isabelle Eberhardt*, 116. This explanation is also advanced by Eberhardt herself: “Ils [les spahis et les *mokhazni*] savaient bien, par tant d’indiscrétions européennes, que Si Mahmoud était une femme. Mais, avec la belle discrétion arabe, ils se disaient que cela ne les regardait pas, qu’il eût été malséant d’y faire allusion”. Isabelle Eberhardt, “Dernières visions”, *Sud oranais* [1908, posthumous] (Paris: Joëlle Losfeld, 2003), 114-118, 116.

<sup>93</sup> Marie-Odile Delacour and Jean-René Huleu, Introduction to *Ecrits intimes*, 10.

<sup>94</sup> Sidonie Smith, *Moving Lives: 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Women’s Travel Writings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 44. Verna Forster advances a similar argument: “she [Eberhardt] had the freedom and privilege to travel and behave as she did precisely because she was European.” Verna A. Forster, “Reinventing Isabelle Eberhardt: Rereading Timberlake Wertenbaker’s *New Anatomies*”, *Connotations* 17, 1 (2007/08): 109-28, 111.

<sup>95</sup> Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 359. My emphasis.

Saadi” script on the members of the Muslim community. Like the latter, the husband took on the role his Western wife had designed for him: that of her meek student first, then that of a modest civil servant – a subaltern at the service of the colonial administration.<sup>96</sup>

### 2.2.2.2. Feminising Muslims

Another irony in the Russian convert’s relation to fellow Muslims is that her desire to dominate them dismantles the very masculine and empowering image she had constructed for them in her eagerness to identify with power-holders. In subjecting the natives to her own will, Eberhardt reverses gender categories, forcing on the (male) Muslims the feminine traits of passivity and obedience, while assigning to her Western self the masculine tasks of thinking, planning and deciding, thus falling back into the ambivalence of the Orientalist discourse from which her panegyric of Islam seems to depart. This ambivalence is made manifest in “La *Zaouïa*” itself, despite the powerful masculinisation pervading the description of the *muezzin*’s call. If one of the two male Oriental friends with whom she attends the prayer is presented as “une nature masculine pure”,<sup>97</sup> the other is said to be “voluptueux et raffiné, semblable à *une sensitive* que tout contact brutal fait souffrir”.<sup>98</sup> Not content with feminising this Oriental male, Eberhardt makes him sanction his own feminisation. To his female Western friend, Ahmed declares: “Combien ta nature est plus virile que la mienne et combien plus que moi tu es faite pour les luttes dures de la vie...”<sup>99</sup>

The description of the mosque prayer itself is not always rendered in power-evoking terms as it is in “La *Zaouïa*”. If the *muezzin*’s call is often sonorous and virile, it is also, at times, described as “plaintif”,<sup>100</sup> as in “L’Enlumineur sacré”. In “Prière du vendredi”, it is the *imam*’s voice which is “cassée et chevrotante”.<sup>101</sup> Though the trope of the “voix forte et sonore”<sup>102</sup> is present in this *récit* in the person of a young believer repeating the *imam*’s invocations, its effect is mitigated not only by the *imam*’s own voice but also by the

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<sup>96</sup> Eberhardt undertook to perfect her husband’s French so as to prepare him for his future job as an administrative secretary. She proved such an inflexible teacher that she occasionally went as far as dealing her “pupil” a blow. The relationship between the writer and her husband will be discussed in the next chapter.

<sup>97</sup> Eberhardt, “La *Zaouïa*”, 92.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “L’Enlumineur sacré” [1902], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 135-136, 136.

<sup>101</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Prière du vendredi” [1906, posthumous], *Sud Oranais* (Paris: Joëlle Losfeld, 2003), 194-197, 196.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

performance of his fellow believers. As in “Fantasia”, the latter recite litanies in honour of the Prophet; however, instead of being raucous and warlike, the voices are now said to be “très pures et très belles”.<sup>103</sup> As two adjectives traditionally more readily used in a feminine context, these words mark a departure from the celebration of the power and masculinity of Islam illustrated above, a departure completed through the “intrusion” of children, usually absent in Eberhardt’s texts, into the prayer-space. In addition, focus is placed not on the evocation of Islamic pride and the spirit of conquest but on the submission, conveyed through the image of the believers’ bending and prostrating themselves, required of Muslims; and the feeling conveyed by the *imam*’s preaching is not one of confidence in a forthcoming triumph but one of “un grand calme doux”.<sup>104</sup>

It is interesting to note that “Prière du vendredi” was one of the texts written by Eberhardt during her sojourn on the Algerian-Moroccan frontier, where she was sent by General Lyautey. At odds with Eberhardt’s new objective of subjecting uncooperative Muslims to the colonial authority, the rhetoric of strength and conquest which fitted her search for empowerment through Islam had to be erased, and her religion re-written as one of peace and tolerance. The past is now evoked not to highlight Islam’s martial exploits but to emphasise these new values: “Et, comme toujours, comme sans doute aux jours lointains, il y a quelque deux cents ans, le bienheureux *cheikh* M’Hammed professait là ses doctrines humanitaires et ésoteriques, un grand calme règne sur cette vallée et sur le *ksar*.”<sup>105</sup> “Humanitarianism” reappears in this laudatory comment on the Ziania religious community: “Les marabouts Ziania sont favorables à la France. Ce sont des gens paisibles et humains qui saluent une puissance de justice.”<sup>106</sup> Unlike this “friendly” conception of Islam, the rigid version of some Moroccans is condemned for its hatred of Christians and *M’zanat*,<sup>107</sup> a hatred which, for the writer, “[oublie] les principes de tolérance de l’Islam pur”.<sup>108</sup>

While, in allowing the Islamic East to be penetrated by modern Western values, this new construction of Islam as a humanistic religion perpetuates the Orientalist narrative of Eastern penetrability, Eberhardt’s reformulation of Moroccan hostility towards the

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>105</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “La Barga” [1906], *Sud oranais*, 185-187, 186-187.

<sup>106</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “L’Entrée à la *Zaouïa*” [1906], *Sud oranais*, 176-178, 176.

<sup>107</sup> “M’zanat” is the plural of “M’zani”, an Arabic word for “religious renegade”.

<sup>108</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Transformation” [1906], *Sud oranais*, 184-185, 184.



coloniser in strictly religious terms – an Islamic hatred for the Christians – re-writes the Mediaeval Western narrative of the Crusades as well as the demonisation of the “unenlightened” Muslims which marked it. If their faith could not be dismissed as idolatry or imposture by one who herself professed Islam, Eberhardt’s “modern Saracens” were nonetheless criticised for having failed to grasp the benign light of their humanistic religion. However, unlike the representations of the Middle Ages, these new Saracens were feminised; this is not because they were no longer the mighty enemies their Mediaeval ancestors used to be for the West, but because it was not in the writer’s interest that they should be so if she was to succeed in her mission of subduing them to the “Christian” invader.

One striking image of Eberhardt’s feminisation of Moroccan Muslims is her account of the amusements of a group of students (who also happen to be the sons of *marabouts*) that she was invited to share. With its “vigne vierge”, the “délicieuse petite cour”<sup>109</sup> she goes through before arriving at the place of the young men’s recreations anticipates the feminisation of the students themselves. In the luxurious and refined interior, Eberhardt informs her readers that the young men would often lift up their spirit with good conversation and ... needlework:

La réunion se passe en conversation. Comme pour en préciser l’intimité récréative, un des lettrés musulmans, après nos présentations, se remet à son travail de couture et cherche des soies pour une gandoura blanche qu’il orne de délicates broderies. Parmi les étudiants marocains, ces travaux de couture et d’ornementation des tissus sont fort en honneur : ils sont une preuve de goût; ce n’est pas déchoir que de s’y livrer, même en public.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>109</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Chez les étudiants” [1906], *Sud oranais*, 217-222, 218.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 220. As Marie-Odile Delacour and Jean-René Huleu warn the reader (*Sud oranais*, 217), this text seems to have been almost totally re-written by Victor Barrucand; only a few lines of the original manuscript have survived. However, the passage quoted above *is* available at the Centre des Archives d’Outre-Mer and, though some words are missing, the description of students involved in needlework and their overall feminisation are equally obvious. What remains of the original version runs as follows:

Beaux plateaux [...] attirail du thé, les verres multicolores, jo[li]s [...] comme des fleurs sauvages...

Le décor sévère jetant un voile [...] sur les plaisirs des jeunes hommes qui [...] baissent les yeux et demeurent muets.

[La ré?]union se fait plus intime [...]

Un des étudiants se remet à son travail de [...] gandoura blanche qu’il orne de délicates brode[r]ies ?]

[Par?]mi les lettrés arabes, la couture est fort en honneur [...] pas déchoir en s’y livrant même en public.

[...] alors pour jamais l’atmosphère volup[tueuse?] [...] hante Bith-Es-Sefra [the Yellow Room], le lieu de réunions, commune d’ailleurs, des étudiants.

Eberhardt's feminisation seems to target Muslim Morocco in particular. Its men enjoy not only embroidery but also tea-making, which, the writer tells us, is for Moroccans a typically male activity.<sup>111</sup> More revealing still is the feminisation of the Moroccan landscapes, in contrast to those of Algeria. "A mesure que nous [Eberhardt and Djilali, the guide] avançons vers l'ouest, les collines s'abaissent";<sup>112</sup> the aggressive verticality of "l'éperon abrupt du djebel Béchar" and "des collines aiguës comme des dents de scie"<sup>113</sup> soon gives way first to funny-looking hills, named, on account of their appearance, "Bezzaz El Kelba" (Dog's Teats), then to the smooth curvedness of the dunes of Kenadsa – her destination: "Du sable blond, des ondulations molles, toujours, comme depuis les Bezzaz El Kelba, les mêmes paysages, la même harmonie monotone de grandes lignes sans angles".<sup>114</sup>

Eberhardt's feminisation of a Morocco that was still not colonised while masculinising French Algeria indicates the interconnectedness between the gendering process and the gendered characters' positioning *vis-a-vis* the French coloniser, whose part the writer had now taken. Thus read, the representation of Moroccans as frail and effeminate betrays a will to denigrate resistance to colonialism while valorising the "good" Muslim – he who shows willingness to submit to the colonial power. Such valorisation (and masculinisation) of "loyalty" – as Eberhardt re-writes submission – is well illustrated in the following passage, where she hails the Muslims who choose to side with the French coloniser: "L'Arabe connaît l'honneur viril, et il veut mourir en brave, face à l'ennemi, mais il ignore absolument le désir de la gloire posthume. Surtout ces hommes simples, ces frustes nomades qui apportent volontairement au service de la France leur vaillance, leur belle audace et leur endurance inlassable."<sup>115</sup>

The Islamic power and the spirit of conquest celebrated before Eberhardt allowed the colonial authorities to hire her services fades away in favour of a self-effaced, subdued version of Islam. While the rhetoric of bravery and honour is retained, these values are now re-defined in terms of subservience, and the fight for the Islamic cause, of which she

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The figures of the students handling their needles, their lowered eyes, the metaphor of the veil, the context of seclusion, and the overall atmosphere of luxury and voluptuousness not only feminise the Moroccan *marabouts'* sons but indeed also call to mind familiar images of Orientalist harems.

<sup>111</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "Five O'Clock maraboutique" [1906], *Sud oranais*, 209-212, 212.

<sup>112</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "Kenadsa" [1906], *Sud oranais*, 174-176, 175.

<sup>113</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "Ben Zireg" [1906], *Sud oranais*, 163-165, 163.

<sup>114</sup> Eberhardt, "Kenadsa", 174-175.

<sup>115</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "Légionnaires et *mokhazni*" [1906], *Sud oranais*, 170-171, 171.

herself once dreamt, is re-written as struggle on behalf of France. Of her husband Slimène, a *spahi* in the French army, she writes that “il sera toujours le soldat de la Sainte Cause de l’islam”;<sup>116</sup> and when fellow Muslims, angered by Sidi Mohamed Taieb’s support of French settlement, accused him of having betrayed his religion, Eberhardt took up his defence, as she explains in a declaration she made following her expulsion from Algerian territory:

J’ai [...] défendu de toutes mes forces feu le *naïb*<sup>117</sup> d’Ouargla Sidi Mohamed Taieb, mort glorieusement sous le drapeau tricolore, contre les accusations de quelques musulmans, ignorant tout de l’islam – du vrai, celui du Coran et de la Sounna – qui accusaient le *naïb* d’avoir trahi l’islam en installant les Français à In-Salah. J’ai toujours et partout parlé aux indigènes en faveur de la France.<sup>118</sup>

No less than her collaboration with General Lyautey, Eberhardt’s defence of Sidi Taieb and her re-writing of her husband’s service in the French army as “being a soldier of Islam” deconstructs the anti-colonial stance of which her espousal of the Islamic faith (and her marriage to a Muslim man) is often taken as evidence. Although the man she took as a husband was a native, he was, as a *spahi*, also a representative of the French colonial system; he was, additionally, one of the few Algerians to be granted French citizenship. In turn, it is through marrying this Muslim, but nonetheless French, man that Eberhardt herself came to be a member of an all-powerful France. Husband and wife then sealed their adherence to the colonial power; the former through his modest functions in the French administration, the latter by deploying her considerable knowledge of Islamic tradition to fashion a persuasive rhetoric of pacification for the Muslims.

### 2.2.2.3. Enlightening Islam, unenlightened Muslims

Eberhardt’s gendering of the natives goes hand in hand with an authorial comment on the degree of their attachment to Islam. Among the Muslim soldiers in the French army, her preference goes to the *mokhazni*,<sup>119</sup> who, unlike the *spahis* and *tirailleurs*, show a strict observance of Islamic instructions:

<sup>116</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 19.

<sup>117</sup> *Naïb* means representative in Arabic. In this particular context, the word indicates the title bestowed on the “vice-head” of the *zaouïa*.

<sup>118</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 158.

<sup>119</sup> A *mokhazni* is a member of *El Makhzen*, a paramilitary body composed of natives and whose role is to maintain order.

[L]es *mokhazni* sont, de tous les soldats musulmans que la France recrute en Algérie, ceux qui demeurent les plus intacts, conservant sous le *burnous* bleu leurs mœurs traditionnelles.

Ils restent aussi très attachés à la foi musulmane, à l'encontre de la plupart des tirailleurs et de beaucoup de spahis.

Cinq fois par jour, on les voit s'écarter dans le désert et prier, graves, indifférents à tout ce qui les entoure [...] <sup>120</sup>

More than with the *spahis* and *tirailleurs*, however, it is with the Bedouin rebels that the *mokhazni*'s double loyalty – to Islam and to France – is contrasted. In “Soir de *Ramadhane*”, Eberhardt's disapproval of the Doui Menia's hostility to France is accompanied by their dismissal as poor (or non-)Muslims, on account of their non-observance of the *Ramadan*-fasting. An anecdote widespread among their *frères ennemis* (the *mokhazni* and *légionnaires*), and taken up by the writer herself, has it that, on their way back from a battle against the French, the Doui Menia met a man whose name happened to be *Ramadhane*: “C'est donc toi qui es *Ramadhane* [they told him], celui qui, tous les ans, nous fait souffrir de la faim et de la soif !” <sup>121</sup> With these words, they killed the poor man and rejoined their tribe to break the news that *Ramadhane* was dead, and that there was, henceforward, no need to fast. Although a few of them continue to observe this religious duty, “ils s'arrangent [...]: ils se mettent à trente pour jeûner chacun un jour.” <sup>122</sup>

The Doui Menia's disregard of fasting contrasts with the *mokhazni*'s scrupulous observance of the Islamic prayers. In emphasising the strength of the faith of France's recruits and the rebels' impiety, Eberhardt deploys a strategy of denigration which aims at invalidating and discouraging rebellion by equating anti-colonial dissidence with *religious* dissidence. But Eberhardt's assessment of the *mokhazni*'s and the rebels' religiosity does not only underscore her manipulation of the religious argument to serve the colonialist cause, that is, her politicisation of religion; it also confirms the commanding attitude shown in the previous chapter to characterise her attitude towards North Africa and its people, thought to be inferior. In distributing “brownie points” to deserving Muslims and making light of those deemed to be lacking in religious rigour (whether they be *spahis*, *tirailleurs*, or anti-colonial dissidents), the writer allows herself, as a new convert, to pass judgement on those who have professed Islam for centuries.

<sup>120</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “*Douar du Makhzen*” [1908], *Sud oranais*, 60-72, 61.

<sup>121</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “*Soir de Ramadhane*” [1908], *Sud oranais*, 109-111, 110.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

Such a tendency is all too common with Eberhardt. If her account of the religion she shared with the natives is laudatory, the natives themselves are, more often than not, portrayed as inferior, primitive creatures, a contrasting representation made possible by the clear-cut distinction that she draws between racial and religious categories, and which is often conveyed through the contrasting tropes of light and darkness. While the former is omnipresent in her rendering of Islam, which, she writes, “naquit [...] d’une idée de droiture et de jaillissement dans la lumière”,<sup>123</sup> images of darkness are central in her comments on its followers and are shared by otherwise very different characters. Separated by ethnic identity, gender, and overall outlook on life, Yasmina and Hama Srir, for example, are nevertheless reunited by their “atavistically” dark nature. While the former is said to have “[une] expression sombre et triste”,<sup>124</sup> the latter’s “âme ardente et vague”<sup>125</sup> is haunted by a constant “peur des ténèbres”.<sup>126</sup> A similar darkness marks the description of his two companions; while the older’s face is “aquiline et sombre”,<sup>127</sup> the younger Boudjema’s is, symbolically, “voilée de noir”.<sup>128</sup> Like Yasmina, and like Hama Srir and his friends, Tessaadit’s character – and indeed the whole Chaouiya race to which she belongs – is “sombre et obstiné”,<sup>129</sup> and Oum Zahar’s soul is “tourmentée et assombrie”,<sup>130</sup> and so so it is with many other characters.

Of course, none of these dark minds is blessed with thought. Eberhardt subscribes to the old Western-thought-versus-Oriental-passion dichotomy by depicting characters endowed with an “âme ardente” but a “cerveau éteint”.<sup>131</sup> In “Yasmina” alone, the phrases and epithets stressing this inability to think are almost uncountable. While having the “passion fouguese de sa race”,<sup>132</sup> the Bedouin is “naïve” and “inconsciente”,<sup>133</sup> “dans sa pauvre intelligence inculte, [...] les forces vives dormaient profondément”.<sup>134</sup> Although, like her, her French lover, Jacques, is a naïve young dreamer, Eberhardt draws a clear distinction between the dreams of the young Western idealist and the imprecise reveries of

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<sup>123</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Réflexions du soir” [1906], *Sud oranais*, 222-224, 223.

<sup>124</sup> Eberhardt, “Yasmina”, 97.

<sup>125</sup> Eberhardt, “Dans la dune”, 156.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Tessaadit” [1915, posthumous], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 210-227, 211.

<sup>130</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Oum Zahar” [1902], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 119-126, 119.

<sup>131</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Nuits de ramadhan: la *derouicha*” [1902], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 268-271, 269.

<sup>132</sup> Eberhardt, “Yasmina”, 101.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 96 and 97, respectively.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 107.

the primitive Oriental. If she poetises Jacques' naïveté, writing "[c]e n'était en somme que le vide de son cœur à peine sorti des limbes enchantées de l'adolescence [...], la presque virginité de sa pensée que les débauches de Paris n'avaient point souillée",<sup>135</sup> her rendering of Yasmina's is different: "Elle passait toutes ses journées, dans le silence menaçant de la plaine, sans soucis, sans pensées, poursuivant des rêveries vagues, indéfinissables, intraduisibles en aucune langue humaine."<sup>136</sup>

The "virginity" of Jacques's thought betokens a pure and elevated soul – an elevation reflected through the elevated style which marks the description – rather than a weak intellect; the French soldier is elsewhere said to be "intelligent" and "porté à analyser ses sensations".<sup>137</sup> Yasmina, on the other hand, is not only deprived of this intelligence; the statement that her reveries are not translatable to any human language indeed brings the character close to animality, and Eberhardt's text, once again, close to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, whose comment on the natives' "amazing sounds" as "resembl[ing] no sounds of human language" it echoes.<sup>138</sup> Other analogies between the "simple-minded" natives and animals occur elsewhere in Eberhardt's texts. For instance, in a letter to a local newspaper, *La Dépêche algérienne*, where she sums up her life in the desert, she explains that all she needed was her faithful horse and "des servants à peine plus compliqués que [s]a monture."<sup>139</sup>

Eberhardt thus extends her perpetuation of Western prejudices beyond the limits of fiction. While, like Yasmina, her own husband is, in another passage from her diary (quoted above) referred to as an unconscious (and humble) companion, she congratulates herself at length on being blessed with the precious gift of Thought,<sup>140</sup> a gift she shares with her male protagonist, Jacques. Despite this similarity, however, there is in "Yasmina" a distance between Eberhardt and her European character which shows her to be either much less or much more naïve than him. Indeed, her reinforcement of the common Western prejudices about the East while lauding Jacques for not having been infected with

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>138</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 108.

<sup>139</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 154.

<sup>140</sup> "Il est une beauté en toute chose et savoir la discerner est le don du seul poète: ce don n'est point mort en moi et je m'en glorifie, car les seuls trésors *impérissables* sont ceux de la Pensée." Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 129. Eberhardt's emphasis. The importance bestowed on thought – formally signalled through its capitalisation – makes the exclusion of her native characters from its realm all the more indicative of her vision of them as helplessly inferior.

them is either a mark of her blindness to her own complicity with Orientalist discourse or a cynical anticipation of the failure of her protagonist's idealism. In other words, either Eberhardt is, ironically, herself "unconscious" of the derogatory nature of her discourse on the natives, or she lucidly inserts such discourse to mock her character's appealing but naïve aspiration to erase the Westerner's superior gaze, heralding its forthcoming loss, which will indeed occur with Jacques' coming of age.

Eberhardt takes care to insist on the Islamic faith of the characters she denigrates. Commenting on the "Berber cross" tattooed on Yasmina's forehead, she asserts that its origin is unexplainable, as the Berbers have always been Muslims.<sup>141</sup> Though such an assertion departs from the West's traditional racialist religion-mapping, which associates Arabs with Islam and Berbers with Christianity,<sup>142</sup> it also gives greater validity to the myth of inferior Orientals in that the persistent darkness of their minds despite "[l]a grande lumière de l'islam"<sup>143</sup> which had been theirs for centuries can only betoken an intrinsic imperviousness to light. It is not to a lack of proper guidance that their superstition, primitive fetishism, and unrefined passion can be assigned; rather, it is these features, themselves the result of the extinction of their minds, which prevent them from grasping the uplifting message of Islam.

In the context of the natives' supposedly defective, not to say non-existent, intellect, the privileged, because thinking, being that Eberhardt herself is undertakes to correct their necessarily distorted understanding and practice of their faith, passing negative judgement on the Raouraoua's<sup>144</sup> *koubba*, whose walls, ornamented with "barbaric" figures, "déforma[ient] cet édifice de l'islam",<sup>145</sup> and on the "degenerate" Chaouiya, who place oppressed females like Tessaadit "hors la loi islamique par un mariage non conforme".<sup>146</sup> As in her attitude towards her husband, whose future in the colonial administration she wrote for him, and as in her dismissal of Moroccan Muslims' hostility towards "Christians" and of the Algerians' condemnation of Sidi Taieb's fight under the French

<sup>141</sup> Eberhardt, "Yasmina", 97-98.

<sup>142</sup> See Patricia M.E. Lorcin, *Imperial Identities: Stereotyping, Prejudice, and Race in Colonial Algeria* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999), 62. In fiction, such mapping is well-illustrated in Pierre Benoît's *L'Atlantide*, whose Christian hero Capitaine Morhange arrives in the Sahara desert with the mission of finding evidence of the Tuaregs' age-old Christianity and of its resistance in the face of "Mohamedan fanaticism". Pierre Benoît, *L'Atlantide* [1919] (Paris: Albin Michel, 1963).

<sup>143</sup> Eberhardt, "Oum Zahar", 120.

<sup>144</sup> The Raouraoua are the inhabitants of Oued Rir', in the North-Eastern Algerian Sahara.

<sup>145</sup> Eberhardt, "Oum Zahar", 122.

<sup>146</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "Sous le joug" [1902], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 177-189, 178.

banner as the expression of an erroneous appraisal of Islam, the writer of these lines enacts her domination, adopting the Westerner's usual self-satisfied and preaching discourse. In allowing herself, though a young and new convert, to pass judgement on Islam as envisioned and practised by those for whom it had been an age-old faith, Eberhardt actually went farther than many of her contemporaries in her display of Western arrogance: if the West's collective ambition was to inculcate aspects of its own civilisation – Christianity, for example – to the natives, her own claim was nothing less than teaching them their own religion. This commanding manner was not reserved for the illiterate Bedouins. When Ali Abd El Wahab, her well-educated Tunisian correspondent, wrote to her about his project of publishing a paper explaining the tenets of the Islamic doctrine, she hastened to send a full page of detailed recommendations.<sup>147</sup>

A similar persistence of the traditionally authoritarian Western manner marks the texts of other Europeans who, like Eberhardt, converted to Islam and openly denounced colonial abuses. In *Desert Encounter*, a book-length account of his journey through the Italian-occupied Libyan desert, the Danish convert to Islam Knud Holmboe offers an unusually sympathetic representation of the Muslims and an uncompromisingly harsh portrait of the Western coloniser; however, this does not prevent him from occasionally adopting a condescending attitude towards the natives. While acknowledging their sense of hospitality and their dignity in the face of adversity – of death, in particular – he, like Eberhardt, also faults them for their superstition and ignorance. His rendering of an Esau<sup>148</sup> festival becomes an occasion to decry practices seen as estranged from Islam, despite the performers' repetition of “*La illaha il'Allah*” (There is no god but God), the meaning of which “[i]t looked as if they did not grasp”.<sup>149</sup> Just as the *Aissaoua* are made to illustrate native ignorance, Abdeslam, a Moroccan who accompanies Holmboe halfway on his journey, is made to incarnate the Arabs' irrational belief in, and fear of, “supernatural” presences like *djinns*.<sup>150</sup> Other passages in *Desert Encounter* further show the natives' ignorant gullibility, as does the episode which relates the perfidiousness of a charlatan who, passing himself off as a holy man, baits a desperate father into giving him what little

<sup>147</sup> Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 171-172.

<sup>148</sup> *Esau*, or *Aissaoua*, is a Muslim sect founded in Meknès (Morocco) in the fifteenth century and known for its extravagant practices, which include collective trances and exorcism ceremonies.

<sup>149</sup> Knud Holmboe, *Desert Encounter* [1931] (London: Quillam, 1994), 24.

<sup>150</sup> As a Muslim, Holmboe himself is supposed to believe in *djinns*, whose existence is acknowledged in the Quran. *Djinns* are a race of spirits, which can be either good or evil and assume different shapes, including that of a human.



money he possesses with the promise of curing his blind son. When one of the natives happens to be “enlightened”, as in the case of that sheikh who, on one occasion, saves Holmboe from the anger of other natives (who suspect him of being Italian), it is because he has “made the pilgrimage to Mecca, [...] spent some time in Egypt, and [...] been to France.”<sup>151</sup>

Unlike the ignorant and fearful North African Muslims, Holmboe himself seems to be endowed with all the virtues, displaying as much courage and endurance as he does intelligence, education, and morality, the latter manifesting itself through his condemnation of the Italians’ inhumane policy. Not content with the exploit of crossing the desert in an old car – a Chevrolet which, indeed, broke down quite often – and surviving ten days with almost no food or water, he also portrays himself as a “providential man” who always happens to be there at the right moment to disentangle the direst situations. Natives in turn ask him to lead the morning prayer, recite the proper *surah*<sup>152</sup> (which none of these illiterate people knows) over a dead man’s body, or serve as an interpreter between them and an American traveller, with whom communication is, until his arrival, impossible. All of these tasks he, of course, successfully fulfils, thus proving to deserve not only their trust but also the gifts and expressions of gratitude they shower on him. Like Eberhardt, Holmboe is the one who thinks, decides, and solves problems.

Commenting on *Desert Encounter*, Tim Winter salutes Holmboe’s objective ability to see the faults of Muslims and Westerners alike.<sup>153</sup> Holmboe indeed goes farther than most Western writers (including Eberhardt herself) in grasping the Eastern cultural environment in which he sojourned, refraining from the traditional contempt for its “primitive lifestyle” and denouncing not only cruel colonialist practices, but also colonialism as such, which, he argues, “introduces Western civilization in the Orient, and tramples down the culture which already exists.”<sup>154</sup> However, though many of the natives he met were probably as illiterate as he describes them, the superstition he assigns to them and the contemptuous description he gives of some of them (mainly of women, all of whom are said to be “worn and ugly”,<sup>155</sup>) verges on caricature, while the hero-role that he reserves for himself betrays a lingering belief in Western superiority, a belief that can also be detected in the other

<sup>151</sup> Holmboe, *Desert Encounter*, 40.

<sup>152</sup> A *surah* is a chapter of the Quran.

<sup>153</sup> Winter, Introduction to *Desert Encounter*, 6.

<sup>154</sup> Holmboe, *Desert Encounter*, 206.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

Western converts – Leopold Weiss,<sup>156</sup> Roger Garaudy,<sup>157</sup> and Isabelle Eberhardt – to whom Winter compares him.<sup>158</sup> Though Muslims, these authors read their religion in the light of Western values – specifically, the individualism, objectivity, and “conspicuous lack of fanaticism”<sup>159</sup> that Winter seems to appreciate in them – thus failing to be welcomed as full members of their new religious community. Offering a vision of religion “refreshingly unencumbered with dogma”, Weiss championed women’s rights and pleaded for a lenient application of the *Shari’a* that would privilege “mercy and understanding over cold justice.”<sup>160</sup> Although his ideas were influential for a while,<sup>161</sup> he soon came to be disillusioned by the quick rise of intolerant extremism which caused him to leave the Islamic world first for Portugal, then for Spain.<sup>162</sup> For his part, Garaudy, whose life was marked by a constant shuttle between atheism, Catholicism, and Islam, sought to achieve reconciliation between religion and what he saw as the humanistic values of Marxism. Such ideas appealed only moderately to the Western world; in a way similar to Weiss’s sense of estrangement, and eventual self-exile, from Pakistan, and to Eberhardt’s dismissal as *M’zania* by her Moroccan hosts,<sup>163</sup> Garaudy was virtually excommunicated from the Muslim world as he was officially declared a heretic by the Azhar religious institution.<sup>164</sup>

### 2.3. (De)carnivalised Islam

#### 2.3.1. The Sufi choice

One common point between Holmboe and Eberhardt is their manifest admiration for Sufism.<sup>165</sup> Holmboe devotes pages of his book to this “highest form of Islam”,<sup>166</sup> as it is

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<sup>156</sup> Leopold Weiss (1900-1992) was a Jewish Austrian journalist who converted to Islam in 1926 and adopted the name Muhammad Asad. He took part in the foundation of the Pakistani state and was granted Pakistani citizenship on Pakistan’s independence in 1947. Weiss’s best-known work is *The Road to Mecca* (1954), an account of his travels in the Islamic World and his conversion.

<sup>157</sup> Roger Garaudy (1913-2012) was a French philosopher and an active member of the Communist party. Expelled from this party in 1970, he converted to Islam twelve years later.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>160</sup> Michael Wolfe ed., *One Thousand Roads to Mecca: Ten Centuries of Travelers Writing about the Muslim Pilgrimage* (New York: Grove, 1997), 364.

<sup>161</sup> Weiss seems to be behind the article of the Pakistani constitution which grants women eligibility for the position of Prime Minister. See *ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Eberhardt, “Transformation”, 184.

<sup>164</sup> Norman, *Islam et Occident*, 374.

<sup>165</sup> Sufism is the form of Islam which has exercised the strongest influence on Westerners, mainly in the first decades of the twentieth century. For examples of European adepts of this movement, see Mark Sedgwick,

described to him by Ahmet Ali, a native teacher; and though the positive comments he inserts on it are put in the mouth of native Muslims,<sup>167</sup> it is not difficult to see that he was won over to these characters' views himself. One of the traits of Islamic mysticism he particularly underscores is its ecumenical character: "By the grace of Allah, mercy is granted in all religions".<sup>168</sup> This character relates to the Sufi principle of *Tawhid* (Unity), which claims that the uniqueness of God unites all human beings – indeed all living beings.<sup>169</sup> Because what Sufism aspires to is acquiring closeness to, and deeper knowledge of, God, and because God instils part of Himself in all of His creatures, it is even sometimes argued that it is possible to be a Sufi without being a Muslim.<sup>170</sup> Sufis not only believe in the Torah, the Psalms, and the Gospels as well as in the Quran,<sup>171</sup> but their universalist thrust extends even beyond the major monotheist doctrines. In 1659, Dara Sikoh, a member of the Qadiriya translated the Upanishads into Persian in an attempt to reunite Islam and Hinduism in mysticism.<sup>172</sup>

This ecumenism underlying the Sufi doctrine brings it close to the ideal of tolerance cherished by modern Europe. Indeed, as John Baldock notes, Sufism has increasingly exercised a fascination on Westerners, who often see in it the possibility of a spiritual experience without the obligation of conversion to Islam.<sup>173</sup> In the case of actual converts, however, it is legitimate to suppose that this fascination betrays a wish to bridge the gap between their new faith and their former religion/culture.<sup>174</sup> There is, in this connection, a recurrent analogy between the focus on Love (and on God as the Beloved) in Sufism and

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*Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>166</sup> Holmboe, *Desert Encounter*, 169.

<sup>167</sup> This is a common technique with Holmboe, who also uses it to pass negative judgement, as he does on the previously mentioned Esau dance.

<sup>168</sup> Omar Ibn Farid, quoted in Holmboe, *Desert Encounter*, 170.

<sup>169</sup> James Fadiman and Robert Frager, *Essential Sufism* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), 11.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>172</sup> Schimmel, *Islam: an Introduction*, 112.

<sup>173</sup> Baldock, *The Essence of Sufism*, 10-11. Although, in these pages, Baldock distances himself from this separation (between Sufism and Islam) as a manifestation of "today's anarchic pick-'n'-mix spiritual supermarket", he later (73) moderates his position, writing that "Allah knows best" regarding the possibility of a Sufism without Islam. Mark Sedgwick voices similar scepticism regarding the possibility of separating Sufism from Islam. See Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 65.

<sup>174</sup> One striking example is that of Frithjof Schuon, who, while espousing Sufism, counted among his most valuable possessions a statuette of the Virgin Mary. For more on this convert, see Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*, 84-93.

Christianity.<sup>175</sup> In *Desert Encounter*, one native character's remark that the atrocities inflicted on them by the (Christian) coloniser were at odds with the love preached by Christianity echoes another character's remark that Love is essential to the Sufi doctrine, a similarity which was likewise not alien to the appeal exerted by Sufism on Eberhardt. As Delacour and Huleu note, the Qadiriya among whom she lived "prient pour tous les hommes sans distinction de religion et même pour toutes les créatures. Abd el Qader Jilani, qui plaçait au-dessus de tout la charité, avait une vénération particulière pour Sidna Aïssa" [Jesus-Christ] et vivait en bonne intelligence avec les chrétiens".<sup>176</sup> To some extent, Eberhardt confirms Delacour's observation that the Sufis prayed even for the non-Muslims by mentioning the blessings she is accorded by Sidi Brahim, despite her being labelled a *M'zania*;<sup>177</sup> however, it is often through more subtle and usually stylistic elements that Eberhardt's eagerness to reconcile Islam and Christianity manifests itself. In the great number of textual references she inserts in *Journaliers*, she leaves room for Biblical quotations (she mainly quotes Saint Jeremy, in particular), as well as for citations from the Quran. Similarly, the adjective "Biblical" is recurrently employed in her description of Muslim dignitaries.

In his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Mikhail Bakhtin explains that the carnivalesque's relish in misalliances brings together "[a]ll things that were once self-enclosed, disunified, distanced from one another by a noncarnivalistic, hierarchical world view".<sup>178</sup> Because it deconstructs the Muslim-versus-*Kéfer*<sup>179</sup> dichotomy, the Sufi principle of all-embracing love fits within the Bakhtinian definition and proposes a rather incongruous carnivalesque conception of faith, the incongruity lying in the fact that the religious spirit, with its solemnity and its dichotomic categories – faithful-versus-infidel, virtue-versus-sin, life-versus-afterlife, among others – seems to be anti-carnivalesque in its very definition. The possibility offered by Sufism to be at once a Muslim and a non-Muslim corresponded to Eberhardt's wish to preserve her freedom of action. Before her conversion to Sufism and indeed, before her official adoption of Islam, she already advocated the right to be simultaneously a Muslim and a *Kéféra* in one of her letters to Ali

<sup>175</sup> Fadiman and Frager, *Essential Sufism*, 14.

<sup>176</sup> Marie-Odile Delacour and Jean-René Huleu, *Le Voyage soufi d'Isabelle Eberhardt* (Paris: Joëlle Losfeld, 2008), 114.

<sup>177</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "Fête soudanaise" [1906], *Sud oranais*, 215-217, 217.

<sup>178</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* [1929] (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 123.

<sup>179</sup> *Kéfer* is the Muslims' word for "non-believer".

Abd-El-Wahab, in which she voiced her refusal to subscribe to Muslim women's duties of seclusion and submission, despite her willingness to adopt their religion: "Dites-moi [...] si votre conviction est que la femme soit nécessairement subordonnée à la volonté de son mari ou de son amant par le fait même de leur union. Cela, je ne le comprends pas et je ne voudrai jamais l'admettre. C'est le seul point où je suis *Kéféra*."<sup>180</sup> Though formulated at a time when she was only starting to be interested in Islam, this statement that she was partially a convert and partially still a non-Muslim did not merely describe a stage in her religious evolution that would eventually end up in her total conversion: Eberhardt *never* complied with Muslim women's style of life or of dressing.

Another dichotomy disrupted by the universalist aspiration of Sufism is precisely the male/female one. Inasmuch as its aim at attaining God is believed to be possible to all humans, regardless not only of religion but also of gender, women are not excluded from it. Rather, their progress on the Sufi path is sometimes such that they come to reach a status of religious authority close to saintliness, simultaneously securing the believers' veneration and a degree of freedom rarely attained by Muslim women outside Sufi circles. In Eberhardt's own time, *maraboutes* like Lella Dehbia enjoyed such status, travelling alone and transgressing the codes of feminine dress by wearing masculine clothes.<sup>181</sup> Unsurprisingly, Eberhardt was fascinated by these women who successfully reconciled Islam, female gender, and power – the very negotiation she herself sought to achieve. How to reconcile the will-to-power she expected to fulfil through Islam with the obvious subjection to which the Muslim women she encountered were confined was a question that she temporarily solved through cross-dressing. However, whether this was due to the precariousness in which the natives' full awareness of her female identity placed her, to the inconsistency of her masculine role with her forthcoming status as Mrs Ehni,<sup>182</sup> or to the very renunciation of her gender category that it demanded, this solution somehow did not seem a sufficiently reassuring guarantee of long-term power, and in this regard, the possibility of female saintliness that Sufism offered was an ingenious alternative. As

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<sup>180</sup> Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 110.

<sup>181</sup> Mackworth, *The Destiny of Isabelle Eberhardt*, 116.

<sup>182</sup> "La question maraboutique" coincided with Eberhardt's expulsion from Algeria, shortly after the Behima assault in 1901, an expulsion which made an official marriage with Slimène Ehni urgent, as it offered the only possibility to nullify the expulsion by granting her French citizenship.

Lamia Zayzafoun rightly notes, it is this will-to-power, more than the simple quest for spiritual elevation, which is behind her interest in *maraboutisme*.<sup>183</sup>

*Marabouts* set themselves free from the chains of enslaving patriarchy and the constraints of seclusion. Lella Khaddoudja, left a widow, agreed to remarry only on the strict condition that her second husband take her away from the familiarity and monotony of her native land. She settled temporarily in Hedjaz, before heading for Mecca, thus turning into a nomad of sorts : “je me mets à rêver à cette Lella Khaddoudja inconnue, et qui a sans doute une âme un peu aventureuse, puisqu’elle a rompu de sa propre volonté, avec la routine somnolente de la vie cloîtrée de ses pareilles, pour aller ailleurs recommencer une existence nouvelle, sous un autre ciel”.<sup>184</sup> Other *marabouts* Eberhardt met may not have shared this adventurous spirit, but they enjoyed as much, if not more, power. Responsible for the finances of her son’s *zaouïa*, “Lella” enjoyed tremendous power despite her “invisibility” and seclusion;<sup>185</sup> and Lella Zeyneb defied the patriarchy of both the Muslims and the French by succeeding to her father as the head of the Rahmania brotherhood despite their opposition.<sup>186</sup> The Russian convert voices her admiration for both women, lauding the former as a “grande dame musulmane”, “toute-puissante, si vénérée”<sup>187</sup> and writing that the very sight of the latter, whom she goes all the way to Bou-Saada to call on, provoked in her a feeling “de rajeunissement, de joie sans cause visible, d’apaisement.”<sup>188</sup>

Ironically, however, the carnivalesque thrust embodied in the Sufi dismantling of the Muslim/*Kéfer* dichotomy and of the gender hierarchy is belied by the very high status to which some Sufi women (and not others) are entitled. Modelled on that of men, the “petit monde des femmes”<sup>189</sup> that Eberhardt describes is one in which the central figure of “Lella” reigns supreme – she is referred to as the “reine mère”<sup>190</sup> – the “pâles”<sup>191</sup>

<sup>183</sup> Zayzafoun, “*La Roumia Convertie*”, 50.

<sup>184</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Lella Khaddoudja” [1906], *Sud oranais*, 197-199, 198.

<sup>185</sup> “Lella” is the mother of Sidi Brahim, to whose *zaouïa* Eberhardt was dispatched by General Lyautey. “Lella” rarely left home and only if strictly veiled.

<sup>186</sup> See Julia Clancy-Smith, “The Shaykh and his Daughter: Implicit Pacts and Cultural Survival, c. 1827-1904”, *Rebel and Saint: Muslim Notables, Populist Protest, Colonial Encounters (Algeria and Tunisia, 1800-1904)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 214-253, 231-241; and Zayzafoun, “*La Roumia Convertie*”, 51.

<sup>187</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Message” [1906], *Sud oranais*, 191-192, 192.

<sup>188</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 258.

<sup>189</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Petit monde des femmes” [1906], *Sud oranais*, 182-183, 182.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

*marabouts'* wives and the even less fortunate "commoners", composed of virgins, wives, widows, and divorcees, merely gravitating around her. This hierarchical structure is at odds with "l'influence nivélatrice de l'islam"<sup>192</sup> that Eberhardt often celebrates, a levelling aspect that pertains not only to homogeneous behaviour resulting from the following of Islamic precepts and instructions, but also, more importantly, to the egalitarian principle at the core of the Islamic creed, according to which, as one *hadith* puts it, "verily, Muslims are brothers". This anti-hierarchical side is mainly reflected in the absence of an Islamic clergy, which Eberhardt evokes in texts like "Prière du vendredi": "L'*imam* n'est pas un prêtre – l'Islam n'a point de clergé régulier –, [sic] c'est simplement le plus savant de l'assistance. Tout homme lettré peut servir d'*imam*; il doit simplement réciter la prière."<sup>193</sup>

In opting for Sufism, Eberhardt resists the hierarchy maintained in official Islam – that of gender – only to replace it with others. The hierarchical principles of Sufism are not simply reflected in its social structure, but in the very conception of its teachings. While *Sunni* pupils can choose to learn the precepts of *shari'a* in schools devoted to that study, it is also possible to dispense with a master and opt for an individual reading of the holy texts and their existing interpretations, no priest-like mediation between the believer and God being necessary. By contrast, Sufi knowledge is assumed to be unattainable without a teacher: *tariqa*, the term chosen by Sufis to refer to (the first step of) their quest for divine Truth, is translatable as "path", in opposition to the "broad street" that *shari'a* means. Because the path is more arduous and much less accessible than the street, which is a public place by definition, it cannot be traversed without the guidance of one who is more familiar with it, a master to whom the disciple owes loyalty and obedience while advancing in his quest for God.<sup>194</sup> Though presented as stages in a spiritual progress, the four stages constituting this quest<sup>195</sup> also correspond to a four-part hierarchy reminiscent of the Christian clergy, in that they determine the degree of reverence and authority to be bestowed on the believer.

The amount of respect enjoyed within a Sufi community is, indeed, shaped as much (if not more) by social and racial features as by "spiritual" considerations. To legitimise his hostility to Sheikh Bouamama, a resister to the French coloniser whose popularity was

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 55.

<sup>193</sup> Eberhardt, "Prière du vendredi", 196.

<sup>194</sup> Ira Marvin Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 138.

<sup>195</sup> The four stages are *shari'a*, *tariqa*, *haqiqa* (Truth), and *ma'arifa* (Gnosis).

such that it was threatening to exceed his own, Eberhardt's host, Sidi Brahim, evokes his modest background: "Il faut certainement que Dieu ait aveuglé les fils du Mogh'rib, pour qu'ils abandonnent ainsi son sentier, pour qu'ils trahissent leur Sultan descendant du prophète [...] et pour suivre qui? [...] Bouamama, fils d'un infime brocanteur de Figuig, homme *sans origine et sans instruction*, fauteur de discordes et de massacres".<sup>196</sup> While Bouamama is despised for his social condition, the black *kharatines*, "musulmans pourtant",<sup>197</sup> are excluded from the *jemaas* (the public discussions of community affairs); and in "Beni Israel", Eberhardt provides examples of still greater discrimination against the Jews through the case of Esthira, an unfortunate victim of a Bedouin's assault who escapes rape only thanks to the providential intervention of *spahis* who happen to pass by. When her husband, Haim, takes her case to the *marabouts*, asking for justice, his request is firmly dismissed: though such deeds as that which he reported are rigorously condemned by Islam, no action can be taken against the "villain", who, as a Bedouin, is not a member of the community.

Regardless of the *marabouts'* verdict, it is the almost caricatural meekness with which Haim formulates his complaint that is indicative of the lowly position occupied by the Jews in Sidi Brahim's *zaouïa*. Having taken off his shoes, Esthira's husband, "courbé jusqu'à terre, [...] alla baiser successivement le pan du burnous de tous les ksouriens impassibles".<sup>198</sup> The striking gap between the treatment of the Muslims and that of the Jews is in obvious contradiction with the ecumenical claims of Sufism and its principle of universal love. Yet, interestingly, Eberhardt goes very close to blaming the Jewish community itself for its lot. Haim's narrative of his wife's misfortune elicits nothing but laughter in Eberhardt's (Muslim) companion: "Chez nous, quand pareille chose arrive, l'homme retrouve le coupable et le tue. Eux ils se contentent de geindre comme des souris à qui on a marché sur la queue."<sup>199</sup> Eberhardt's own view is not very different: Haim, in a sense, deserved his fate, for "celui dont le bras n'est pas fort et qui ne sait pas tenir le fusil n'a qu'à s'humilier et se taire au pays de la poudre."<sup>200</sup> As in earlier examples, Eberhardt voices her *parti pris* for power.

<sup>196</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "L'indignation du marabout" [1906], *Sud oranais*, 188-191, 189.

<sup>197</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "Beni Ounif" [1908], *Sud oranais*, 33-37, 37.

<sup>198</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "Beni Israel" [1908], *Sud oranais*, 100-105, 104.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 102-103.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.



### 2.3.2. Insane saints and virtuous sinners

As employed in Eberhardt's texts, "*Maraboute*" refers to two types of female freedom. If the *maraboutisme* of women like Lella Khaddoudja and Lella Zeyneb is a bequeathed title of nobility as well as a homage to their piety, in "Oum Zahar", the eponymous twelve-year-old heroine becomes a *maraboute* when, following her mother's death, she seems suddenly inhabited by an inner violence that she opposes to all attempts at subjection. Hitherto used to meek acceptance of patriarchal diktat, she now unexpectedly breaks into an uncontrolled fit of convulsions as, one night, her father tries to stop her determination to leave his house. Her violence is eventually accepted as a sign of her *maraboutisme*, and Oum Zahar is left free to follow the traces of Keltoum, a lugubrious creature under whose dark influence she seems to have fallen. The status of saintliness implicitly bestowed on Oum Zahar (through her designation as a *maraboute*), whose violence is obviously a symptom of mental disturbance, points to the carnivalesque connection between holiness and insanity in Islamic popular culture, which, as Mackworth notes "lent a marabout quality to madness and even idiocy which [...] was regarded as a sort of divine folly sent by God."<sup>201</sup> Indeed, in several Algerian dialects, the term "derouich", which originally refers to an adept of mystical Islam (that is, Sufism) – a dervish – can also designate a madman or a diviner.

This bringing together of madness and *maraboutisme*, so reminiscent of the carnivalesque clergy of fools,<sup>202</sup> seems to have fascinated Eberhardt. In addition to "Oum Zahar", she also brings insanity and religion together in "Death of a Muslim", through the incongruous description of a madman involved in a random reading of Quranic verses while the death rituals are being accomplished,<sup>203</sup> thus violating both the sanctity of the religious text and the solemnity of death. Yet, beyond a gratuitous wish to carnivalise religion, what interested Eberhardt in this link between *maraboutisme* as a mark of religious authority and *maraboutisme*-as-madness is probably its empowering potential. Like Lella's and Lella Zeyneb's *maraboute*-status, Oum Zahar's mental illness allows her to set herself free from a paternal authority long seen as harsh, though so far born in

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<sup>201</sup> Cecily Mackworth, *The Destiny of Isabelle Eberhardt*, 60.

<sup>202</sup> See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* [1965], trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 81.

<sup>203</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "Mort musulmane" [1906], *Sud oranais*, 152-155, 153.

silence. In the case of one often seen as a “détraquée”,<sup>204</sup> and who herself admitted: “Certes, *je suis folle*, je le sais fort bien, mais il en sera toujours ainsi”,<sup>205</sup> the popular reading of madness as a divine force, hence, as a mark of holiness, could only be welcomed for its ability to transform an initially negative qualification into a power-signifier while allowing her to transgress, as she often did, commonly respected cultural norms.

In such transgressions, Sufism also seems more accommodating than “orthodox” Islam. Besides seemingly challenging the Muslim/non-Muslim dichotomy, this religious trend presents itself as a mixture of the sacred and the sinful. While being the holy spaces of religious teaching, *zaouïas* are also described by Abdelhamid and Dalenda Larguèche as liminal spaces where rogues, scoundrels, runaway wives, homosexuals, and other “sinners” of all kinds find refuge.<sup>206</sup> By the same token, the famous Sufi *aaras*,<sup>207</sup> which celebrate the anniversary of the death of the order’s founder, often become occasions to “pray together, share special food, and celebrate in various ways that [are] not always strictly religious.”<sup>208</sup> Wine, drug-addiction, and sexual experience are often seen as stages towards spiritual ecstasy – the transcendence of rationality through emotional exaltation which is central in Sufism.

This carnivalesque blend of *dévergondage* and spiritual elevation could only fit a woman who, like Eberhardt, wished to reconcile piety and pleasure. While scrupulously observing religious duties like the five daily prayers and the *Ramadan*-fasting, the “converted *roumia*” also notoriously transgressed all those relating to alcohol-prohibition and sex-regulation; at once a kif-addict and a heavy drinker, she was also known for her libidinous nature. Assigned the mission to watch the behaviour of this European who suspiciously spent most of her time with the natives, Captain Cauvet submitted a report where he described her as “une névrosée et une détraquée [...] venue à El Oued principalement pour satisfaire sans contrôle dans un pays peu fréquenté par les Européens ses penchants vicieux et son goût pour les indigènes”.<sup>209</sup> After her death, the reputation of

<sup>204</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 124.

<sup>205</sup> Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 157.

<sup>206</sup> Dalenda Larguèche and Abdelhamid Larguèche, *Marginales en terre d’Islam* (Tunis: Cérès, 1992), 117.

<sup>207</sup> Aa’ras is the plural of *urs*, meaning “feast” or “celebration” in Arabic.

<sup>208</sup> Shimmel, *Islam: an Introduction*, 112.

<sup>209</sup> Quoted in Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 290.

her unbridled sexuality turned into something of a legend, becoming a favoured subject for most of her critics, as Delacour and Huleu disapprovingly note.<sup>210</sup>

Eberhardt herself points to this mixture of religiosity and sin in her writings. In her travel notes of May 16<sup>th</sup> 1901, she recounts the end of a fast-day and the evening following the breaking of the fast. Instead of the traditional solemnity with which such moments are rendered in religious or didactic texts, Eberhardt's description is rendered with a touch of humour and even irreverence. Although the band of friends – among whom Slimène Ehni and Eberhardt herself – have duly gone through the fasting, they show a not-very-pious impatience to hear the *muezzin* announce the *Maghreb*-time (sunset).<sup>211</sup> More impiously still, they even curse the poor man, accusing him of unnecessarily delaying the breaking of the fast. When they do at last hear the *muezzin*'s call, it is neither with food nor with water that they break their fast, but with the more cherished, though prohibited, kif and *ar'ar*.<sup>212</sup> What remains of the night is spent in a no less carnivalesque alternation of fervent prayers and sensual pleasure.

This oscillation between piety and vice is also present in Eberhardt's personal writings, where her "désir de perfectionnement moral"<sup>213</sup> does not prevent her from celebrating what she calls "les *narcotiques* de la Vie"<sup>214</sup> and despising those who scorn "la volupté de l'amour", whom she compares to eunuchs and vile Pharisees.<sup>215</sup> Interestingly, the contradictory myths of Oriental excess and carnality on the one hand and spirituality on the other are also inherent in Western Orientalist discourse. The carnivalised Eberhardtian practice of the Islamic religion inscribes itself within this discourse by perpetuating not only these myths but also those of Islam's supposed lustfulness and "materiality". This vision of Islam actually marks the discourse of many Western converts, who, as such, are supposedly favourable to their new religion. In opposition to the excessive spirituality and "mysteriousness" of Christianity, this new religion is seen as clear and "realistic" in that it does not ignore instinctual human needs. In *Desert Encounter*, Holmboe explains his adoption of the Islamic faith, arguing that Islam is clear

<sup>210</sup> Delacour and Huleu, *Le Voyage soufi*, 129.

<sup>211</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "Cahiers", *Ecrits sur le sable I*, 82-95, 85.

<sup>212</sup> *Ar'ar* is juniper. This plant is used as a drug in North Africa.

<sup>213</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 27.

<sup>214</sup> Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 168.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

and concise and that it is therefore the only religion able to survive modern times;<sup>216</sup> in 1954, Muhammad Asad (Leopold Weiss) wrote that Islam, a religion of both the soul and the body, had allowed him to reconcile his spiritual needs with worldly pleasure.<sup>217</sup> Though such portrayals are meant as laudatory, they are nonetheless revealing of the Eurocentrist perspective of their owners. As Daniel Norman notes, Asad's celebration of the "earthly" side of Islam matches the modern West's impatience with asceticism.<sup>218</sup>

Eberhardt herself repetitively eulogises this religion in which "[il n'y a] pas de mystères"<sup>219</sup> and "[qui] a une morale absolument terrestre", "sans aucun esprit d'ascétisme".<sup>220</sup> However, because of her "overacting" these (supposedly) inherent Islamic features, her discourse comes closer to the hostile discourse that dates back to the Middle Ages (and which has been summed up previously) than to that of other converts, giving support as it does to the charges of Islamic immorality and lustfulness. Although the fact that she, a European, indulges in drinking and sexual promiscuity might be thought to dismantle such myths by showing Westerners to be no less "immoral" than the (Muslim) natives of the East, her constant living among the Arabs and her non-dissimulated conversion turn her case into one that legitimates the traditional warning against the dangers of going native rather than belies Western assumptions about Orientals.

As arguably the best-known literary example of going native, Conrad's Kurtz incarnates precisely the moral loss and the lack of restraint with which it is associated. More importantly, what his case points to is the relation between his turning into a savage and his thirst for power: it is because he is clouded by what appears to be his almighty power that, losing all sense of reality, he bestows on himself the status of a deity and behaves like one. Making due allowances – Eberhardt, having, of course, never been the savage that Conrad's protagonist becomes in Africa – it is possible to argue that the Russian convert's moral "looseness" was not unrelated to a sense of superiority to both Westerners and natives and of impunity as regards the latter. While the spirituality of Sufism nurtured her contempt for the godless, materialist, and (therefore) vulgar nineteenth-century Europe, the excesses she indulged in were the mark of her privileged status among the Muslims she had joined. Indeed, neither her refusal to submit to the

<sup>216</sup> Holmboe, *Desert Encounter*, 42.

<sup>217</sup> Norman, *Islam et Occident*, 372.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>219</sup> Eberhardt, "Prière du vendredi", 196.

<sup>220</sup> Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 171-172.

Islamic codes of feminine dress and behaviour nor her disregard for the ban on alcohol and illegal sex could have been envisaged by a female native (apart from some *maraboutes*), if she wanted to enjoy esteem and the friendship of religious authorities, as Eberhardt did. Read in this light, her carnivalised Islam became a way of asserting her privileged status as a Westerner and reminding fellow Muslims that she was not “une vulgaire Fathma ou une Aïcha quelconque”,<sup>221</sup> as she writes to her husband to dissuade him from trying to turn her into a tame and obedient wife.

#### 2.4. The impossible conversion

Eberhardt’s failure to (strictly) observe Islamic instructions and prohibitions is indicative of her inability to reinvent herself as a coherent Muslim. The conversion which was partly motivated by a multiform quest for power (overcoming marginality, conquering suffering and defeat through belief in *Mektoub*, acceding to authority through *maraboutisme* or to glory through martyrdom) was also, ironically, limited by it. Because the restriction on her freedom represented by the bans on wine and kif are, like female seclusion and veil-wearing, and also the conception of *Mektoub* as passivity, at odds with her ideal of self-empowerment, the Russian convert determinedly transgressed them, legitimising her insubordination through her own re-writing of the Islamic texts, while dismissing more “authentic” Muslims’ reading of them as unenlightened.

What Eberhardt’s case highlights is the intervention of power mechanisms in what is seemingly a purely religious act. As a self-empowering gesture, conversion is shown by Eberhardt to be sought by those occupying a position of marginality on their cultural/social map rather than by those confidently speaking from its centre, a vision well-illustrated by Roberto Fraugi, the protagonist of “*M’tourni*”,<sup>222</sup> and the previously mentioned Jacques, in the short story “Yasmina”.

##### 2.4.1. Roberto Fraugi/Mohammed Kasdallah

Hedi Abdel-Jaouad argues that all Eberhardt’s Western characters predictably follow the same itinerary as herself: their arrival in the East is soon followed by an encounter with the Other which starts as a love relationship and gradually leads them first to the

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 369.

<sup>222</sup> *M’tourni* is a pidgin word for “convert”.

acquisition of the natives' language, then to conversion to their faith.<sup>223</sup> In spite of this claim, Roberto Fraugi is actually the only Eberhardtian character to incarnate a successful conversion. Leaving behind his native Piedmont highlands and the years of a brutal mason's apprenticeship, he arrives in Africa with the dream of working on his own, putting some money aside, and returning to Santa Reparata to buy a piece of land and spend his old age. As the years go by, however, the pleasant company of the natives with whom he lives and whose language he learns gradually erases the memories of his homeland; abandoning himself to "la monotonie douce des choses"<sup>224</sup> and the influence of his friend Seddik, he adopts Islam and the name Mohammed Kasdallah and decides to settle once and for all among those who profess his new religion.

Before they are ultimately wiped out by his long sojourn in the Algerian South, Fraugi's memories of his native Piedmont are not particularly enchanting. The description of his childhood and early manhood there is filled with words that evoke both moral and physical decay and destitution:

Une mesure en pierres disjointes, un champs [*sic*] maigre et caillouteux dans l'âpre montagne piémontaise, et la misère au foyer où ils étaient douze enfants... Puis, le dur apprentissage de maçon, chez un patron brutal. Un peu aussi, plus vaguement ébauchés dans sa mémoire d'illettré, quelques échappées de soleil sur les cimes bleues, quelques coins tranquilles dans les bois obscurs où poussent les fougères gracieuses au bord des torrents.<sup>225</sup>

The initial position of Eberhardt's *M'tourni* is one of disempowerment and simultaneously geographical, cultural, and social exclusion. He is, much as Eberhardt is, the "Other Within",<sup>226</sup> marginalised as he is by poverty and prospect-closing illiteracy. Given these modest beginnings, Fraugi's willingness to go native comes as no surprise; from the unconsidered underdog he was at home, he turns, if not into an outright power-holder, into a fully respected and even passably wealthy "citizen", concretising, at last, the wish of having a house and a piece of land of his own, which he would have probably never been able to afford in Santa Reparata, despite long years of work. Going native thus becomes

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<sup>223</sup> Hedi Abdel-Jaouad, "Isabelle Eberhardt: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Nomad", *Yale French Studies* 83, 2 (1993): 93-117, 104.

<sup>224</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "M'tourni", *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 342-346, 344.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

<sup>226</sup> Billie Melman, *Women's Orient: English Women and the Middle East, 1718-1918* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1995). Melman uses this phrase to refer to the process of othering which takes place within the boundaries of a national/cultural community. Women and social subalterns are examples of "Others Within".

the means of enjoying a (relative) power that takes the shape not only of property possession, but also of transforming frustration and defeat into success by allowing for the achievement of a long-held dream.<sup>227</sup> It is because of the privileges he finds in living among the Muslims that he decides to become one of them: “Pourquoi aller ailleurs, quand il était si bien à Aïn-Menedia?”<sup>228</sup> In thanking God’s *Mektoub* for having fulfilled his dream, albeit under other skies,<sup>229</sup> Fraugi therefore merely re-enacts the typically Eberhardtian tendency to re-write this Islamic concept as a confirmation of individual will.

In a way, this eventual settlement on African land is foreshadowed by the similar descriptions of Fraugi’s European past and his arrival in the Algerian South. The images of the “masures grisâtres”, “*koubba fruste*”, and “murailles lézardées”<sup>230</sup> in the latter parallel those of “the mesure aux pierres disjointes” in Piedmont. The two places also share similar images of darkness: Fraugi leaves his native “bois obscurs” only to find himself “de nuit, tout seul au milieu de la place vaguement éclairée par les grandes étoiles pâles”, where “des silhouettes de jeunes palmiers se profilait en noir sur l’horizon glauque.”<sup>231</sup> Fraugi himself is implicitly presented as a dark-minded character, whose “mémoire d’illettré” and vague thoughts unmistakably bring to mind such images of the benighted natives as those formerly discussed. Through such analogies, Eberhardt sanctions Fraugi’s re-territorialisation (and social repositioning) in the Algerian South as one which fits his original status. As a socially and intellectually obscure character, Fraugi can only be at home with the equally simple and (both physically and mentally) dark natives. This being among equals, rather than among the more privileged members of his race, in turn enables him to rise to a more enviable status than that he initially enjoyed.

The act of cultural conversion thus seems to rest on the not disinterested principle of having little to renounce and something to gain. This principle also applies to Fraugi’s

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<sup>227</sup> The economic motivations behind Fraugi’s conversion are hinted at by Sossie Andezian, who writes: “on retrouve dans ce récit [“M’tourni”] les logiques de conversion identifiées par B. et L. Bennassar [...] Ces auteurs notent en particulier le nombre réduit de renégats passés à l’Islam pour des raisons religieuses. Les raisons économiques semblent les plus importantes. Plus précisément, c’est l’accoutumance à un nouveau cadre de vie qui entraîne lentement une transformation totale de l’être”. Sossie Andezian, “Images de l’Islam dans l’Algérie coloniale à travers l’œuvre d’Isabelle Eberhardt”, *Littératures et temps colonial: métamorphoses du regard sur la méditerranée et l’Afrique. Actes du colloque d’Aix-en-Provence, 7-8 avril 1997* (Aix-en-Provence: Edisud, 1999), 107-120, 115.

<sup>228</sup> Eberhardt, “M’tourni”, 345.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 346.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 343.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

ultimate conversion gesture – religious conversion. Instead of a fully convinced subscription to his new faith, Islam comes to fill a religious void in one who has never found satisfaction in the Christian doctrine. “Depuis sa première communion, Fraugi n’avait plus guère pratiqué, par indifférence”;<sup>232</sup> and because the religion of the natives seems to him much simpler (and therefore more befitting the natives’ simplicity and his own) and free of the “mystères [qui] lui cassaient la tête”<sup>233</sup> of Christianity, he can see no objection to accepting Seddik’s invitation to embrace Islam.

Instead of an outright conversion – a genuine change – this acceptance is presented as a discovery of an inherent belief, of a condition that has always been there: “Il ne savait pas analyser ses sensations, mais il sentit bien qu’il l’était déjà, musulman, puisqu’il trouvait l’Islam meilleur que la foi de ses pères...”<sup>234</sup> It is on the ground of this conviction that he agrees to be a *M’tourni*, and it is on very similar grounds that Eberhardt justifies her own adoption of Islam. The Russian writer repeatedly defended herself against accusations of “apostasy”, insisting not only on her never having been a Christian – which she indeed never was, although as a European she could not, culturally, be totally cut from Christianity – but also asserting that she was actually born a Muslim,<sup>235</sup> a Muslim origin that she bestows on herself by playing on her unascertained filial identity.<sup>236</sup> There is no evidence corroborating this claim to Islamic birth, and it is very likely to be unfounded; it is in the light it sheds on Eberhardt’s rejection of conversion as a possible form of betrayal, and hence on her fundamentally conservative outlook, that its importance lies.

#### 2.4.2. Jacques/Mebrouk

Unlike that of Roberto Fraugi, Jacques’ “conversion” in “Yasmina” is nominal and short-lived. Afraid of compromising his idyll with the young Bedouin, made restless by her sinful relationship with an “infidel”, he accepts her request to pronounce the Islamic profession of faith and the new name that she gives him – *Mebrouk*. Not knowing that it is possible to say those words which “prononcés *sincèrement*, suffisent à lier irrévocablement à l’islam”<sup>237</sup> without believing in them, Yasmina takes her friend’s conversion to be

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 344.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 345.

<sup>235</sup> To her friend Ali Abd El Wahab, Eberhardt wrote that her birth was the result of her mother’s rape by a Turkish doctor. See Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 133.

<sup>236</sup> Eberhardt bears her mother’s maiden name.

<sup>237</sup> Eberhardt, “Yasmina”, 101. Eberhardt’s emphasis.



genuine, and her worries and sense of guilt fade away. Having so far refrained from physical manifestations of love, she now sees no reason to withhold them.

Jacques's acceptance of such manifestations, despite his awareness that they would not have been provided to a *Kéfer*, shows that there is more to his pretending to be a Muslim than a merely ludic experience and a wish to please his naive beloved as Eberhardt presents it; rather, it proves to be a convenient way of acceding to hitherto denied sexual favours, thus re-enacting the traditional Western usurpation of Islamic identity so as to transgress spaces seen by Muslims as sacred. In the same way as the identity of an Afghan Muslim enabled Richard Burton to penetrate the sacred space of Mecca, access to which is strictly barred to "infidels",<sup>238</sup> and René Caillié's disguise as an Egyptian Muslim gave him access to the Malian city of Timbuktu,<sup>239</sup> Jacques's masquerading as Mebrouk allows him to violate the space of Yasmina's otherwise forbidden body. Although his romantic imagination, prone as it is to idealise erotic sensations, might give his sexual recreation the pretention of genuine and powerful love, Jacques is not enough of a romantic to envisage giving up all his Western privileges to be truly the convert Yasmina thinks him to be and adopt her lifestyle. If, in the moments of "assouplissement intellectuel"<sup>240</sup> caused by the voluptuous proximity of the young Bedouin, such thoughts do occur to him, they are quickly laughed off as nothing but "enfantillages mélancoliques".<sup>241</sup>

Jacques's Western privileges involve more than his position as a lieutenant in the French army. Unlike the illiterate and socially modest Fraugi, he belongs to a noble Ardennes family, and was brought up "dans l'austérité d'un collège religieux de Province",<sup>242</sup> before joining the prestigious Saint-Cyr military school. Little wonder, therefore, that, between obeying his hierarchical superiors' order of a transfer (to South Oran) or resigning so as to remain close to the one he is supposed to "love madly",<sup>243</sup> he should choose the former alternative. When Yasmina, in tears, beseeches him to wear Arab garments and run away with her to remoter parts of the desert, the young officer replies that hers is an impossible request, as fulfilling it would kill his old parents with grief. Evoked repetitively in the short story to justify Jacques's refusal to go native, this "old

<sup>238</sup> Lesley Blanch, *The Wilder Shores of Love* [1954] (London: Phoenix, 1993), 27.

<sup>239</sup> Chris Berggren, *Somewhere in the Sand: in Search of Timbuktu* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2009), viii.

<sup>240</sup> Eberhardt, "Yasmina", 102.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*, 101-102.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>243</sup> "Jacques aimait Yasmina, follement". *Ibid.*, 100.

parents” argument – the epithet “old” which qualifies them is significant – functions more as a metaphor for the traditional racial/social order of things than as a mere expression of filial love; after all, neither filial love nor brotherly affection (for eleven siblings!) prevented Fraugi from choosing to settle in the desert. More than the fear of never seeing his parents again, it is that of transgressing what they hold to be sacred – Christianity and social *étiquette*, incarnated in the religious and prestigious education they choose for their son – which dissuades Jacques from accepting Yasmina’s request; as well as refusing to run away with her, he also rejects her suggestion of her going with him to his new destination and his own (fugitive) idea of returning with her to France.

Jacques’s short-lived role as a Muslim calls to mind a more eminent illustration of the impossibility of the Western power-holder’s turning native. As romantic as Eberhardt’s Jacques (though by no means fictitious), Pierre Loti, Eberhardt’s most admired writer, wrote in laudatory terms about Islamic Turkey as he indulged in a romance with the country’s native daughter Aziyadé. Loti revelled in cultural transvestism, which indeed allowed him to transgressively enter holy places like the quarter of Eyoub and its mosque,<sup>244</sup> and went very close to embracing Islam. However, very much like Jacques, he eventually returned to his native Europe, leaving his Turkish ladylove to die of grief. Like that of her protagonist, the case of Eberhardt’s favourite writer shows that “total identification is impossible”.<sup>245</sup> As a fulfilment of a will-to-power, going native befits not the would-be member of *l’Académie Française* Pierre Loti and the “beau lieutenant Jacques”,<sup>246</sup> but outcasts like Roberto Fraugi.

On Fraugi, Hedi Abdel-Jaouad writes that he is the character who most stands for Eberhardt, having, like her, uncompromisingly identified with the Muslim natives.<sup>247</sup> What emerges from the above analysis, however, is that there is as much of Jacques as of Fraugi in the Russian writer; indeed, that the “noble” lieutenant and the modest mason are less dissimilar than their different backgrounds and evolutions may suggest. Whether temporary or permanent, the three personalities’ conversion is a means of obtaining some

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<sup>244</sup> Edward J. Hughes, *Writing Marginality in Modern French Literature: From Loti to Genet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 17.

<sup>245</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought* [1989], trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 313.

<sup>246</sup> Eberhardt, “Yasmina”, 103.

<sup>247</sup> Abdel-Jaouad, “Portrait”, 104.

privilege or another. For Fraugi, it is social elevation; for Jacques, it is personal pleasure; and for Eberhardt, it is both, as shown by her “scandalous” lifestyle and by the respect she was granted both as a Westerner among the natives and as a *taleb*. More important, conversion is, in the three cases, shown ultimately to be impossible. If Jacques’s acting-out as Mebrouk comes to an end together with his sexual interlude, thus proving it to be a mere illusion, Eberhardt’s description of Fraugi as someone who was already a Muslim (though without knowing it) and her self-reinvention as Muslim-born reveal these two other characters’ conversion to be no less illusory.

### **Conclusion**

Eberhardt’s denial of her own conversion betrays an ethical opposition to change at odds with its (the conversion’s) seemingly carnivalesque thrust. Despite the abolition of frontiers between Western and Oriental and even between Muslim and non-Muslim that her adoption of Islam and of the Sufi tradition respectively seem to embody, the Eberhardtian vision is ultimately one of distance: Eberhardt disapproves of religious conversion as much as she loathes racial mixing. Nevertheless, the case of Roberto Fraugi shows that she is also able to conceive a complex system in which race and social/cultural position are allowed to compensate for each other. If her own “immersion” in native culture proves to be less successful than that of the *M’tourni*, it is because while her initial “inferiority” as a double outsider (as a *Heimatlos* and as a cultural outcast) in the West makes the immersion possible, her wide learning (which Fraugi lacks) can only result in a contemptuous distance from what she sees as numb-minded Muslims. In a West-dominated Orient, where education is an elite privilege, Eberhardt relies on her Westernness and on her education as valuable assets in her quest for power, which she symbolically enacts by passing judgment on the natives’ age-old Islam, dismissing it as unenlightened and inaccurate and substituting for it her own reading, or rather *readings*, of Islamic instructions.

Indeed, the Eberhardtian Islam-text is endowed with identities as multiple as those of its author. Written in turn as submission to God’s will or as self-affirmation (indeed, sometimes, as self-deification), as spiritual elevation or as down-to-earth wisdom/earthly pleasure, as warfare or as peace and tolerance, its constant revision corresponded to the Russian convert’s multi-faceted will-to-power. Because she needed to display enough piety to fit within the saint-role to which she aspired without relinquishing worldly enjoyment,

her practice of Islam had to be at once one of strict observance and of transgression; and because her need to identify with power was complicated by her hybrid identity, satisfying it demanded both an empowerment of Islam through emphasis on its masculinity and conquest-spirit and the advocacy of its submission to her native West, which is implicit in her feminisation of Muslims and her reinvention of Islam as peace.

While Eberhardt's carnivalised religion sanctions the myths of Oriental excess and Islamic libidinous character, her simultaneous feminisation and masculinisation of the Muslims echoes the Western discursive ambiguity which over-masculinises Islam by associating it with warfare and violence, while also feminising it as part of the subdued Orient. Thus, when it is not made explicit in, for example, her collaboration with the colonial authorities, Eberhardt's colonialist stance lurks beneath her sometimes unwitting reproduction of Orientalist discourse. In this connection, what the occasional references made to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in this chapter are meant to illustrate is that the political and literary gestures displayed in the Orient by the "natives' friend" that Eberhardt is widely supposed to be are not so different from those of "typical" imperialists like Kurtz. Both are, after all, talented Europeans who settle in Africa in search of compensatory power and end up going native while also claiming a godlike status in the African space they have joined. Eberhardt's aspiration to be venerated as a saint strikingly resembles Kurtz's transformation into an idol by awed Africans who hold ceremonies in his honour.

Living among the natives or converting to their religion is not necessarily a challenge to racialist assumptions; it provides immunity neither against the will-to-dominate nor against Eurocentric arrogance. Eberhardt's conversion coincided with a period of unprecedented intellectual upheaval in the Islamic world: Jamal al-Dine in Afghanistan and Mohammed Abduh in Egypt were voicing their rejection of both the unselective Westernisation resulting from the colonial experience and the conservative sacralisation of obsolete interpretations of Islamic texts.<sup>248</sup> That Eberhardt's writings, which teem with references to Western texts, make no mention of such names, says much about her contempt for the natives, which, in the event, did not manifest itself only to the detriment of the "obscure-minded" and uneducated.

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<sup>248</sup> Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 516-518.



## Chapter 3

### Desiring Power:

#### The Transvestite Westerner and the Eroticised Native

The intertwining of patriarchy and colonialism has been at the core of most discussions pertaining to Empire and postcolonial studies. In the wake of Edward Said's analysis of Orientalism as a typically masculine impulse to possess a feminised East,<sup>1</sup> critics like Anne McClintock have underscored the recurrence, in colonialist discourse, of the female body as a metaphor for the occupied land and of sexual penetration as an image for the act of colonisation itself.<sup>2</sup> The interconnectedness of patriarchy and colonialism as two systems of oppression is also central to both Western and "subaltern" feminist writings.<sup>3</sup> Although women's intervention in colonialist discourse has been reflected upon, authors who, like Reina Lewis<sup>4</sup> and Billie Melman,<sup>5</sup> have addressed this question, have, in a sense, confirmed the premise that will-to-subjection is a fundamentally masculine trait by emphasising identification and sympathy as common constituents of the female Westerner's representation of the racial Other. As the "Other Within" – that is, as one othered in her own patriarchal culture – the European woman identifies with the similarly oppressed "Others Without" even while distancing herself from them on account of their racial and cultural differences. In negotiating these conflicting reactions, Melman explains that women display not a monolithic Orientalist discourse of subjection like that described by Said, but a plurality of Orientalist discourses.<sup>6</sup> However, while acknowledging the polyphonic character of "Women's Orient", Melman also writes that Western women are generally more inclined to display sympathy for the racial Other than their male

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<sup>1</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* [1978] (London: Penguin, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Kirsten Holst Peterson and Anna Rutherford eds, *A Double Colonization: Colonial and Post-Colonial Women's Writing* (Mundelstrop: Dangaroo Press, 1985); and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" [1988], *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: a Reader*, Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman eds (Harlow: Pearson Education, 1994), 66-111.

<sup>4</sup> Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity, and Representation* (London: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Billie Melman, *Women's Orients: English Women and the Middle East, 1718-1918* [1992] (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 and 315.

counterparts<sup>7</sup> and that their “writing on ‘other’ women [...] substitutes a sense of solidarity of gender for racial and sexual superiority.”<sup>8</sup>

With her wilful borrowing of a male identity and her well-known contempt for fellow members of her sex on the one hand and her traditionally unquestioned sympathy for the natives on the other, Eberhardt unsettles this axiomatic parallel between patriarchy/misogyny and colonialism, so that her case can seemingly only lead to a theoretical *cul-de-sac* or to charging her with ideological incoherence; yet the gist of this chapter is that Eberhardt’s vision and performance of gender is in total convergence with her racial politics. Unless one dismisses, as Michelle Chilcoat does, the theoretical frame which associates patriarchy and colonialism,<sup>9</sup> such an argument is only possible if one rejects either the Russian writer’s misogyny or her supposedly anti-colonialist stance – or both. Her anti-colonialism has already been questioned in the previous parts of this study, which have argued that her appropriation of a native identity operated as a means of empowerment without renouncing either racial categories or the belief in Western superiority. In a similar way, this chapter contends that her hybrid gender identity, which culminated in her transvestism, translated neither a hatred of femininity as such nor a desire to blur dichotomic definitions of gender. Like her cultural in-betweenness, her cross-dressing left unquestioned both the traditional female and male categories and the gender hierarchy based on the premise of male superiority.

Eberhardt’s attachment to traditional gender divisions has been noted by critics like Ali Behdad, who reads her transvestism less as a wish to dismantle the male/female dichotomy than as identification with masculinity as a power signifier which allowed her to participate in the Orientalist project.<sup>10</sup> This chapter takes up and elaborates on this idea; however, where Behdad infers that Eberhardt’s empowering self-masculinisation is, ironically, thwarted by the West’s feminisation of the East with which she (according to him) also identified,<sup>11</sup> it explains that her aspiration to masculinity is undermined by the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>9</sup> Michelle Chilcoat, “Anticolonialism and Misogyny in the Writings of Isabelle Eberhardt”, *The French Review* 77, 5 (Apr. 2004): 949-957. Chilcoat explains that Eberhardt’s misogyny is not in contradiction but rather in line with her (supposed) anti-colonialist stance. This will be discussed in more detail in the second section of this chapter.

<sup>10</sup> Ali Behdad, *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 123-124.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 121-125.

act of cross-dressing itself. In *Vested Interests*, Marjorie Garber sees all performance that involves over-masculinisation as a mechanism of compensation for an original (real or symbolic) absence of the phallus; as such, this type of performance is *always* feminine.<sup>12</sup> Taking up Garber's point, I would like to argue that Eberhardt's eagerness to appropriate a male identity is itself an avowal not only of her femininity but, more importantly, also of her subscription to the patriarchal belief in woman's (moral and physical) inferiority: it is precisely such a belief that makes cross-dressing indispensable to her empowerment project.

Eberhardt's transvestism also emphasises its performer's femininity in that it acts as a shield against the masculine eye. As, in her disguise, she appropriated the male privilege of the gaze, Eberhardt fustigated Western women for their endorsement of the passive role of observable objects. However, what she overlooked was that the very patriarchal law that gives man the monopoly of the gaze necessarily dispenses him from the need to elude the Other's (female) gaze. Because he does not conceive of her as a gazer, man experiences no impulse to protect himself from her eye. For their part, as objects of the gaze, women are left with the two (seemingly) opposing options of over-visibility – which is what Eberhardt reproaches Western women with<sup>13</sup> – or invisibility, which is what she herself opts for. Interestingly, although she is as reluctant to identify with native women, including their way of dressing,<sup>14</sup> as she is with fellow female Westerners, it will be argued that her male costume, meant to distance her from them, is eventually similar to theirs. Indeed, the ambivalent economy of cross-dressing is comparable to that of the veil in that both simultaneously resist and reinforce patriarchal power. Recent publications by so-called Islamic feminists have advocated the veil as a means of neutralising man's objectifying gaze<sup>15</sup> – the very effect expected by Eberhardt from her transvestism. Simultaneously,

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<sup>12</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 355-374.

<sup>13</sup> Eberhardt faults European women for being “servantes de la visibilité au détriment du réel”. “L'Age du Néant” [1900], *Œuvres Complètes II: Ecrits sur le Sable (nouvelles et roman)* (Paris: Grasset, 1990), 529-533, 529. Eberhardt's emphasis.

<sup>14</sup> In a letter to her correspondent Ali, Eberhardt writes that she does not feel compelled to don native women's *m'laya* (veil) to be a proper Muslim. Isabelle Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes: Lettres aux trois hommes les plus aimés* [1991, posthumous] (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2003), 94.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Fadoua El Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy, and Resistance* (Oxford: Berg, 1999); and Katherine Bullock, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical and Modern Stereotypes* (Herndon, VA: International Institute for Islamic Thinking, 2002).



however, both dressing practices enforce the patriarchal imperative of female self-effacement through their erasure of the female body.

While she seems to have been blind to the similarity between her sartorial behaviour and that of native women, Eberhardt was not unaware of the veil's ambivalent significance with regard to female empowerment. Relying on texts like "Légionnaire" (1903) and "Sous le joug" (1902), this chapter shows how the dress code which, on occasion, functions as a metonym for the native woman's subjection within her own patriarchal culture, becomes, in writings which denounce colonial practices, a signifier of resistance, protecting her from the male coloniser's gaze. Paradoxically, however, Eberhardt herself participated in such a gaze through her appropriation of a male identity. "Si Mahmoud" often accompanied male comrades to local brothels, where she welcomed the preliminaries in which the "courtisanes", deceived by her disguise, involved her and indulged in a voyeuristic observation of her companions' similar games.

The erotic charge in Eberhardt's portrayal of native women – prostitutes or otherwise – has been signalled by Lamia Zayzafoun, who reads it as a clear mark of homoerotic desire.<sup>16</sup> Such a reading is contradicted both by the writer's statements, which explain her interest in prostitution sites as a mere "curiosité d'artiste",<sup>17</sup> and biographical records, which agree that she was never involved in a homosexual relationship. And because the eroticisation in Eberhardt's texts is rendered in too explicit terms to be an unconscious process of which she would have been unaware, this gap between text and biography cannot be simply dismissed as evidence of the inadequacy of biographical approaches to literary texts or a confirmation of the "death of the author" announced by Barthes and Foucault decades ago.<sup>18</sup> This chapter attempts to provide a consistent reading of this gap, advancing two explanations. On the one hand, Eberhardt's eroticised rendering of her female characters might well be less a mark of an actual homosexual inclination than an extreme case of her appropriation of masculinity and what is perceived as its privileges. If, however, Eberhardt's texts *are* read as indicative of a homoerotic impulse, then her

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<sup>16</sup> Lamia Ben Youcef Zayzafoun, "Isabelle Eberhardt, ou 'La Roumia Convertie': A Case Study in Female Orientalism", *The Production of the Muslim Woman: Negotiating Text, History, and Ideology* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005), 31-63, 52.

<sup>17</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "Coin d'amour", *Sud Oranais* [1908, posthumous] (Paris: Joëlle Losfeld, 2003), 95-100, 95.

<sup>18</sup> Roland Barthes, "La Mort de l'auteur" [1968], *Le Bruissement de la langue : essais critiques IV* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1984), 61-67; and Michel Foucault, "Qu'est-ce-qu'un auteur?" [1969], *Dits et écrits I, 1954-1975* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 817-849.

refraining from enacting this impulse is worth pondering. Like her already discussed denial of her conversion to Islam through her re-writing of her filial identity, her resistance to homoerotic desire, it will be argued, is revealing of her subscription to the codes of sexual normativity.

Along with the sexual code, Eberhardt also reproduces the patriarchal gendered moral schema. There is, in the woman who departed so “scandalously” from the norms of female “respectability”, a surprising valorisation of feminine virtue, highlighted even in her representation of marginal figures like prostitutes: as opposed to their outspoken Jewish or Western “colleagues”, Arab prostitutes are lauded for their modest demeanour and for refraining from obscenity. Equally interesting is her eagerness either to “punish” female transgressors or to reconcile them with respectability. When they do not, like Achoura, in “Portrait d’Ouled Naïl” (1903) and the protagonist of “La Derouïcha” (1902), renounce their “immoral” lifestyle to lead “une vie exemplaire”<sup>19</sup> of selflessness and piety, they are invariably fated to suffer a tragic, premature death.

The contrast between Arab and non-Arab prostitutes draws attention to the intervention of the racial element in Eberhardt’s negotiation of power and gender identity. In convergence with the previous parts of this thesis, this chapter argues that her hierarchisation of both racial and gender categories enables a complex process of compensation which permits a relative fulfilment of her quest for empowerment without “betraying” her conservative vision of gender identities. This process is particularly at work in Eberhardt’s restriction of her amorous/sexual relations to native men, a restriction which will be explained in terms of her identification of so-called love relations as a permanent struggle for power, her eagerness to secure the upper hand in such a struggle, and, most important, her absorption of both patriarchal and colonial laws: limiting her choice of partners to racial subalterns meant a deliverance from the utter subordination which would have been hers in the face of a Western man both sexually and racially privileged.

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<sup>19</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Le Portrait d’Ouled Naïl”, *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 206-209, 209.

### 3.1. Anatomy of Transvestism

#### 3.1.1. Becoming Si Mahmoud

##### 3.1.1.1. Empowering masculinity

Eberhardt's transvestism was far from being a unique case in the nineteenth-and early twentieth-century West. At the time when she roamed the desert in male attire, European working girls dressed as men to share, unnoticed, male enjoyments like smoking or bar-frequenting;<sup>20</sup> others, regardless of their class background, assumed a masculine identity for more "serious" ambitions – being able to vote or taking part in war – and indeed disguised so successfully that the female sex of some of them was only revealed on their deaths.<sup>21</sup> Without necessarily seeking to pass as men, well-known female figures also took to masculine clothes and ways. While George Sand, with her notorious cigar-smoking and her rowdy sense of humour, is the example that comes most readily to mind,<sup>22</sup> the Western artistic and intellectual scene counted several other cross-dressers, including Willa Cather and Dorothy Richardson and, in France, the writer Colette,<sup>23</sup> the painter Rosa Bonheur,<sup>24</sup> and the renowned actress Sarah Bernhardt.

French theatre was actually a favourite site for both male and female transvestism, although male impersonators far outnumbered their female counterparts throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>25</sup> In a paper on the evolution of cross-dress theatre throughout this period and up to the interwar years, Lenard Berlanstein sheds interesting light on the relation between the rise and fall of such artistic practices and the prevailing political and social codes. Instead of viewing them simply as a temporary escape from the rigidity of

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<sup>20</sup> Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, "Women and Cross Dressing in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries", *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 145-173, 168.

<sup>21</sup> For examples of such cross-dressers, see *ibid.*, 157-166.

<sup>22</sup> For an extensive study of Sand as a writer and unconventional figure, see Belinda Elizabeth Jack, *George Sand: a Woman's Life Writ Large* (New York: Knopf, 2000).

<sup>23</sup> Colette (1873-1954) was a writer and a music hall performer known for her sulphurous liaisons, in turn heterosexual and homosexual. See Catherine Portuges and Nicole Ward Jouve, "Colette 1873-1954", *French Women Writers*, Eva Martin Sartori and Dorothy Wynne Zimmerman eds (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 78-98.

<sup>24</sup> Reina Lewis provides a brief biographical account of this animal painter. *Gendering Orientalism*, 100-102. See also Dore Ashton and Denise Browne Hare, *Rosa Bonheur: A Life and a Legend* (New York: Viking, 1981).

<sup>25</sup> Lenard R. Berlanstein, "Breeches and Breaches: Cross-Dress Theater and the Culture of Gender Ambiguity in Modern France", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 38, 2 (Apr. 1996): 338-369, 338.

gender laws, Berlanstein explains that “trouser roles” and their impersonators supported both the gender code and the prevailing political and social discourse. The very rise of such roles, he argues, was made possible by the accentuation of the gender hierarchy resulting from the valorisation of virility that marked in turn the French Revolution and the Napoleonic reign: because man was the superior gender category, male impersonation was not seen as shocking. By contrast, male-to-female transvestism, seen as debasing, often elicited repulsion and started to lose ground precisely as the reverse form of stage transvestism gained in popularity.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the fact that the male parts taken by actresses was often limited to adolescent, and even pre-pubescent boys, meant that the man/woman dichotomy was left undisturbed, children being traditionally left outside this binary classification.<sup>27</sup> These parts were usually inserted in the lightest, most frivolous dramatic genres – usually operettas and vaudevilles – which, as such, demanded that their content, including their seeming gender-bending, not be taken seriously.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, Berlanstein, who does take their content seriously, states that these plays provided, in addition to amusement, a support to the post-Revolution patriarchal values as well as to the class that the Revolution confirmed in power – the Bourgeoisie. There was little subversion, after all, in the seemingly provocative practice of stage cross-dressing. Commenting on the performance of a famous “trouser-role” actress, Berlanstein concludes that “[a]udiences could easily have seen a Déjazet<sup>29</sup> play and not have had any sense of disorder being celebrated.”<sup>30</sup>

This detour through cross-dressing on the French stage has its relevance in the numerous analogies between Eberhardt and the impersonators discussed above. The transvestite writer was certainly an actress in her own right, although hers was a much broader stage than that of professional performers. As Julia Clancy-Smith puts it, she “was an Orientalist writer, actress, and playwright in-the-making. The costume and part of the

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<sup>26</sup> Berlanstein, “Breeches and Breaches”, 352-353. For her part, Susan Gubar shows that this different reception of female and male impersonations is not limited to the nineteenth century but seems to have traversed the history of Europe’s patriarchal culture. One example she gives (among others) is that the goddess Athena’s appropriation of “the shield and the spear of the male warrior” makes her gain in esteem while a Hercules in female robes ridicules himself as he strips himself of the insignia of power that male clothes are. For more examples, see Susan Gubar, “Blessings in Disguise: Cross-Dressing as Re-Dressing for Female Modernists”, *The Massachusetts Review*, 22, 3 (Autumn 1981): 477-508.

<sup>27</sup> Berlanstein, “Breeches and Breaches”, 353-354.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> One of the most famous male impersonators of her time, Pauline Virginia Déjazet (1798–1875) was “famous for the assurance with which she wore trousers and sang free-and-easy songs”. *Ibid.*, 341.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 354.

script had been constructed in Europe; what was lacking was an adequate *mise-en-scène*”;<sup>31</sup> the adequate *mise-en-scène* being, of course, the North African environment. A more important similarity, however, is her reinforcement of gender hierarchy, not, as might be thought, despite, but indeed *through* the very act of transvestism. Like “trouser roles”, her cross-dressing reflected a subscription to the conception of maleness as a privilege. Recounting a visit to a tribe in the region of Bône in a letter to Ali Abd El Wahab, she wrote with satisfaction that her attire, “commode et imposant”, had allowed her to avoid “la société fastidieuse des femmes arabes et de [s]e mêler aux hommes dont [elle] aime l’admirable calme et la grande intelligence”.<sup>32</sup> When, her real gender identity being known to some of her male hosts, she was eventually asked to move to the women’s quarters, “les sots babillages des femmes”<sup>33</sup> were soon more than she could bear. She wrapped herself up in her *burnous* and went out, seeking the company of *taleb*s standing guard.

This supposed intellectual inferiority is not the only fault Eberhardt found with women. These “êtres sans intelligence”<sup>34</sup> are also, in her view, morally deficient. In an oft-quoted passage from her diary, she congratulates herself on possessing two virtues believed to be accessible to few women: “Ce qui se développe en moi, c’est la plus opiniâtre, la plus invincible énergie et la droiture du cœur, deux qualités que j’estime plus que toute autre et, hélas, si rares chez une femme.”<sup>35</sup> As striking as her denigration of women, in both examples, is the power-evoking lexicon deployed to refer to masculinity. The association of the adjectives “imposant”, “admirable” and “grande” in the passage on male intelligence and “invincible” in her celebration of her “unfeminine” energy says much about her vision of access to masculinity as symbolic empowerment.

Analysing the transvestite writer’s alternate use of the masculine and feminine forms, Christiane Achour comes to the conclusion that while she refers to her public self as masculine, Eberhardt reverts to the feminine form in her more intimate, confessional writings.<sup>36</sup> While this reading is plausible, Achour seems to be blind to the gendered

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<sup>31</sup> Julia Clancy-Smith, “The Passionate Nomad Reconsidered”, *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel eds (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 61-78, 63-64.

<sup>32</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 107.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>34</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, *Journaliers* [1923, posthumous] (Paris: Joëlle Losfeld, 2002), 98.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>36</sup> Christiane Achour, “Isabelle Eberhardt ou le jeu très sérieux du masculin/féminin”, *Frontières des genres: féminin-masculin* (Paris: Le Manuscrit, 2006), 51-69, 64.

definition of empowerment/disempowerment which underpins the very passages she quotes from. Two of these run as follows: “j’étais seule, seule dans ce coin perdu de la terre marocaine...”<sup>37</sup> and “Etre seul, c’est être libre, et la liberté est le seul bonheur nécessaire à ma nature. Alors je me dis que ma solitude était bien.”<sup>38</sup> Although both quotations are reflections on her lonely condition, Eberhardt shuttles between the feminine and masculine inflections depending on whether solitude is seen as a subject of lament or as a liberating, hence empowering, experience. The lines Achour quotes next are even more eloquent:

M’en aller, vagabond et libre, comme je l’étais avant, même au prix de n’importe quelle souffrance nouvelle! [...] m’embarquer, humble et inconnue, et fuir, fuir enfin pour toujours [...] Certes, je ne suis venue ici que pour pleurer, pour regretter, pour me débattre dans l’obscurité et ses angoisses, pour souffrir, pour être prisonnière! A quand le départ radieux?<sup>39</sup>

While the use of the masculine as a trope for freedom and, implicitly, conquest (since this freedom is seen as the reward of resistance to suffering) rehearses the narrative of masculine strength, the writer’s choice of the feminine form to deplore her condition as a hapless prisoner reproduces not only the myth of female weakness but indeed the most clichéd images of femininity: seclusion, passivity, and... tears. Although the feminine is also employed to refer to her escape project, what is focused on in this use is not the empowering part of the experience, now evoked as a flight rather than a conquest, but humility and discretion – two other traditionally female requirements.

Eberhardt’s conventional vision of the male and female gender categories, highlighted in all the passages discussed so far, sheds new light on the need she felt for transvestism. Because the disempowerment she wanted to escape was also, as she saw it, woman’s natural condition, empowerment was only possible through self-reinvention as a man. Thus, while seeming to challenge gender laws, her cross-dressing can be read as the most convenient compromise between her will-to-power and her simultaneous reluctance to challenge the patriarchal order. Interestingly, this contradictory impulse was common among nineteenth-century transvestites. In a statement that parallels Eberhardt’s employment of the masculine and feminine forms, one such transvestite, Valérie Arkell-Smith, explained that trousers did not make her feel weak and helpless as she did when

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<sup>37</sup> Eberhardt, quoted in *ibid.*, 63.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

wearing skirts.<sup>40</sup> Others stated how cross-dressing was for them an indispensable preliminary to transgressions of the codes of femininity like smoking and heavy drinking, which they could never perform in skirts.<sup>41</sup>

### 3.1.1.2. A homoerotic gaze?

Although it is common to look at cross-dressing as a sign of homoerotic inclination, this assumption is challenged both by theorists of transvestism<sup>42</sup> and accounts of transvestites' lives. The notorious lesbianism of Colette did not prevent her from being involved in numerous heterosexual encounters,<sup>43</sup> and there is little evidence of Willa Cather and George Sand being anything other than heterosexual. Sand's close friendship with the actress Marie Dorval led to rumours of a lesbian relationship, but these were never confirmed.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, while Cather had countless female friends, whether she was actually involved in sexual relations with them has not been ascertained, and she herself insistently denied being a lesbian.<sup>45</sup> Often, however, identifying the homoerotic motive in cross-dressing practices is complicated, on the one hand, by the possible gap between erotic desire and the enactment of this desire (so that the absence of homosexual performance does not necessarily entail an absence of a homoerotic impulse), and, on the other hand, by the sometimes diverging narratives told by the cross-dressers, their biographers, and their art.

Eberhardt was an example of such a contradiction. For critics like Lamia Zayzafoun, her non-involvement in homosexual relations did not prevent her from indulging in a homoerotic desire facilitated by her male disguise.<sup>46</sup> Zayzafoun rightly points out the writer's eroticisation of female natives. In "Coin d'amour", which recounts a visit made with male native companions to a local brothel, "Si Mahmoud", while indulging in a

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<sup>40</sup> Quoted in L. Vern and Bonnie Bullough, "Women and Cross Dressing", 162. Other comments on cross-dressing as empowering include Willa Cather's statement that, dressed as a man "you could knock down a policeman", and that of Anais Nin's heroine who, in *Ladders of Fire* (1946), explains how, the first time she was hurt by a boy, she went home and dressed in her brother's suit. See Gubar, "Blessings in Disguise", 482 and 484.

<sup>41</sup> L. Vern and Bonnie Bullough, "Women and Cross Dressing", 168.

<sup>42</sup> Richard F. Docter, *Transvestites and Transsexuals: Toward a Theory of Cross-Gender Behavior* (New York: Plenum, 1988), 6.

<sup>43</sup> See Portuges and Ward Jouve, "Colette", 78-81.

<sup>44</sup> Jack, *George Sand*, 212.

<sup>45</sup> Janet Sharistianian. Introduction to *My Antonia*, by Willa Cather (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), vii-xxiv, xiii.

<sup>46</sup> Zayzafoun, "'La Roumia Convertie'", 52.

voyeuristic observation of her male friends' "jeux enfantins"<sup>47</sup> with the prostitutes, formulates suggestive comments on the looks of these hosts. Reguia has "[des] lèvres charnues"<sup>48</sup> and Khadidja "de fortes lèvres rouges";<sup>49</sup> Marhnia is "ronde, aux formes plus amples", "et quand elle marche, ses hanches pleines ont des ondulations d'une grâce parfaite".<sup>50</sup> Her portrayal of desert women, whom she eyes as they are proceeding to the fountain, is very similar. Besides the description of their "lèvres voluptueuses",<sup>51</sup> "reins cambrés",<sup>52</sup> and "hanche[s] arrondie[s]",<sup>53</sup> the eroticisation of her objects of gaze is conveyed through her emphasis on the "douceur animale" of one of them and the "bras nu" which shows through the veils of another.<sup>54</sup>

Yet, if Eberhardt's eroticisation of the female native is hardly in doubt, whether such eroticisation translates homoerotic desire is problematic in more than one way. In constructing the East as a site of desire, heterosexual male Orientalists consistently projected their fantasies onto feminine Oriental sites like harems and Turkish baths; by contrast, Eberhardt's disregard for such *lieux* in favour of masculine spaces like the *zaouïa* and the road implies that she either did not share their fantasies or their consistency. Indeed, it is difficult to see in what way Eberhardt's transvestism facilitated the homoerotic gaze assigned to her by Zayzafoun; in space-gendered North Africa, a female costume would obviously have been more convenient, by allowing her access to the company of women. Just as male Orientalists' real and/or fantasised penetration of female sites was enmeshed with desire for the occupants of these sites, Eberhardt's access to male *milieus*, made possible precisely by her cross-dressing, may well have been an opportunity to indulge in *heterosexual* desire.

Indeed, Eberhardt's eroticisation of the natives is not limited to women. The over-masculinisation of male natives in "Fantasia", already pointed to in the previous chapter, contains a clear sexual charge. In the description of the cavalcade, powerful equine imagery alternates with the writer's emphasis on the sturdy, athletic aspect of the riders, creating an ambiguous atmosphere that conveys not only the fury of competition but also

<sup>47</sup> Eberhardt, "Coin d'amour", 98.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "Visions de femmes" [1906, posthumous], *Sud oranais*, 193-194, 193.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.



sexual intensity, as shown by the use of ambiguous adjectives like “fougueux”, “enflammé”, and “frénétiques”,<sup>55</sup> used to render the exciting effect of the cavalcade. The textual ambiguity of “Fantasia” is also fed through the suggestive reference to horses as stallions, and the focus repetitively placed on their excited and “foaming mouths”, which, though seemingly related to the euphoria of competition, bears obvious sexual connotations.

Richard Docter explains that transvestism can function as a stimulus in hetero-erotic as much as in homosexual encounters.<sup>56</sup> As her eroticisation of both male and female natives shows, this seems to have been very much the case with Eberhardt. However, inasmuch as her transvestism was the enactment of an aspiration to masculinity, what appears to be an erotic interest in the native woman may be read as a mere part of her overall performance of this masculinity – just like the smoking, drinking, bellicosity, and other aspects of “male” behaviour that male clothes have been seen to elicit in female cross-dressers. Indeed, Eberhardt’s “erotic gaze” is inseparable not only from her male disguise, but also from other typically masculine accomplishments, as illustrated by a passage in which she boasts of the detonating *baroud d’honneur* with which s/he salutes the passage of native prostitutes: “Il y avait des femmes de la maison de tolérance qui rentraient d’El Hamel. Parées et fardées, assez jolies, elles sont venues fumer une cigarette auprès de nous. Fait la fantasia en leur honneur tout au long de la route. Beaucoup ri...”<sup>57</sup> While such identification with masculinity is common to most transvestite women, Eberhardt further presents the particularity of being a “belated writer” and as such, the heiress to a long male Orientalist tradition marked by a systematic sexual objectification of its women. As an ambitious writer seeking to clear a space for herself in a “man’s Orientalist world”, Eberhardt, in eroticising the North African woman, might well be doing no more than diligently apply the codes of Orientalist writing as mapped out by her literary

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<sup>55</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Fantasia” [1901], *Œuvres Complètes I: Ecrits sur le Sable (récits, notes et journaliers)* (Paris: Grasset, 1988), 77-82, 78 and 80.

<sup>56</sup> Docter, *Transvestites and Transsexuals*, 22. Docter’s study is, however, chiefly concerned with *male* transvestism.

<sup>57</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 259. The performative character of Eberhardt’s gesture is highlighted by the laughter it elicits in her.

predecessors:<sup>58</sup> an argument which provides a plausible explanation for the gap between Eberhardt's texts and her biography with regard to homosexuality.

Of course, the two arguments developed above – homo-eroticism as a performance of masculinity and as a perpetuation of the generic codes of Orientalism – need not be mutually exclusive, nor do they necessarily entail an absence of homoerotic desire as such. After all, as Judith Butler (after Foucault) argues, sexual (and gender) identity has no existence of its own; it is a construct that is inseparable from the regulatory mechanisms of power.<sup>59</sup> This intertwining of power and desire is still more salient in the context of colonialism, where the possession of the Oriental woman both allegorises and signals the political control of the land.<sup>60</sup> The homoerotic impulse in Eberhardt thus makes sense as a double fulfilment of will-to-power: it encapsulates both the patriarchal subjection of woman and the Western subjection of the East.

Yet if the laws of colonial power demand the eroticisation of the female native, those regulating Western definitions of sex and gender are formulated within the “grids of an idealized and compulsory heterosexuality.”<sup>61</sup> In this connection, it is interesting to note Eberhardt's insistence on her heterosexual identity, her eroticisation of native women notwithstanding. A case in point is the following passage, in which she takes care to distance herself from the *trouble des sens* provoked in her male friend by the proximity of a female presence:

Il fait chaud, sous la tente, dans l'entassement des hommes à demi couchés, accoudés sur les genoux ou sur l'épaule du voisin, fraternellement. Dans l'autre moitié de la tente, derrière les somptueux reflets de laine pourpre, ce sont des frôlements de femmes et des chuchotements qui intriguent vivement mon compagnon. Pourtant, il s'efforce de rester impassible et de ne rien remarquer de ce que révèle le voisinage des femmes.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Behdad, *Belated Travelers*, 116-124. Behdad does not, however, address the question of Eberhardt's homo-eroticism. Her desire to possess the Orient, which he assigns to the influence of the Orientalist tradition, is, for him, metaphorical, manifesting itself through the imperial rhetoric of possession which marks her writing of North Africa.

<sup>59</sup> See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), particularly pages 119-123.

<sup>60</sup> Barbara Harlow, Introduction to *The Colonial Harem*, by Malek Alloula, trans. Myrna Godzich and Glad Godzich (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), ix-xxii, xv-xvi.

<sup>61</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 172.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Achour, “Le Jeu très sérieux”, 61.

As Achour notes, the adverb “fraternellement” which qualifies the physical contact between male comrades – including the writer “himself” – is ambiguous, hinting as it does at not so “fraternal” affections. In the same way, it is possible to read Eberhardt’s eagerness to deny any homo-erotic response on her part as an unwilling avowal of the presence of such a response. If this is the case, however, then her denial of her homosexual inclinations is interesting in that it betrays her loyalty to the traditional sex regulations which prescribe heterosexuality as the norm and, by extension, to the male-versus-female sexual dichotomy.

As it happens, Eberhardt did devote one of her earliest writings to the theme of homosexuality. “Per Fas et Nefas” centres on the dying Lébédinsky’s wish to see Stélianos, his lover, one last time. In the face of the male couple’s expressions of love, the female first-person narrator, who clearly stands for the writer herself, expresses an ambivalent attitude, simultaneously voicing her awareness of the constructed character of heterosexual desire and her subscription to this construct. While admitting that “tout au monde n’est que pure convention”,<sup>63</sup> she also congratulates herself on her “grand scepticisme slave”, which enables her to remain unshaken, “sans le moindre dégoût et sans révolte devant cette antinomie criante de la nature.”<sup>64</sup>

### 3.1.2. So a woman, after all

In assuming a male identity, what Eberhardt sought was her self-empowerment within the patriarchal code rather than a revision of this code that would allow the enfranchisement of women in general; in detaching herself from other women, the transvestite chose to turn her back on the so-called “feminine cause,” in which she never voiced interest. Ironically, the very gesture which was meant to distance her from fellow members of her sex and the feminine predicament of obedience and dependence proved to be a confirmation of both. As will be shown below, her disguise brings her close to the figure who, for the West, was the very epitome of female subjection – the native woman – rehearsing both her age-old submission to the Law of the Father (“father” is here used in its literal meaning) and her resort to invisibility as a strategy of resistance.

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<sup>63</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Per Fas et Nefas” [1895], *Écrits sur le sable II*, 47-57, 55.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

### 3.1.2.1. *Vox Paterna*

In “Blessings in Disguise”, Susan Gubar notes that many female cross-dressers were familiar with “masculine” dress and behaviour from childhood, having been brought up as boys.<sup>65</sup> This was most certainly the case with Eberhardt. Won over to the anarchist ideas which castigated the prevailing system of gendered education, her (step)father, Alexander Trophimowsky, provided her with an education similar in amount and content to that he dispensed to her brothers; and because anarchist views valorised manual work and physical effort, Eberhardt had to take part in the “male” tasks of sawing wood and carrying loads as well as in horse-riding.<sup>66</sup> Her clothes were as “unfeminine” as her occupations. Trophimowsky, believing that the focus on women’s physical assets had much to do with their failure to be recognised as men’s equals, had little patience with coquettishness. Young Isabelle’s appearance had, therefore, little to betray her sex: crop-haired, she constantly wore trousers. Yet Trophimowsky’s stern dress code had more practical motives, as was revealed as Eberhardt grew older. When, in her late teens, he granted her permission to venture out of the secluded Villa-Neuve, this was only on condition that she be unrecognisable in her male clothes, which, he believed, gave woman more security.<sup>67</sup> Despite her compliance with this pre-requisite, Eberhardt had also to be accompanied by one of her brothers – usually Augustin.<sup>68</sup>

Trophimowsky’s behaviour reveals as much about his contradictory attitude towards education as about his daughter’s ambivalence towards patriarchy. The anarchist father who advocated gender equality<sup>69</sup> was, after all, a conservative who allowed his daughter out of seclusion only if “properly dressed” and accompanied by a male guard; and similar

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<sup>65</sup> This was the case, for example, with Radclyffe Hall, Carson McCullers, and Dorothy Richardson. Gubar, “Blessings in Disguise”, 489-490.

<sup>66</sup> See, among other biographers, Mohammed Rochd, *Isabelle Eberhardt: une Maghrébine d'adoption* (Algiers: Office des Publications Universitaires, 1992), 21-22 and Cecily Mackworth, *The Destiny of Isabelle Eberhardt* [1951] (New York: Ecco, 1975), 19-20.

<sup>67</sup> Mackworth, *The Destiny of Isabelle Eberhardt*, 20.

<sup>68</sup> Edmonde Charles-Roux, *Un Désir d'Orient: jeunesse d'Isabelle Eberhardt* (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1988), 153-154.

<sup>69</sup> The only biographer to refute this idea seems to be Edmonde Charles-Roux, for whom Trophimowsky was not an anarchist but, “[t]out au plus, un homme en rupture avec les traditions”, with a “libéralisme ‘à la Tolstoï’”. *Un Désir d'Orient*, 119. Elsewhere, Charles-Roux also writes that Eberhardt’s tutor had “toujours douté de l'égalité des sexes” and that he had a strong antipathy for feminism (153).

examples of this conservatism are numerous.<sup>70</sup> However, because of the unconventional element in his instructions – his idea of proper dress, for example – Eberhardt’s acquiescence to them is equally double-edged. Writing to her brother of a trip she made to Geneva dressed as a sailor, she admits having enjoyed the thrill of being able to “[s]e balade[r] en marin, même en ville, à la barbe des agents...”<sup>71</sup> But the disguise which ridiculed the patriarchal law, represented by the policemen, by ignoring the strictures it imposed on female dress simultaneously submitted to that law because it had been urged by a paternal order, and because this order itself illustrated a belief in woman’s vulnerability and need for protection.

Eberhardt pursued the role of the dutiful, obedient daughter long after the death of her parents, whose memory she never failed to invoke every time she embarked on a new project. In her diary, she convinces herself of the soundness of her decision to marry Slimène Ehni by reflecting that her mother would certainly have liked him.<sup>72</sup> A few pages later, it is her father’s approval that she congratulates herself on obtaining: “je me suis endormi et Vava m’est apparu, prodiguant de la tendresse à Rouh’<sup>73</sup> et me donnant son appréciation de lui, sur son ton de jadis ...”<sup>74</sup> Similarly, to legitimise her quest for empowerment through literary success, she articulates it as a wish to honour the memory of “*L’Esprit Blanc*” and “Vava”, as she called her mother and her (step)father respectively.<sup>75</sup>

Another simultaneous transgression and enactment of the Father’s law was her settlement in North Africa. It was a transgression because Trophimowsky had forbidden her to sail to Tunisia unless accompanied either by her brother or a *dame de compagnie*; it was an act of loyalty because her decision to don male native garb immediately on her arrival in the Maghreb perpetuated a tradition that he had himself set – one which associated freedom of movement with masculinity. Her behaviour in the masculine world that she chose to appropriate is no less imbued with his teachings. Her male acquaintances affirmed that there was no sense of coquettishness or femininity about her – that “unless

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<sup>70</sup> One example is his forbidding Eberhardt to settle in Tunisia unless with a mature-aged maid or her brother Augustin; another is the careful “investigation” he undertook before accepting Rechid Bey’s offer to marry his (step)daughter. Charles-Roux, *Un Désir d’Orient*, 381 and 395-396.

<sup>71</sup> Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 60.

<sup>72</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 111.

<sup>73</sup> This affectionate nickname, which Eberhardt gave her husband, means “soul” in Arabic.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

you had known, you would never ever have taken her for a woman.”<sup>76</sup> Privileged with a male education and adopting male ways, she was treated with respect by the native dignitaries as well as by the *légionnaires*. One of the latter indeed testified that “she had nothing provocative about her and was far from being pretty”<sup>77</sup> and that, as a consequence, they never “took any liberties with her [...] although they were sometimes a dozen of [them] chatting with her.”<sup>78</sup> Sticking to the father’s advice decidedly had its rewards.

### 3.1.2.2. Actresses

In its simultaneous challenging of and subscription to patriarchy, Eberhardt’s cross-dressing is reminiscent of the Bhabhaian concept of mimicry. Bhabha’s well-known argument is that the mimic unsettles colonial power by creating an in-between category – that of “the same (as the white man) but not quite” – which slips through the white/non-white dichotomy informing the colonial taxonomic episteme.<sup>79</sup> However, Bhabha simultaneously takes up the Fanonian reading of mimicry as desire for whiteness which, in turn, betrays an acceptance of the colonial racial hierarchy.<sup>80</sup> It is precisely this reading that gives Bhabha’s identification of mimicry as a fetishistic practice its sense:<sup>81</sup> what is sought through the imitation of the white man is a compensation for the mimic’s all too acute awareness of his/her *lack* of whiteness.

Enunciated in terms of gender, desire displaces its centre from whiteness as a signifier of racial superiority to the phallus – that mark of male privilege.<sup>82</sup> And just as racial mimicry stems from a fetishistic hankering for whiteness, cross-dressing translates a wish to compensate for the missing phallus. In this connection, Garber maintains that both male and female forms of transvestism – and indeed all forms of gender migration – are phallessentialist. Male-to-female transvestism, she argues, in nothing but *man’s* idea of woman; it is less an expression of female subjectivity than “male subjectivity in drag.”<sup>83</sup> Similarly, citing several cases of transvestites and transsexuals, Garber shows how these

<sup>76</sup> Jean Rodes, quoted in Annette Kobak, *Isabelle: the Life of Isabelle Eberhardt* [1988] (New York: Vintage, 1990), 212.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* [1994] (London: Routledge, 2006), 122-123.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 108-109. For Frantz Fanon’s discussion of the black subject’s aspiration to whiteness, see his *Peau noire, masques blancs* [1952] (Réghaia: ENAD, 1993).

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>82</sup> This analogy is pointed out by Bhabha himself. *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>83</sup> Garber, *Vested Interests*, 96.

gender migrants are defined both by themselves and by their environment (including their doctors) in relation to the absence/presence of “the absolute insignia of maleness”.<sup>84</sup> Male-to-female transsexuals identify this insignia as the cause of distress which prevents them from being normally constituted women and which has, therefore, to be got rid of, only to regret the fact that its loss has affected their identity, replacing their former strength and positive energy by submissiveness and passivity.<sup>85</sup> For their part, female transsexuals seal their access to the male category by voicing the traditional masculine fears of castration.<sup>86</sup> Yet the phallus, Garber (following Lacan) insists, is *not* necessarily the physical attribute of masculinity; if this were the case, “men would have no need of feathers or ties or medals.”<sup>87</sup> Rather, it is the symbolic representation of the attribute in question. This symbolic quality makes the sense of phallus-lack possible in men as much as in women.<sup>88</sup>

It is only logical that falling short of being male (or what is perceived as such) should be compensated for through an over-masculine performance. Analysing the gender positioning of supposedly “hypermale” celebrities, Garber underscores the conflict between their public roles as icons of masculinity and the “femininity” which marks their private life, a femininity which often takes the shape of failure to perform sexually and/or submission to a castrating woman.<sup>89</sup> This analysis adds significance to Christiane Achour’s previously evoked comments on Eberhardt’s alternation of the male and female forms in her writings. Like Rudolph Valentino,<sup>90</sup> the Hollywood actor who provoked feminine swooning or fits of hysteria but who was banned from the conjugal bed by his lesbian wife,<sup>91</sup> the Eberhardt who assumed a public male persona and affirmed, with obvious pride, “je suis un homme”,<sup>92</sup> did acknowledge her femininity – if only to herself. Indeed, stating, after Behdad, that she aspired to be a man does not mean that she thought she was one; rather, it is her awareness of her femininity and her perception of it as a fundamental lack that made her compensate for it through an excess of masculinity. Eberhardt’s cross-dressing may not be an exceptional performance, as has been shown in the previous

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 96-97.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>87</sup> Eugénie Lemoine-Luccioni, quoted in *ibid.*, 119.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 360.

<sup>90</sup> Valentino was an Italian actor of the 1920s. He mostly famously starred in *The Sheikh* (1921), on which Garber relies to highlight the actor’s gender ambiguity.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 100.

section, but the desert-roaming, the *fantasias*, the fascination with battlefields and military locations, the friendship with wild hunters – in short, her adventurous life – outperformed not only fellow female transvestites but also men themselves in the display of masculinity.

Butler has explained that supposedly “natural” gender identities are nothing but fabrications that gain significance through repeated corporeal or discursive performance.<sup>93</sup> Although the effect of such ritualised performance comes to be seen as original states – as essences – Butler argues that the discontinuities or failures that unavoidably mark performances of gender eventually betray its constructed character.<sup>94</sup> Eberhardt participates in such unmasking of the unnaturalness of gender in three ways: if her performance of masculinity shows that there is nothing natural about what is usually called femininity, both her overacting of her masculine role and her occasional acknowledgment of her female identity reveal the fake character of her own maleness and, by extension, of male identity in general.

Eberhardt’s “private” admission of her female gender is in concordance with Garber’s statement that transvestism is a feminine practice even as it wears the mask of (hyper) masculinity. But Garber’s argument is not only about the feminine character of transvestism. Her point is that this character derives from the very fact that cross-dressing is a performance, display being essentially a woman’s trait.<sup>95</sup> This association between femininity and masquerade is, of course, recurrent in patriarchal discourse on gender. From the religious warnings against feminine guile to the Nietzschean affirmation that women are “first of all and above all actresses”,<sup>96</sup> focus was placed on women’s art of deception, a focus which has persisted in more recent writings. One twentieth-century reformulation of it is Lacan’s idea that woman’s wish to compensate for her non-possession of a phallus by *being* the phallus – that is, an object of desire – accounts for her relinquishing of her “true” self in favour of artificial traits and behaviour through which she aims to please.<sup>97</sup> This Lacanian reading of female coquettishness is interesting in that it ironically brings Eberhardt close to what she loathed most in women. Ultimately, the transvestite writer who

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<sup>93</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 178-180.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 179 and 185.

<sup>95</sup> Garber, *Vested Interests*, 355.

<sup>96</sup> Quoted in Frances Nesbitt Opper, *Nietzsche on Gender: Beyond Man and Woman* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 23.

<sup>97</sup> Jacques Lacan, “The Signification of the Phallus” [1958], *Ecrits: a Selection* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 311-322, 321.



disapproved strongly of women's "sourire sur commande" and "rouge artificiel"<sup>98</sup> – of their "éternelle comédie sur le même sujet"<sup>99</sup> – had much in common with those on whom she showered contempt. She shared not only their phallogocentric vision – she turned her back on their aspiration to be the phallus only to replace it with a desire to *own* a phallus through self-masculinisation – but also their feminine destiny as "eternal actresses".

### 3.1.2.3. Veils

Like the "actresses" she despised, Eberhardt, as a performer, did make herself an object of the gaze, even while seeking to be herself a gazing subject. In a sense, her cross-dressing allowed her as much to be a phallus as to appropriate it. Not only did it not prevent her from having an uncountable number of admirers, but, by bestowing on her an aura of mystery that she obviously cultivated, it was itself an asset in the game of fascination she loved to play with her male acquaintances, especially in her late teens.<sup>100</sup>

In its simultaneous resistance to and invitation of the masculine erotic gaze as well as in its ambivalent relation to patriarchy, Eberhardt's male costume bears a similarity with the veil. In the same way as it both submitted to and transgressed the patriarchal law, the veil has been read in turn as a symbol of oppression and a mark of resistance to man's power. In particular, female Muslim critics have reinterpreted the veil as a feminist strategy in that it resists the objectification and commodification of the female body, thus displacing discourse on this sartorial practice from a moral to a political perspective.<sup>101</sup> While acknowledging the resistance potential of the veil, however, other contemporary critics tend to depict it as ambivalent in that its very resistance to man's gaze tends to stimulate erotic fantasy: "[t]he veil attracts the eye, and forces one to think, to speculate about what is behind it".<sup>102</sup>

This vision of the veil as both stimulation of and resistance to man's objectification is particularly relevant to Western portrayals of female Muslims, in which it indeed holds pride of place. Although, as critics like Reina Lewis and Billie Melman have argued, the

<sup>98</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "L'Age du néant", 530.

<sup>99</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "En Marge d'une lettre" [1906], 207-209, 208. This text was re-written by Victor Barrucand.

<sup>100</sup> Kobak, *Isabelle*, 39.

<sup>101</sup> Bullock, *Rethinking Muslim Women*, 216.

<sup>102</sup> Meyda Yeğenoğlu, "Veiled Fantasies: Cultural and Sexual Difference in the Discourse of Orientalism", *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: a Reader*, Reina Lewis and Sara Mills eds (New York: Routledge, 2003), 542-566, 546.

veiling tradition extends, both in time and space, beyond the frontiers of the Islamic world,<sup>103</sup> it has, in concordance with the traditional Orientalist feminisation of the Levant, been re-defined as an allegory for the Islamic East. As such, the veil came to embody the (male) Western desire to possess the Orient – both its land and its women.<sup>104</sup> However, because it shields its wearer against the Western man’s erotic gaze, thus preventing the enactment of his will-to-possession, the veil also became a symbol of native resistance; an obstacle to the project of conquest which has to be disposed of. The colonial doctrine, as Fanon puts it, goes as follows: “if we want to destroy the structure of [native] society, its capacity for resistance, we must first of all conquer the women; we must go and find them behind the veil where they hide themselves”.<sup>105</sup> One major discursive strategy deployed in the fulfilment of this task is the denigration of the veil as a mark of the effacement and oppression of women in their culture<sup>106</sup> and, in turn, of the inferiority of the Islamic Orient, woman’s status serving, in the colonialist vision, as a measurement of civilisation.<sup>107</sup> As a trope for the coercion of Oriental women, the veil thus legitimises the occupation of the East by legitimising the “civilising mission”, providing it with the moral argument of “saving brown women from brown men”, as Spivak’s famous quip goes.<sup>108</sup>

Nor are such chivalrous sentiments reserved for Western men alone. nineteenth-century female Westerners, notably feminists, were equally concerned with (what was seen as) the sad predicament of the native woman. A leading figure in this connection was the feminist Hubertine Auclert, whose *Les Femmes arabes d’Algérie*<sup>109</sup> decried polygamy, denounced Arab marriages as “des viols d’enfants”,<sup>110</sup> and advocated the enfranchisement of “ces enterrées vivantes”, by extending the application of French laws to the natives.<sup>111</sup> Despite her non-involvement, and indeed her distaste for, the feminist movement,

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<sup>103</sup> Reina Lewis and Sara Mills, introduction to *Feminist Postcolonial Theory*, 1-21, 15; and Billie Melman, “Transparent Veils: Western Women Dis-Orient the East”, *The Geography of Identity*, Patricia Yaeger ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 433-465, 461-463.

<sup>104</sup> Frantz Fanon, “Algeria Unveiled” [1959], *Decolonization: Perspectives from Now and Then*, Prasenjit Duara ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), 42-55, 47-49.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-46.

<sup>107</sup> Julia Clancy-Smith, “Islam, Gender, and Identities in the Making of French Algeria, 1830-1962”, *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender, and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism*, Julia Ann Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda eds (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998), 154-174, 155-156.

<sup>108</sup> Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, 92.

<sup>109</sup> Hubertine Auclert, *Les Femmes arabes d’Algérie* (Paris: Société d’Editions Littéraires, 1900). See also Clancy-Smith, “Islam, Gender, and Identities”, 167-172.

<sup>110</sup> Auclert, *Les Femmes arabes d’Algérie*, 42.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

Eberhardt appropriated not only the Auclertian theme of the oppression of the native woman, but also other nineteenth-century feminists' favourite tropes. Her reference to native women forced into unwilling marriages and a life of subjection as "esclave[s], plus esclave[s] encore que les négresses, car elle[s] souffrai[ent] de [leur] servitude"<sup>112</sup> is an obvious transposition of John Stuart Mill's comments on the feminine condition in *The Subjection of Women*,<sup>113</sup> as is her reference to native arranged marriages as a "viol légal".<sup>114</sup>

In such denunciations, veil-imagery is often employed to reinforce the depiction of female misery, as in "Légionnaire", where Tatami, a young native servant, first veils her face when her brother marries her off against her will. Her face-covering is associated with negative words evoking contempt and submission as well as sorrow:

Mais un jour, ce frère qui avait abandonné Tatami et qu'elle avait oublié, vint à la ferme réclamer sa sœur qu'il avait promise en mariage. Elle essaya de protester, mais la loi était contre elle et elle dut obéir. Sans même revoir Dmitri, elle dut voiler pour la première fois de sa vie son visage éploré et, montée sur une mule lente, suivre son frère dans le *douar* voisin où étaient les parents de sa femme. Elle fut reçue presque avec dédain.<sup>115</sup>

Similarly, in "Sous le joug", Tessaadit, married off against her will to an old and unknown suitor, is ordered to observe strict veiling throughout her journey to her distant new home: On lui avait recommandé de ne pas relever les rideaux, de ne pas ôter son voile [...]

Ainsi, de la route, elle ne vit rien [...]  
Enfin, [...] la portière s'ouvrit et Tessaadit aperçut le vieillard auquel on l'avait donné et avec qui elle n'avait pas échangé dix paroles depuis quatre jours qu'elle était son épouse.  
Vite, elle s'engouffra dans une voiture dont son mari, Si Larbi, baissa les stores en crin...  
Tandis que la voiture roulait, Tessaadit [...] eut voulu soulever un coin de rideau, mais [...] n'osait.<sup>116</sup>

Clancy-Smith notes that the Western obsession with the native woman's supposedly degraded condition at the turn of the twentieth century coincided with an increasing sexual

<sup>112</sup> Eberhardt, "La Révoltée" [1906], *Sud oranais*, 213-215, 213.

<sup>113</sup> John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women* [1869] (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1980).

<sup>114</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "Sous le joug" [1902], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 177-190, 178.

<sup>115</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "Légionnaire" [1903], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 275-286, 283.

<sup>116</sup> Eberhardt, "Sous le joug", 212.

commodification of this same woman through explicit visual and textual representations.<sup>117</sup> In Eberhardt's texts, the veil which functions as a symbol of oppression also enables the eroticisation of its wearer. Indeed, with its "enveloppement sculptural",<sup>118</sup> the cover hiding the native woman's body is often shown to enhance, rather than to prevent, the Western man's desire to possess: "Sous leur *m'lahfa* (veil) de laine sombre, elles [les femmes arabes] ont des corps souples et musclés, d'une perfection de formes qui se devine à chaque mouvement."<sup>119</sup>

While both her eroticisation of the veil and her writing of it as a mark of submission smack of colonialist discourse, Eberhardt's representation of this sartorial element is more ambivalent than that of most of her Western contemporaries. If Tessaadit and Tatami are depicted as unhappy with their lot, this is not the case for all her veiled characters. Lella – Sidi Brahim's mother, to whom, as has been mentioned in Chapter 2, Eberhardt looked up with admiration – was "crainte et vénérée de tous",<sup>120</sup> but she was also invisible and "ne sortait que haut voilée".<sup>121</sup> The possible compatibility of face-veiling and power is also illustrated in "Dans la dune". Oum el Aâz, "maigre et de haute taille sous ses longs voiles" is venerated; "même certains hommes [...] la craignaient."<sup>122</sup> In both cases, the veil functions as a trope not for effacement and submission but for the female native's possible empowerment within her culture. In a similar way, the veil which is associated with the white man's erotic fantasy also acts as a means of resisting his desire for possession. In "Foggara", the veiling/unveiling ritual metaphorises the native woman's resistance/surrender to the Westerner's will-to-possess. Just as, along with other manifestations of distrust like silence and recoil gestures, Embarka indicates her refusal of the friendship tacitly offered by the French soldier Weiss by anxiously covering her face in his presence, it is through unveiling that she signifies the melting of her hostile feelings: "Le lendemain, il la salua, et elle lui répondit, se découvrant [enfin] le visage, qu'éclaira un demi-sourire discret".<sup>123</sup> In "Sous le joug", Tessaadit, who, having fallen into prostitution, has ceased to veil her face, clings ferociously to it as the French lieutenant seeks to appropriate her for his own pleasure: "En une défense farouche, elle recula, le visage

<sup>117</sup> Clancy-Smith, "Islam, Gender, and Identities", 156.

<sup>118</sup> Eberhardt, "Sous le joug", 178.

<sup>119</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "Oujda" [1908], *Sud oranais*, 135-144, 143.

<sup>120</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "Petit monde des femmes" [1906], *Sud oranais*, 182-183, 183.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "Dans la dune" [1905, posthumous], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 144-156, 154.

<sup>123</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "Foggara" [1920, posthumous], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 355-358, 357.

sombre, l'oeil mauvais, *s'enroulant plus étroitement dans ses voiles*. Elle avait compris vaguement, *mais elle ne voulait pas* [...] A coups de dents, à coups d'ongles, elle se défendit.”<sup>124</sup> Instead of being associated with words evoking weakness and obedience, it is combativeness and defiance that the veil now signifies; the mark of submission to the native patriarchal law becomes one of resistance to the colonialist law which entitles the male coloniser to possess the colonised woman.

The struggle between the French lieutenant and the oppressed native woman ends, predictably, with the latter enduring the former's unwanted embraces – just as she had endured those of her loathed husband. The failure of Tessaadit's resistance to the double yoke of home-made patriarchy and colonial will-to-possession, and, in particular, her final fall into passivity and submission, are charged with a bitterly ironic tone in that they mock the emphasis laid throughout the narrative on her rebellious character and proud determination. Perhaps as ironic, however, is Eberhardt's blindness to the failure of her own resistance. Although her European status made her immune to the colonial sexual objectification imposed on her character, her attempts to subvert the patriarchal law through cross-dressing were ultimately defeated – and not only because her clothing style was an enactment of a paternal teaching or because it confirmed the narrative of male superiority. After the crisis of the Behima attack and her expulsion to France, the narrative of her hitherto unconventional life moved towards a most conventional dénouement for a nineteenth-century European woman: marriage – albeit with a native – and adherence to the colonial project.

## **3.2. Women, race, and morality**

### **3.2.1. The good, the bad, and the ugly**

#### **3.2.1.1. “Innocent” victims**

One of the rare instances in which Eberhardt accepted, albeit reluctantly, to dress as a woman was precisely her appearance in court for the trial of Abdallah, the perpetrator of the Behima assault.<sup>125</sup> The proper dress to wear for this occasion had been carefully pondered and discussed with her husband, and both seemed to agree that male clothes

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<sup>124</sup> Eberhardt, “Sous le joug”, 185. My emphasis.

<sup>125</sup> Kobak, *Isabelle*, 173.

would be provocative and, therefore, unwise.<sup>126</sup> Characteristically, Madame Ehni categorically refused the option of Western female clothes: a lady's outfit was beyond her means, and she would not "stoop" to wearing the "habits [...] mal fichus et ridicules", the "frusques de cuisinière", of working girls, although a working *man's* costume, she added, would not have bothered her.<sup>127</sup> While, as Zayzafoun observes, this contempt for the working woman says much about Eberhardt's preoccupation with social status,<sup>128</sup> her better disposition towards male workers confirms the subscription to the traditional gender hierarchy that has already been detected in her. Eventually, it was for the less class-marked apparel of native women that she opted: in addition to sparing her the disgrace of dressing below her rank, it fitted the role of the powerless victim that she strategically wanted to act out.

The victimisation of woman is indeed an Eberhardtian constant. This is perhaps best illustrated in her re-writing of her mother's history. An amiable and frail woman, Nathalie de Moerder obviously incarnated her daughter's ideal of femininity – the very "type de femme bonne par essence, éprise d'idéal."<sup>129</sup> Often evoked in loving terms in her diary, she is depicted as an ethereal creature uncontaminated by "le monde terrestre dépravé [...] qui lui était étranger."<sup>130</sup> Yet, for all her virtues, "*l'Esprit Blanc*" transgressed the moral code by deserting her husband to elope with Trophimowsky and by giving birth to an illegitimate child; an episode which, as argued in the previous chapter, provided Eberhardt with a pretext to re-write her "pedigree" to suit herself. Interestingly, the scenario which reinvented her as the daughter of a Turkish (hence, Muslim) doctor also absolved her mother: in her daughter's narrative, the good Nathalie is not a "sinner", but the poor victim of the doctor's rape.<sup>131</sup> Apparently, Eberhardt preferred the role of the female victim to that of the female transgressor, a choice rather at odds with the rebel-figure that she is traditionally thought to incarnate.

The representation of woman as man's victim is also recurrent in her plots, which are, from "Yasmina", one of her earliest Maghreb stories (it was written in 1899), to texts written shortly before her death like "Portrait d'Ouled Naïl", constructed around the theme

<sup>126</sup> See Eberhardt's letter to Slimène in *Ecrits intimes*, 141-142, and 146.

<sup>127</sup> Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 346.

<sup>128</sup> Zayzafoun, "*La Roumia Convertie*", 54.

<sup>129</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 223.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>131</sup> Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 133.

of the seduced and abandoned woman. In these Maghrebian transpositions of the sentimental novel, the “villain” can be either a French soldier, as in “Yasmina”, or a male native, as in “Portrait”, in which distance and administrative promotion causes well-born Si Mohammed El Arbi to forget the pledge of “eternal love” he makes to Achoura. The assignment of the villain-role to both Western and native male characters indicates an awareness of the interconnectedness of colonialism and patriarchy which is at the centre of postcolonial discussions. If, in “European” sentimental novels like those of Samuel Richardson, the ingenuous heroine is assisted, and sometimes eventually rescued, by some enamoured saviour, no such happy ending is possible for Eberhardt’s brown women: neither white nor brown men are there for their rescue.

There is more to this victimisation than simple mimesis – a wish to render an authentic portrait of the feminine condition as she witnessed it in the Maghreb. Subtler associations between femininity and victimhood in texts like “Pleurs d’Amandiers” and “L’Ami” betray the writer’s own conception of woman’s proper status. Unlike most of her fiction, these short stories are centred on same-sex friendships rather than heterosexual romances. “Pleurs d’Amandiers” centres on two former prostitutes and their nostalgic remembrances of bygone days when “Saâdia, à la fine figure aquiline et bronzée, et Habiba, blanche et frêle charmaient les loisirs des Bou-Saâdi et des nomades.”<sup>132</sup> Interestingly, the “blanche et frêle”, hence, in a sense, more feminine, Habiba is also shown to be the more fragile. Unable to resist the blows of old age, she dies at the end of the story, leaving Saâdia in mourning.

“L’Ami” provides a still more eloquent example of Eberhardt’s gendered conception of human relations – regardless of the gender categories of those involved in them – as well as of her systematic “sacrifice” of the one acting the “female” part. The friendship it recounts is, this time, male. Disregarding their comrades’ mockery and colonial suspicion towards all forms of inter-racial contact, the *légionnaires* Boussaid and Lombard are inseparable; so much so that Boussaid deserts his own room to move into his friend’s. This move, so reminiscent of a bride leaving her house to share her husband’s, carries an implicit feminisation of Boussaid, a feminisation further hinted at through the “housewifely” tasks he performs: taking care of his new living-place, the young native

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<sup>132</sup> Eberhardt, “Pleurs d’Amandiers” [1903], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 322-325, 323.

cleans the room's walls and fills them with pictures, looking-glasses, and other ornaments. He also dutifully takes charge of Lombard's laundry.

Along with subtle indicators, like the narrator's referring to Lombard's room as "*leur chambre*"<sup>133</sup> (note the narrator's suggestive emphasis on the possessive adjective), and Lombard's own reference to it as "*chez nous*",<sup>134</sup> the feminisation of Boussaid bears barely veiled homosexual undertones, and the guise of friendship with which the writer covers the relationship between the two young men says much about her already indicated respect of the prevailing sexual code and its centeredness on heterosexuality. More relevant to the present discussion, however, is the fact that, as in "*Pleurs d'Amandiers*", it is the performer of the feminine role who eventually dies: the two friends' "domestic" happiness is suddenly interrupted as Boussaid succumbs to severe pneumonia. In the Eberhardian logic, woman, whether "real" or symbolic, is the right person to sacrifice.

### 3.2.1.2. Women like men

With the exception of her mother, the only (European) woman for whom Eberhardt voiced admiration was Véra Popowa, a Russian student of medicine she befriended in Geneva and whom, like her mother, she idealised as "[un] être pur et noble".<sup>135</sup> Somewhat perplexingly, however, these two ideals of femininity were the extreme opposite of one another: unlike the soft-tempered and even self-effacing Nathalie de Moerder, Véra was firm-principled, strong-willed, and assertive. Eberhardt was impressed by the force of her dedication to the anarchist movement, of which she was a leading member among Geneva students, and was equally fascinated by her intellect and her moral rigour, which she thought to be superior to her own and which she tried to emulate.<sup>136</sup>

The much admired Véra Popowa is known to have inspired one of Eberhardt's rare European female characters. Véra, in the novel "*Trimardeur*", shares not only her name but also the determination of her model and her devotion to the anarchist cause. Obviously, just like the woman after whom she is named, this character is far from corresponding to the patriarchal ideal of femininity; but as represented in the novel, she is actually hardly a woman at all. If, to highlight her character's utter disdain for romantic aspirations,

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<sup>133</sup> Eberhardt, "*L'Ami*" [1905, posthumous], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 191-198, 195.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 218.

<sup>136</sup> See Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 34 and 218 respectively.



Eberhardt describes her as “toute pensée, toute action, presque insexuée”,<sup>137</sup> it is as a male comrade that she is treated by fellow militants: “Depuis des années, une étroite amitié les liait, pleine de franchise, *une tendresse d’hommes*.”<sup>138</sup> This masculinisation persists even after she *is* eventually involved in a romantic relation – a most tormented one – with the male protagonist, Dmitri Orschanov. Weak-willed and easily led by his “low” inclinations, it is to Véra’s iron-fisted guidance that Dmitri owes his liberation from “la boue douloureuse [qui] l’attirait”<sup>139</sup> – the Russian underbelly, with its taverns and houses of ill-repute. Nor is “iron-fisted” a mere image. When Dmitri, weakened by too much drinking, falls on the snowy ground in a state of delirium, Véra, in a typically masculine gesture, “le prit dans ses bras robustes et le coucha sur les madriers un peu secs. Elle ôta son manteau et l’en couvrit. Puis, elle s’assit près de lui et, machinalement, roula une cigarette.”<sup>140</sup>

Eberhardt’s eagerness to masculinise Véra betrays an anxiety to restore the gender-order threatened by her character’s unconventionality; because she sees strength and determination as masculine prerogatives, women displaying these features have to be stripped of their femininity and re-defined as men. This discursive strategy is also recurrent in her rendering of native female characters. The only women worthy of her attention are “grande[s] et mince[s] [or sveltes] sous leurs haillons”;<sup>141</sup> but the “defeminisation” of her heroines goes further than this erasure, as it were, of visible manifestations of femininity. Oum Zahar, in the eponymous short story, “a l’intelligence et le courage d’un homme”<sup>142</sup> and is, on this account, the favourite child of her father, for whom she acts as a substitute for the son with whom he has not been blessed. Her “masculinity” is further hinted at through the contrast drawn between her swarthy and stern gaze and the figure of Messaouda, her “plus blanche, plus douce”<sup>143</sup> sister. Tessaadit, in the similarly eponymous text,<sup>144</sup> is no different. While her father spoils her as his only child despite her being

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<sup>137</sup> Eberhardt, “Trimardeur” [1922], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 421.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 423. My emphasis.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 397.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 435.

<sup>141</sup> See, for example, Isabelle Eberhardt, “Oum Zahar” [1902], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 119-126, 119, “Le Major” [1944, posthumous], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 157-176, 166, and “Sous le joug”, 178.

<sup>142</sup> Eberhardt, “Oum Zahar”, 123.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>144</sup> This short story should not be confused with “Sous le joug”, which also features a native heroine named Tessaadit.

“autoritaire [et] dure”,<sup>145</sup> her mother notes with disapproval her fiery, wild character, predicting for her no end of trouble if she does not learn to tame it.

Both Tessaadit and Oum Zahar end up transgressing the cultural/moral code. While Oum Zahar is declared a *maraboute* as she defies the authority of her father, who forbids her to leave his house, and chooses to roam the desert, following in the steps of the sinister “witch” Keltoum, Tessaadit cynically turns to prostitution as a quick means of enrichment and, hence, empowerment. Towards the women sharing her “profession” as well as towards customers (whom she keeps under the spell of her looks), she displays the same merciless, despotic character. These ultimate rebellions are related to, and indeed heralded by, the masculinisation of the two women. As has been noted as regards the character Vera, audacity and revolt, like determination and hardheartedness, belong to the male, and in trying to cross the gender frontier, women appropriating these features are *de facto* re-defined as men. This re-categorisation, however, does not suffice to legitimise these characters’ transgressions. The fears of Tessaadit’s mother prove to be justified as her haughty and inflexible daughter is eventually forced into submission by the infatuated but jealous and suspicious Si Dahmane, and as both fall ill as a result – so Tessaadit thinks, at least – of one of her numerous female enemies’ sorcery. The last lines of the story depict her lying on the sand, prevented by impecuniosity, illness, and exhaustion from reaching the abode of her dying lover.<sup>146</sup> While Si Dahmane’s eventual “taming” of Tessaadit heralds the restoration of the traditional gender hierarchy, her demise, ill and penniless, reads as a retribution for her transgression. Indeed, her tragic fate is shared by all Eberhardt’s female characters who seek to rise beyond the feminine predicament of powerlessness.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Eberhardt, “Tessaadit”, 211.

<sup>146</sup> Although Marie-Odile Delacour explains that “Tessaadit” was never completed, the text’s final lines, particularly the narrator’s description of Tessaadit “*tomba[nt] pour la dernière fois sur la piste saharienne avant d’avoir atteint son but*” makes it easy to understand that demise was the fate reserved for the heroine. “Tessaadit”, *Ecrits sur le sable*, 226. My emphasis. Delacour’s note is inserted just below the text (227).

<sup>147</sup> This is, for example, also the case for Rakhil, who, as evoked in the first chapter, resorts to prostitution to rise above the life of impoverishment and squalor of fellow Jews and ends up being murdered by a jealous lover.

### 3.2.1.3. The ugly

Noting the contradiction between Eberhardt's misogyny and what she takes to be her anti-colonialist stance, Michelle Chilcoat tries to reconcile them by arguing, on the one hand, that Eberhardt's denunciation of the colonialist system was part of her overall condemnation of the Western capitalist logic, based on possession and profit, and, on the other hand, that she saw women as the very incarnation of this logic.<sup>148</sup> This, according to Chilcoat, explains the writer's donning of native, rather than European, male costume: at once misogynist and anti-colonialist, she wanted to participate in patriarchal oppression without being involved in colonialism.<sup>149</sup> Chilcoat supports her argument by pointing to the fact that greed and possessiveness are recurrent and central features in Eberhardt's heroines,<sup>150</sup> and by quoting at length from Eberhardt's essay "l'Age du néant", in which Western women are castigated as being "sans profondeur",<sup>151</sup> "d'une vulgarité absolue",<sup>152</sup> and "servantes de leur corps au détriment de leur esprit et uniquement préoccupées de futilités infimes".<sup>153</sup> Eberhardt actually formulated even more virulent comments on women she met in North Africa – both European and native. If the settlers' wives encountered in Ténès are a "troupeau [de] femelles, névrosées, orgiaques, vides de sens et mauvaises",<sup>154</sup> the native women of Batna, among whom she had to live for a while, are, in a similar way, "de[s] femelles indignes du nom d'êtres humains."<sup>155</sup>

While Chilcoat's charge of misogyny is amply justified by passages such as those just quoted, her argument begs many questions. Even accepting the more than debatable idea of Eberhardt's supposed anti-colonialism and contempt for possession,<sup>156</sup> one may wonder why it should be assumed that she categorised desire for possession as exclusively feminine when "l'Age du Néant" and many of her "anti-colonialist" texts show it, more often than not, to be a male trait. Besides, if, as Chilcoat affirms, Eberhardt perceived in the natives, who owned next-to-nothing and were happy in their destitution, a healthy

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<sup>148</sup> Chilcoat, "Anticolonialism and Misogyny", 950.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 954.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 953.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Eberhardt, "L'Age du néant", 129.

<sup>154</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 234.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>156</sup> Chilcoat's argument has been contradicted in the two previous chapters, which discuss Eberhardt's subscription to the colonial project and her rhetoric of possession.

alternative to the materialism of the West, then how the native woman, arguably even more impoverished than her male counterpart, came to be associated with materialist logic in the Eberhardtian imaginary also calls for explanation. More important, Eberhardt's attitude towards her "greedy" female characters – like Tessaadit – is not hostility and certainly not contempt. She might chastise "bad", revolting women in her anxiety to safeguard the gender order, but their very omnipresence in her writings seems to point to the fascination they exercised for her.

In a sense, the failure of these women's rebellion brings them close to the passive, gentle heroines in that it reconciles them with suffering and/or death. It is precisely this suffering which redeems them in their creator's eye, Eberhardt having, indeed, recurrently commented on the elevating and "purifying" virtues of affliction.<sup>157</sup> Therefore, while the charges of misogyny laid against her are justified, it usually spares her heroines; more often than not, it targets "standard" women who, because they lack the delicacy of the "good" woman and the passion of the "bad" one, are condemned to banality and shallowness. Often lacking man's strength and education, woman, for Eberhardt, can only be rescued from "vulgarity" by a stoic acceptance of her suffering or a heroic rebellion leading to tragedy. In Eberhardtian aesthetics as indeed in the traditional classification of characters and genres,<sup>158</sup> the tragic is perceived as elevating; and because it is intertwined with knowledge,<sup>159</sup> women denied it are those who display unawareness of the mediocrity (either material, moral, or intellectual) of their condition. This is the case with the female bourgeois, who, unquestioning of their objectification by the male gaze, exhibit their toilettes with satisfaction; but this is also the case of racially "subaltern" women – particularly Jewesses and "Negresses". Indeed, the Eberhardtian hierarchisation of the native racial groups discussed in Chapter 1 is often implicit in her representation of the behaviour of the female representatives of those groups. Describing an unexpected meeting between male nomads and desert women, she contrasts the reserved attitude of both female

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<sup>157</sup> "La souffrance est bonne, car elle *ennoblit*", Eberhardt writes in her diary. *Journaliers*, 141. Eberhardt's emphasis.

<sup>158</sup> The Aristotelian classification of literary genres defines tragedy as an elevated genre, along with the epic and as opposed to comedy and parody. Drawing on Aristotle, modern critics like Northrop Frye classify tragedy as a "high mimetic mode". See his *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* [1957] (London: Penguin, 1990).

<sup>159</sup> This intertwining of knowledge and tragedy is discussed by Friedrich Nietzsche, who mainly relies on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* as illustrations. See his *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Clifton P. Fadiman (New York: Dover Publications), 1995, 23 and 29.

and male Arabs with the “looseness” of black women. While, “[p]ar des gestes à peine esquissés, par de brefs regards, nomades et femmes [arabes] se comprennent”,<sup>160</sup> “les esclaves noirs rient et plaisantent avec des femmes *qu’on ne daigne même pas leur cacher*”.<sup>161</sup> Although not a model of restraint themselves, black men, Eberhardt writes in yet another confirmation of her gender prejudice, are more reserved than their female racial counterparts.<sup>162</sup> Similarly, “[l]es Juives, moins surveillées [que les Arabes], plus hardies, abordent librement les hommes [et] distribuent des œillades provocantes”.<sup>163</sup> Of course, if these women’s “misbehaviour” lacks the “grandeur” bestowed upon that of female rebels, it is precisely because it is less an act of transgression than a manifestation of their blind subjection to instinct.

Judging them both morally and intellectually inferior, Eberhardt discards these women’s words as unworthy of interest. When she does not dismiss their conversation as “sot babillage”, as previously quoted, she shows them to be involved in endless malevolent scheming, as is the case in the novel *Rakhil*,<sup>164</sup> or in trivial fights, competing against each other in the choice of the rudest, most offensive invective, as two black slaves are shown to do in “Petit monde des femmes”, before they are eventually silenced by the firm male authority of Kaddour, the catering manager.<sup>165</sup> The subaltern, Spivak has argued, cannot speak;<sup>166</sup> this is very much the case with Eberhardt’s women. If the “good” are muted by the very fact of their absolute submission to the patriarchal law and the “bad” are eventually silenced by their tragic defeat, the words of the “ugly” – those who escape suffering by finding a happy compromise with patriarchy – are reduced to mere *bavardage*, which, as Roland Barthes has argued in another context, is nothing but a noisy substitute for silence.<sup>167</sup> In the Eberhardtian vision, silence is not only the noblest condition for woman; it is her *only* possible condition.

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<sup>160</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Soir de Kenadsa” [1906], *Sud oranais*, 233-236, 236.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 235. My emphasis.

<sup>162</sup> Eberhardt, “Petit monde des femmes”, 183.

<sup>163</sup> Eberhardt, “Soir de Kenadsa”, 236.

<sup>164</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, *Rakhil* (Paris: La Boîte à Documents, 1990).

<sup>165</sup> Eberhardt, “Petit monde des femmes”, 183.

<sup>166</sup> Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, 104.

<sup>167</sup> Roland Barthes, *Critique et vérité* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1966), 38.

### 3.2.2. The importance of being moral

#### 3.2.2.1. Female virtues

While confirming her hierarchised approach to race, Eberhardt's approval of female Arabs' discretion and her distaste for the "looseness" displayed by Jewish and black women also reveals a quite Victorian valorisation of female morality which is, once again, surprisingly at odds with the "immoral" trend of the life she herself led. So essential do these features seem to be for Eberhardt that she lauds their presence even in "fallen" women like prostitutes. In "Coin d'amour", an incongruous emphasis is laid on their reserve – indeed, shyness – and "proper" behaviour. While their customers indulge in "de grands éclats de rire et des cris perçants",<sup>168</sup> the women respond to their amusing stories with discreet laughter, "se couvrant pudiquement la moitié du visage avec les pans de leurs voiles".<sup>169</sup> Even as s/he and his/her companions enjoy their canoodling, "Si Mahmoud" notes that "[elles] s'empresent, un peu timides";<sup>170</sup> that their gestures are "très réservées" and their allusions "très voilées".<sup>171</sup> In another illustration of the relevance of race to Eberhardt's vision of morality, s/he notes approvingly that "[c]omme toutes les prostituées arabes, quand elles n'ont pas été contaminées par les soldats, ces [...] femmes se tiennent bien, sans obscénité de gestes et de langage".<sup>172</sup>

There is something rather amusing, and certainly paradoxical, in this re-writing of the brothel as a "respectable" place. In a sense, it is reminiscent of the female descriptions of the Seraglio discussed by Reina Lewis in *Gendering Orientalism*. In contrast to the construction of the Oriental harem as a site of erotic fantasy in male representations, Lewis argues that women artists stripped this venue of its erotic dimension and bestowed on it a domestic respectability similar to that which marked the nineteenth-century household. Thus, Henriette Brown's paintings portray harem women involved in tasks like sewing, knitting, and taking care of their children – that is, doing just the sort of activities that were supposed to occupy a European wife.<sup>173</sup> Similarly, in *Women's Orient*, Melman highlights the projection of bourgeois morality on the harem in the travel writings of nineteenth-

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<sup>168</sup> Eberhardt, "Coin d'amour", 98.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism*, 109-121.

century women like Julia Sophia Pardoe and Amelia Hornby, a projection which contrasted with the openness which characterised the accounts of the previous century.<sup>174</sup> Although Eberhardt departed from these contemporaries in that she preferred male *milieus* and was, as shown, the accomplice of male eroticisation of the native prostitute, she simultaneously distanced herself from this eroticisation through the “voile de pudeur”<sup>175</sup> which she threw over her description of the latter. Indeed, instead of the explicit bawdiness which pervades male renderings of the brothel, like those of Maupassant and Flaubert,<sup>176</sup> hers privileges euphemism and understatement. While her fiction teems with prostitutes, prostitution locations are either domesticated, as the title “Coin d’amour” itself indicates, or poetised as “asile[s] de plaisirs”.<sup>177</sup> The word “prostitute” is itself often avoided in favour of the more elevated “courtisane” and “hétaïre” or metaphors like “amoureuses anciennes”.<sup>178</sup>

This reserve also marks her autobiographical writing. Although her friend Victor Barrucand has often been accused of having sought to “conventionalise” the non-conformist Eberhardt by erasing those episodes of her life that might have shocked the reader’s moral sense,<sup>179</sup> this was a writing procedure to which she herself often resorted. Thus, her lodging with her long-time friend Eugène Letord in a southern hotel was not mentioned in her diary, and it is thanks to Letord’s own diary that this episode was disclosed: instead of the brief lunch to which Eberhardt reduced their encounter, her friend’s records show that he kept her company constantly for three days.<sup>180</sup> In the same way, the tranquil, restrained life she describes in *Heures de Tunis* “censors” the unbridled sexuality which marked her Tunisian stay.<sup>181</sup> Just as she “covered up” for her mother’s

<sup>174</sup> Melman, *Women’s Orient*, 99-100.

<sup>175</sup> Eberhardt, “Pleurs d’amandiers”, 324.

<sup>176</sup> See Guy de Maupassant, “À la Feuille de rose: maison turque”, *À la Feuille de rose: maison turque ; suivi de la correspondance de l’auteur avec Gisele d’Estoc et Marie Bashkirtseff et de quelques poèmes libres* [1875] (Paris: Encre, 1984) and Gustave Flaubert, *Le Voyage en Egypte : octobre 1849-juillet 1850* (Paris: Entente, 1986).

<sup>177</sup> Eberhardt, “Coin d’amour”, 98

<sup>178</sup> Eberhardt, “Pleurs d’amandiers”, 324.

<sup>179</sup> See, for example, Claude-Maurice Robert, *L’Amazone des sables : le vrai visage d’Isabelle Eberhardt* (Algiers: Soubiron, 1934), 21; and Françoise d’Eaubonne, *Vie d’Isabelle Eberhardt* (Paris: Flammarion, 1968), 390.

<sup>180</sup> Edmonde Charles-Roux, *Nomade j’étais: les années africaines d’Isabelle Eberhardt* (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1995), 103-105.

<sup>181</sup> For more on the contrast between Eberhardt’s Tunisian sojourn and her writing of it, see Catherine Stoll-Simon, *Si Mahmoud ou la renaissance arabe d’Isabelle Eberhardt* (Léchéelle: Emina Soleil, 2006), 47-58.

“misbehaviour” by re-writing the story of her conception and birth, she erased her own infractions of the moral law.

In Eberhardt’s ethics, condemnation of racial transgression holds a central place. It has already been noted that her rebellious, “masculinised” women meet a tragic end. Yet, it is interesting to note that passive and “feminine” characters like Yasmina are no more spared by Nemesis than rebels like Tessaadit, and it is possible to suppose that this is because, for all her self-effacing character, Yasmina *is* a transgressor: while respecting the patriarchal law with its gender hierarchy and its definition of femininity, she does infringe the racial code by involving herself in a sentimental/sexual encounter with the French Other. The Eberhardtian moral outlook seems to disapprove equally of racial and gender violations. This is, once again, highlighted even in Eberhardt’s description of prostitutes. For all her greed and thirst for quick empowerment, Tessaadit hesitates for a long time before eventually agreeing to take a French customer; similarly, in “Coin d’Amour”, the “house” inmates refuse stubbornly to open their door to Si Mahmoud and his friends, whom they know to be “*m’zانات*”, that is, renegades who have chosen to side with the coloniser. It is only when the insistent customers threaten to break down the door that they are eventually allowed in.

It has often been noted that Eberhardt’s portrayal of native prostitutes is tinted with the writer’s usual compassion for the weak. While this sympathy is hardly deniable, attributing it, as Zayzafoun does, to a form of identification with these women is less convincing.<sup>182</sup> Her comment on one of her native characters’ choice of prostitution as an alternative to seclusion and obedience conveys distance and implicit disapproval: “Achoura, comme toutes les filles de sa race, regardait le trafic de son corps comme le seul gage d’affranchissement accessible à la femme”.<sup>183</sup> Although she did, as Zayzafoun argues, often share the utter impecuniosity of these “*filles*”, she made it a point of honour to insist that she could *never* envisage resorting to the extreme solution to which they turned so promptly:

Je suis dans la misère noire, à la veille peut-être de la faim. Eh bien! Jamais, jamais un seul instant, en toute conscience, l’idée ne m’est venue d’admettre la possibilité de sortir de cette misère menaçante par la voie ordinaire de tant de

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<sup>182</sup> Zayzafoun argues that black prostitutes functioned as Eberhardt’s “alter ego” in that they incarnated the spectre of destitution and social disgrace which constantly haunted her. “*La Roumia Convertie*”, 49.

<sup>183</sup> Eberhardt, “Portrait d’Ouled Naïl”, 207.



centaines de mille femmes. Il n’y a même *aucune tentation* contre laquelle je doive lutter pour cela. C’est *impossible*, voilà tout. Et il me semble dès lors que parfois – car les âmes fortes sont rares –, [*sic*] l’excuse de la misère est invoquée en vain, par celles du moins qui ont une culture intellectuelle et morale, qui ne sont pas de la *chair à vivre*, tout simplement. Je ne jette la pierre à personne et je conserverai toujours ma large indulgence pour toutes les faiblesses humaines, car toutes, elles sont le résultat de facteurs si terriblement compliqués et touffus [...]<sup>184</sup>

Eberhardt’s assertion of her self-satisfied superiority and the indulgence she claims for those she believes to be her inferiors – those deprived of “une culture intellectuelle” – reproduces that benign condescension often manifested by “benevolent” colonisers; simultaneously, the association of the choice of prostitution and the Arabness of the women who opt for it in the former quotation indicates that Eberhardt’s sense of Westernness is not alien to her sense of superiority.<sup>185</sup>

Eberhardt’s focus on female morality in general and her own in particular fits well within the colonialist rhetoric which designated women as “custodians of [imperial] morality” and “guardians of European civility”<sup>186</sup> and may well be a manifestation of her eagerness to be worthy of the colonial enterprise. There is perhaps more than the mere effect of solitude to the fact that her disavowal of the wild life of her early youth occurred while residing in Sidi Brahim’s *zaouïa* – that is, on the Moroccan frontier where she had been dispatched by Lyautey: “Depuis que je suis dans cette *zaouïa* [...], j’ai pris certains aspects de mon passé turbulent en horreur, mes sens ont plus de délicatesse.”<sup>187</sup> It is also in this connection that her scathing attacks on Western women can be read. Reproaching them with shallowness amounts to indicting them with a missing moral sense. Preoccupied solely with the “trivial” issues of looks and courtship, they fail to measure up to the role expected of them as the guarantors of the morality of the colonial enterprise. And it is precisely this privileged status which accounts for the severity of Eberhardt’s judgement. The indulgence she shows towards the “moral deficiency” of native women is one reserved

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<sup>184</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 177-178. Eberhardt’s emphasis.

<sup>185</sup> The quoted passages show that the distance Eberhardt took from native prostitutes stemmed from a belief in her racial and intellectual superiority rather than, as Sidonie Smith argues, from a defence mechanism against the discomfort engendered by her perception of these native women’s bodies as a menace, on account of their similarity to her own. See Sidonie Smith, *Moving Lives: 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Women’s Travel Writing* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2001), 38.

<sup>186</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 183.

<sup>187</sup> Eberhardt, “La Révoltée”, 215.

for “inferior” creatures, in which such a deficiency is therefore all-too-predictable; not for those on whom the validity of the Empire rests.

### 3.2.2.2. Educating the native woman

Eberhardt’s simultaneous entrenchment in the bourgeois moral outlook of her time and the colonialist mission finds a particularly powerful illustration in an undated essay in which she expressed her views on the issue of educating the female native.<sup>188</sup> Significantly, the text, which is a far cry from the myth of Eberhardt as an anti-colonialist rebel, is almost totally absent from the countless editions of her work.<sup>189</sup> Roughly, Eberhardt proposes an educational agenda that would take into consideration the learners’ cultural specificities and their mode of life: the teaching dispensed to them should not only differ from that provided in the Western metropolis; it should also differ from one part of the colonies to another. Thus, for female city-dwellers, she recommends teaching fine embroidery, an art traditionally practised in Algerian urban centres and well adapted to their confined lifestyle. For the “rougher” Kabyles and desert nomads, however, this refined skill would be ill-adapted; it is in the art of weaving, with which they are familiar, that these women should be instructed.

The educational programme exposed in this text is revealing in more than one way. While her insistence on reinforcing the female natives’ traditional skills instead of Europeanising them is concordant with her ethics of racial and cultural distance, it also highlights her traditional conception of gender roles. It is, once again, amusing to see an Eberhardt who has herself never taken part in embroidery and sewing sing the praises of such delicately feminine tasks. The argument of preserving traditional activities, evoked to back her recommendation of weaving as the only proper skill for nomads and Berber mountain-women, is equally unconvincing, the non-secluded lifestyle of these women offering, besides the activity she proposes, other occupations like farming or shepherding. Her privileging of weaving at the expense of these outdoor activities suggests that her proposal has less to do with preserving native tradition than with her being influenced by

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<sup>188</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Instruction professionnelle des [femmes] indigènes”, *Rakhil* (Paris: La Boîte à Documents, 1990), 136-142.

<sup>189</sup> The only author who seems to have thought of having it published is Danièle Masse, who inserts it as an appendix to Eberhardt’s novel *Rakhil*.

the bourgeois conception of female education, her claimed refusal to transpose Western models to the colonised Orient notwithstanding.

The text provides even stronger evidence of this bourgeois influence. Teaching centres, Eberhardt warns, should be vigilant in the choosing of their inmates. “Lost girls” should not be allowed to mix with “les jeunes filles d’honnête famille”,<sup>190</sup> as this would discourage parents from educating their daughters; “les écoles professionnelles”, she observes, “ne doivent point être des asiles”.<sup>191</sup> This exhortation is all the more bewildering as the author was well aware of the link between the prostitutes’ condition and their lack of education, as shown by the quotation in which she voices indulgence only for those prostitutes who are deprived of intellectual training. This by now unsurprising over-concern with “respectability”, which is manifested no less in the phrases “filles d’honnête famille” than in her banning of the “infortunées petites créatures qui errent dans nos rues”<sup>192</sup> from her project of education, not only contradicts Zayzafoun’s idea that she identified with native prostitutes, but, indeed, even negates the sympathy the word “infortunées” seems to voice for them.

The moral argument was a paramount feature of nineteenth-century campaigns in favour of female education. In France, as in Great Britain and America, perfecting the would-be-learner’s morality was a central argument for the champions of such a project; and, in order that the argument should prove valid, school directors saw to it that their students complied with their strict codes of conduct. Although, both in England and France, boarding-school girls’ behaviour was placed under surveillance in an attempt to “preserve pupils from the corruption of the [...] world”,<sup>193</sup> regulations were even stricter in French schools.<sup>194</sup> Among other things, friendships were restricted and supervised with the purpose of preventing social mixing.<sup>195</sup> Indeed, this was a major anxiety for parents, who wished their daughters to receive their education “in a well-conducted establishment frequented by girls of their daughter’s rank, and [if possible] by them exclusively, where

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<sup>190</sup> Eberhardt, “Instruction professionnelle”, 139.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Mme de Maintenon, quoted in Christina De Bellaigue, *Educating Women: Schooling and Identity in England and France, 1800-1867* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 163.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

the joint influence of teachers and school companions may help to strengthen good principles instilled at home”.<sup>196</sup>

Eberhardt seems to have been won over to this educational model. Besides revealing a concern with morality, her exclusion of prostitutes from the doors of her projected academy obviously also participates in the reinforcement of social stratification. In addition to its incompatibility with their exiguous location, one of the reasons she discourages teaching weaving to city women was that she thought they would be unwilling to “stoop” to skills usually practised by “socially inferior” women.<sup>197</sup> To this class bias, Eberhardt adds racial prejudice. While eager to preserve racial distance by confining native women to their ancestral skills, she also buttresses the colonialist power schema by designating the coloniser as the “master” and maintaining the colonised in the role of the disciple. A glaring gap in her educational project is indeed that it explains neither in what way an education that would only teach female natives what they already know could prove profitable to them nor how their Western teachers could possibly improve their practice of an art which is indigenous and, as such, alien to themselves.

Eberhardt concludes her essay by voicing her wish to receive constructive responses from ladies who share her interest in the issue of female native education and who have already devoted themselves to this “noble” task. The deferential tone in which she addresses them and her expressed wish to participate in their project confirms her subscription to the colonial project of educating the native, while also underlining the fact that her misogynist comments did not target all Western women, and, more important, the view that her contempt for some female Europeans is embedded in what she saw as their failure to embody her ideal of the “superior” woman coloniser. In other words, it is to her idealisation of the colonial project, not to anti-colonialism as Chilcoat argues, that her misogyny relates.

### **3.3. Love in the time of colonisation**

If, as has been argued, Eberhardt’s political stance is pro-colonial and her moral one emphasises racial distance, then her quasi-exclusive preference for native partners and her eventual marriage to one of them becomes particularly problematic. However, what seems

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<sup>196</sup> James Hammond, quoted in *ibid.*, 139-140.

<sup>197</sup> Eberhardt, “Instruction professionnelle”, 141.

to be a glaring contradiction makes sense when read against the background of her will-to-power and her subscription to both the racial and gender schemas of her time. Her perception of human relations, including romantic ones, in terms of a power struggle and her systematic attribution of the role of the oppressed to woman meant that she had little chance to secure for herself the upper hand in this type of exchange, a fatality which could only be defeated by calling her “racial superiority” to the rescue. Instead of thwarting her attempts at self-masculinisation, as Behdad’s argument goes, the feminisation of the colonised Oriental by the Westerner legitimated her “wearing the pants” and liberated her from the female prerogative of obedience to male authority, the male native being, precisely, not perceived as having this status.

### 3.3.1. A war called love

Eberhardt’s awareness of the power tensions underlying love relations is perhaps most obvious in her rendering of the tormented passion between Véra and Dmitri Orschanov in her novel “Trimardeur”. The violence with which these tensions can be unleashed is poignantly described in the following scene:

Orschanov était aveuglé par la colère et le désir. Ils se tordaient, l’un contre l’autre, en une lutte orageuse.  
 - Brute, lâche, râlait Véra, une barre dure entre les sourcils.  
 Enfin, tous deux, roulèrent à terre.  
 Ce rut sauvage et cruel la soulevait de dégoût et de honte.  
 Orschanov se releva. Sous sa main, le poignet droit de Véra avait saigné. Elle était pâle, elle n’avait pas répondu à son étreinte, elle lui en voulait.<sup>198</sup>

The juxtaposition of words like “désir” and “colère”, the adjectives “cruel” and “sauvage” used to qualify what is supposedly a manifestation of love on Orschanov’s part, and the overall ambiguity of the description, in which the contact between the two lovers oscillates between mad embrace and merciless struggle re-write love as a conflict over power, so that Orschanov’s furious wish to possess Véra is answered with no less furious resistance. This resistance is, of course, not the mark of unwanted or unreciprocated love. Rather, it is a response to a gesture perceived as a threat to Véra’s hitherto unchallenged authority. Indeed, until this sudden eruption, Orschanov has been her rather docile disciple. As has previously been mentioned, it is under her firm counsel that he extirpates himself from his

<sup>198</sup> Eberhardt, “Trimardeur”, 447-448.

“unhealthy” inclinations; “Orschanov suiv[a]it point par point [s]es conseils”;<sup>199</sup> “elle le dominait, et ne cédait pas”.<sup>200</sup> Yet this well-defined power distribution is gradually complicated as Orschanov starts to resent his enslavement and as Véra’s own firmness dwindles with the growth of her affection for him. While Orschanov, in his increasing revolt “haïssait presque Véra”, wondering “ [d]e quel droit elle le gardait comme ça, contre son gré”,<sup>201</sup> she, for her part, “se méprisa[it] d’être si faible: elle n’avait pas su le faire sien, et elle s’assujettissait à lui, maintenant.”<sup>202</sup>

The novel teems with other images that suggest either imprisonment and submission or rebellion and the quest for liberation. Love, as represented in “Trimardeur”, is a constant assessment and re-assessment of the beloved Other’s power and a subsequent to-ing and fro-ing between subjection of and subjection to him/her. While the fascination felt for the power of the beloved Other is fed by the fear of losing this object of love, yielding to him/her raises the spectre of *self-loss*, of total annihilation of the will. It is these anxieties which unfold in the violent passage quoted above. The liberated violence, which culminates in the spilled blood, in turn heralds the lovers’ – especially Orschanov’s – enfranchisement. Setting himself free from Véra’s grasp at last, he, the very next day, sets sail for Marseilles, as a first stage in his long-delayed project of *vagabondage*.

There are, of course, alternatives to Véra’s and Orschanov’s endless struggle; “good” women accept self-surrender, placing all the power in the hands of the male partner (often, the husband), as is the case in “Dans la dune” with Saadia, who, “lasse et apeurée” surrenders to “son maître”.<sup>203</sup> The kind of friction-fraught love described in “Trimardeur” characterises couples brought up to have equal gender status, as it were, by the masculinisation of woman. Tessaadit’s hold over the enamoured Martial is even more paralysing than Véra’s (over Dmitri). Her sadistic impulse to torture him with continual rebuffs and unconcealed infidelities is only exacerbated by her victim’s demonstrations of helplessness: “[e]lle l’aimait, mais irrésistiblement, elle éprouvait un obscur besoin de le torturer, pour mieux le dominer.”<sup>204</sup> However, as Martial, having long despised himself for his passive submission to his beloved’s affronts, eventually sets himself free from her

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 415.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 424.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 439.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 435.

<sup>203</sup> Eberhardt, “Dans la dune”, 153.

<sup>204</sup> Eberhardt, “Tessaadit”, 218.

grasp and turns his back on her, it is her turn to be subjected to the jealous and possessive Si Dahmane.

Eberhardt's own romantic involvements were often as tormented as those of her characters, and she seems to have found enjoyment in turn in the role of the torturer and in that of the quarry. While she made several victims both in Europe and the Maghreb,<sup>205</sup> the one she tormented most was certainly her correspondent Ali. As Delacour observes, there is an obvious sadistic streak in the fact that she regularly gave him detailed accounts of her liaison with El Khoudja while ignoring his own manifestations of amorous interest.<sup>206</sup> The liaison in question seems to have started with Eberhardt's falling under the spell of El Khoudja's "très grande virilité",<sup>207</sup> "sans qu'il ait rien fait pour [l]'attirer".<sup>208</sup> When he eventually did manifest his interest, it was to accompany it with that jealousy and possessiveness traditionally associated with Oriental passion. Although, frightened by the perspective of living in perpetual seclusion, the young woman rejected his immediate offer of marriage, she yielded to his request for a quasi-matrimonial relationship<sup>209</sup> and complained (always to poor Ali) that her condition was one of outright enslavement, but that she feared she would never set herself free from her "master's" grasp, despite the sufferings he had caused her.<sup>210</sup>

### 3.3.2. (Un)loving the native

The El Khoudja-Eberhardt-Ali triangular relationship echoes the ambivalence of Eberhardt's fictional female characters. While obviously enjoying the power she exercised over her lovers/suitors, she also had to resist the pleasure she often derived from assuming the role of the powerless victim. It is indeed rather puzzling to note that Eberhardt's strongest inclinations went to men who treated her with indifference. Apart from El Khoudja, one of her most intense experiences of love was inspired by Archavir, an impecunious and physically unpretentious Armenian student for whom the smitten girl

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<sup>205</sup> Among others, these included Christos Christidi, a Greek doctor whom Eberhardt intrigued with anonymous, mysterious letters and Mohammed, a Tunisian lover who, during a brief escapade she had into the desert, wrote pleading for a quick return to Tunis and signing, in shaky French, "ton victime". See Charles-Roux, *Un Désir d'Orient*, 175; and Mohammed's letter in Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 258-259 respectively.

<sup>206</sup> Delacour's comment is inserted in Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 79.

<sup>207</sup> Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 86.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 87-88.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

was, so to speak, transparent.<sup>211</sup> In a defensive reflex, however, she refused to commit herself to either of these men.<sup>212</sup>

### 3.3.2.1. Western wives, native husbands

Detecting the intervention of Eberhardt's will-to-power in her romantic involvements, Zayzafoun explains the distance she took from Archavir and El Khoudja by her awareness of the loathed position of weakness in which these men's wealth promised to place her; by the same token, it is the absence of such threats in the person of Slimène Ehni (who was almost as impoverished as herself) which made marriage with him possible.<sup>213</sup> Slimène's impoverishment was not only of a financial nature; biographers seem unanimous that he was a "colourless" and conveniently malleable figure who seldom questioned his wife's authority. However, still more important as regards the possibility of empowerment he offered Eberhardt was his racial subalternity.<sup>214</sup> As has been argued in the previous chapters, the company of the natives, to whom she felt superior, provided the writer with a confidence she lacked at home.

Eberhardt was, of course, not the first European woman to marry an "Oriental". Separated by nationality and social rank, the English aristocrat Jane Digby and the French petty bourgeois Aurélie Picard had similar destinies in that they left their native land to settle in the desert, marrying one of its leading men and intervening in a significant way in local events and even, on occasions, the international affairs of their new home.<sup>215</sup> While Digby not only counselled Sheikh El Mezrab, the chief of one of the most influential Syrian tribes, in his task of leadership, but also fought by his side in the inter-tribal wars so recurrent in the desert,<sup>216</sup> Picard's clout was such that most of the decisions taken by her husband were actually whispered by herself. She advised him on matters relating to his

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<sup>211</sup> For a detailed account of this relationship, see Edmonde Charles-Roux, *Un Désir d'Orient*, 283-301.

<sup>212</sup> Returning to Geneva after a long absence, the formerly indifferent Archavir – re-baptised Rechid Bey after an unexpected allegiance to the Ottoman occupier and subsequently assigned a prestigious diplomatic position – now expressed a pressing wish to marry Eberhardt. The latter accepted the proposal only to change her mind and cut all bonds with her fiancé shortly afterwards. See *ibid.*

<sup>213</sup> Zayzafoun, "La Roumia Convertie", 42.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>215</sup> For a biography of Digby, see Lesley Blanch, "Jane Digby El Mezab: Matrimonial Themes and Variations", *The Wilder Shores of Love* [1954] (London: Phoenix, 1993), 131-196; for a biography of Picard, see Ursula Kingsmill Hart, "Aurélie Picard", *Two Ladies of Colonial Algeria: The Live and Times of Aurélie Picard and Isabelle Eberhardt* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Centre of International Studies, 1987), 1-69.

<sup>216</sup> Blanch, *The Wilder Shores of Love*, 134 and 177-178.



*zaouia*'s finances<sup>217</sup> and, a fervent colonialist, reinforced the already ongoing cooperation between the Tijanya brotherhood, of which he was a local representative, and the French authorities.<sup>218</sup>

It would be interesting to dwell on the reasons which brought these women to settle in the Orient and contract an interracial marriage at a time when this sort of union was very much frowned upon. Although repulsed by the gross features, “dark skin and frizzy beard”<sup>219</sup> of her suitor, the twenty-year-old Picard saw in the offered marriage an unexpected opportunity to swap the dim prospects that awaited her in Europe for the prestigious position of an influential dignitary's wife. But her ambition went even further. Both the affective authority she had over her husband and her active involvement in the colonial enterprise endowed her with a power of initiative that was denied to her at home. From an obscure lady's maid in her native Upper Marne, she turned into a desert queen of sorts, feared for her intransigence and hailed for her achievements.<sup>220</sup>

Jane Digby was far from being the obscure maiden Picard was. Born into an aristocratic family, she was no less beautiful than she was well-born. But her reputation for extraordinary looks went hand in hand with that of her countless sulphurous romances. Her lovers included an English museum curator, an Austrian prince, a German king, a Greek count, an Albanian outlaw, and even, for a brief period, the French writer Balzac.<sup>221</sup> When she became Madame El Mezrab, she was forty-six years old and had suffered the blow, so humiliating for such a renowned beauty, of discovering that her latest flame – the Albanian brigand – was actually more infatuated with her plain, but younger, maid, than with her.<sup>222</sup> That her marriage with the Syrian sheikh took place at this stage of her life was probably not fortuitous: for the first time, she admitted that life, as she had hitherto understood and lived it, was over;<sup>223</sup> that the power her looks bestowed on her had started to fade. In Syria, where, filled with disappointment, she headed with the feeling “that only archaeology

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<sup>217</sup> Hart, *Two Ladies*, 31-33.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>220</sup> Picard's major achievement is “the Qurdan”, a large-scale garden in the middle of the desert, in the midst of which she erected an impressive manor house. This project was, to a large extent, financed by the French authorities. Visiting her in her “castle”, wives of native dignitaries covered her with gold, jewellery, and gifts of all sorts. *Ibid.*, 35-41.

<sup>221</sup> Blanch, *The Wilder Shores of Love*, 138-163.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, 162-164.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

remained,”<sup>224</sup> another blow awaited her. An Oriental suitor, whom she agreed to marry despite his refusal to divorce his three wives, “forgot” his pledge of marriage during a brief trip she made back to Europe. On her return, she found her promised position taken; she had to retreat before her native rival’s “invincible youth”.<sup>225</sup> The realisation of the (relative) waning of her empowering beauty provoked by these episodes had probably much to do with her willingness to marry Sheikh Mudjuel El Mezrab and to endorse the role of the caring and obedient wife usually demanded of Oriental women.<sup>226</sup> Despite such “concessions”, however, her status was *not* that of other desert women. Few of these would have convinced their husbands to live, as the Mezrabs did for six months, on the outskirts of Damascus à l’européenne.<sup>227</sup> Back in the desert, her lifestyle was certainly not that of any fellow wife; she was the “Sitt” – the Lady – whose advice was sought on farming, education, and domestic affairs, among other questions; she was the one “often seen racing ahead of [male] Bedouins” as they went hunting.<sup>228</sup>

In very different ways, the cases of Digby and Picard show, first, that, in the context of nineteenth-century racialist ethics, the option of marrying a native was only considered inasmuch as it was seen as empowering and, second, that no matter how respectful of Oriental tradition, the Western woman in the East was guaranteed, on account of her very Westernness, a status superior to that of her Oriental counterparts. By bestowing on the white woman systematic power over the brown woman and, often, the brown man, these unions perpetuated the narrative of Western superiority, thus belying their seeming transgression of racial ethics. Interracial relations – including marital ones – unmistakably bear the mark of racial hierarchy, and Western wives, in such relations, often “wear the pants”.

“Wearing the pants” is precisely the phrase chosen by Ursula Hart in her *Two Ladies of Colonial Algeria* to describe both Eberhardt’s and Picard’s relationships with their respective husbands.<sup>229</sup> Yet what comes from Hart’s book is that this phrase is the only possible point of comparison between the two women. While Picard is portrayed as the

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>226</sup> There are testimonies of the handsome Englishwoman “humbly washing the feet of her Arab lord and master.” Ibid., 134.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 176 and 178.

<sup>229</sup> “Like Aurélie, she [Eberhardt] wore the pants.” Hart, *Two Ladies*, 89.

epitome of the arrogant, and unsympathetic Westerner, Eberhardt's relation to the desert is rendered in idyllic terms which highlight her fascination with the place and her disinterested friendship with its people. Where the French *petite bourgeoisie*, throughout thirty years spent in the Algerian South, never relinquished European dress styles,<sup>230</sup> never mingled with the natives, and treated her servants with meticulous intransigence and even, on occasions, with cruelty,<sup>231</sup> the Russian writer adopted their costume, shared their lifestyle, and denounced the treatment they suffered under an iniquitous colonial system. In the same vein, the supposedly genuine and disinterested love uniting the Ehni couple is opposed to the cold calculation behind Picard's agreement to marry Tidjani: "It was certainly not love at first sight, though love at the thought of power it certainly was."<sup>232</sup> Despite these facts, however, contrasting "kind" Eberhardt and "wicked" Picard is rather simplistic. As has been argued in the different parts of this study, the Russian writer was immune neither to ambition and will-to-power, nor to imperialist ideology, including racial prejudice. It is also, with more relevance to the present discussion, possible to highlight several similarities between her interracial marriage and Picard's. If becoming Madame Tidjani lifted the Upper Marne girl above her subaltern social condition, transforming her into a local spokesperson for the colonial presence in the Algerian desert, marrying Slimène granted the Russian outsider (to the French Empire) access not only to the Algerian colonial space from which she had been banned, but also to Frenchness itself, as a first step towards involvement in the colonial enterprise.

### 3.3.2.2. "An ideal husband"

El Khoudja and Slimène – the two native men to whom Eberhardt felt the most attracted – were, so to speak, the two poles of her ambivalent economy of desire. As has been argued in the previous chapter, Eberhardt both feminised and over-masculinised the Muslim male in her simultaneous eagerness to re-write her religion as empowering and to reproduce the colonialist penetration of the female Orient. It is a very similar logic that explains her fascination with these antagonistic types of character. Despite her fascination with masculinity as a power signifier, which accounts for the spell "le mâle"<sup>233</sup> El

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 41-42

<sup>231</sup> Picard is reported to have brutally whipped her servants for having failed to take proper care of a set of *burnouses* she intended to offer as gifts. Ibid., 42.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>233</sup> Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 160.

Khoudja, with his despotic, possessive character, cast on her, this paragon of masculinity perturbed the traditional Western-maleness-versus-Oriental-femininity schema to which she adhered and which she sought to reproduce in what Ann Laura Stoler called “the intimate frontiers of the Empire”.<sup>234</sup> For such a task, soft-tempered Slimène was a much more suitable candidate. As described by biographers and by Eberhardt herself, he seemed to be a masculine incarnation of supposedly feminine virtues – and of feminine looks. And it precisely these features, so at odds with those which captivated her in El Khoudja, that she claimed to cherish in him: “Pourquoi est-ce que j’adore les yeux de Rouh’? Ce n’est ni pour leur forme ni pour leur couleur, c’est pour le rayonnement doux [...] de leur regard”.<sup>235</sup> This focus on her husband’s *douceur* is recurrent throughout her references to him.<sup>236</sup>

Describing her life with Slimène in a letter to her brother Augustin, Eberhardt writes with satisfaction:

Caractère doux, gai, détestant le bruit, les sorties, les fréquentations de cabarets, aimant sa maison, la défendant jalousement contre toute invasion du dehors, Slimène est un époux idéal pour moi qui suis fatigué, écœuré, et las surtout de la solitude désespérante où je me suis toujours trouvé, malgré les fréquentations que j’ai pu avoir.<sup>237</sup>

Surprisingly for a “nomad” like Eberhardt, the passage reads as an ode to cosy, tranquil family life and is strikingly reminiscent of the scenes of domestic happiness so dear to conventional Europe. But where the warmth of a welcoming home – and of a loving wife – is traditionally the place where *man*, tired of the danger and adventure of the outside world, finds refuge, it is now the Ehni wife who, weary of her peregrinations and her frivolous frequentations, retires to the cosy comfort made ready by her husband: feminised through the emphasis laid on his softness, quiet temper, home-loving character, and “virtuous” keeping away from disreputable locations, Slimène is “un époux idéal” because he displays the qualities of... an ideal wife.<sup>238</sup> Simultaneously, in addition to her appropriation of the

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<sup>234</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, “Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies”, *The Journal of American History* 88, 3 (Dec. 2011), 829-865, 830.

<sup>235</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 125.

<sup>236</sup> See, for example, Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 127 and 133.

<sup>237</sup> Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 284.

<sup>238</sup> This reading shows that Eberhardt’s domestication of Slimène was not only metaphorical as Sidonie Smith argues. Smith suggests that Eberhardt took her husband “home”, that is, to Europe, by instructing him in Western civilisation and literature. See Smith, *Moving Lives*, 41.

traditionally male role of the tired traveller, Eberhardt confirms her self-masculinisation through the masculine inflections of the adjectives she employs to qualify herself.

The “femininity” of Slimène was convenient in that it permitted a reconciliation of the Eberhardtian wish to re-enact the narrative of the female East as the object of the (male) Westerner’s desire and domination without departing from the fundamental law of Western sex-regulations – heterosexuality – and the patriarchal gender hierarchy. Operating a reversal in the gender identities of Monsieur and Madame Ehni also allowed the latter to “call the tune” within the couple. As has been noted, Eberhardt made her husband an agent of the colonial enterprise by urging him to take up the position of a civil servant, encouraging him to prepare for the recruitment exams by arguing the need to lift the Arab race above the ignorance and intellectual backwardness which made it the object of the West’s contempt. And, while taking on the task of raising him up to Western standards of education, she, an intransigent teacher, occasionally went as far as delivering her pupil a corrective blow.<sup>239</sup> From the “civilising mission” to the erasure of the native’s will and the use of violence, the Eberhardt-Ehni relationship functions as a microcosm of the East-West colonial schema.

As a central element of this schema, the feminisation of the Orient is not only allegorised through Slimène’s soft eyes or his penchant for sedentariness. In the correspondence she kept with her fiancé during the Marseilles “exile” which followed her expulsion, Eberhardt recurrently admonished him for his lack of stamina and surrender to despair, while highlighting her own faculty for endurance: “Pourquoi est-ce que je ne faiblis pas, moi? Pourquoi moi, ‘faible femme’, je tiens bon, je lutte [...]?”<sup>240</sup> As made obvious by the inverted commas surrounding “faible femme”, the use of this phrase to qualify herself is clearly sarcastic; the object of its denigration is less the woman that she is than the man whom she exceeds in the supposedly masculine traits of strength and combativeness.

### 3.3.2.3. Forbidden motherhood

Despite her intense sexual life, Eberhardt was never a mother. This detail seems to have intrigued her biographers, who, in seeking an explanation, have advanced various,

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<sup>239</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 122.

<sup>240</sup> Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 368.

and sometimes extravagant, hypotheses. While some, like Kobak, have discussed the possibility of a biological deficiency rendering conception impossible for her,<sup>241</sup> others have speculated on the nature of her sexual practices.<sup>242</sup> A perhaps less far-fetched explanation is Kobak's other affirmation – that the writer was well-acquainted with the latest contraceptive methods of her day and that there is evidence of her sending for an informative brochure on this subject shortly after she started venturing to Geneva and having her first romantic encounters.<sup>243</sup> Without wishing to linger on these rather voyeuristic accounts of Eberhardt's private life, her attitude to motherhood is worth reflecting upon. Unless, as Kobak speculates, her non-experience of maternity was an unchosen result of an inability to conceive, what is worth investigating is less how she negotiated her well-known penchant for sex and her rejection of motherhood than the ethical/ideological motive behind such recalcitrance.

It would be tempting to provide a feminist explanation; to argue that, in rejecting motherhood, Eberhardt not only rid herself of an obstacle to her itinerant quest for freedom, but also questioned a status often seen as woman's natural destiny,<sup>244</sup> thus writing an alternative life-narrative for the "weaker" sex. The argument sounds all the more consistent as it fits perfectly well within the traditional Eberhardt iconography – that of the unconventional woman, the paragon of freedom, the celebrated rebel-figure – supported by other aspects of her life. Despite its seeming plausibility, however, this reading lacks Eberhardt's own support. While she did sometimes write disapprovingly of marriage – that other sacred nineteenth-century institution – similarly negative comments on motherhood are absent from her writings. Although the mother as a literary figure is rare in her fiction, it is, when present, evoked in laudatory terms. In "Oum Zahar", the eponymous heroine's fragile equilibrium is only preserved thanks to her mother, "le seul rayon de soleil, le seul semblant de bonheur qui [lui] soit donné".<sup>245</sup> With the death of this sole consolation, Oum Zahar's last bond with the "normal" world is broken as she becomes a *maraboute* and

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<sup>241</sup> Kobak suggests that Eberhardt might have been anorexic and amenorrhoeic and that the sexual freedom which marked her life had probably much to do with this condition. *Isabelle*, 98.

<sup>242</sup> Françoise d'Eaubonne explains Eberhardt's cross-dressing by her wish to restrict her sexuality to anal intercourse. *Vie d'Isabelle Eberhardt*, 390-391. Kobak dismisses this hypothesis as not plausible. *Isabelle*, 99.

<sup>243</sup> Kobak, *Isabelle*, 39 and 98.

<sup>244</sup> D'Eaubonne reads Eberhardt's (supposed) sexual practices as a deliberate attempt to escape the shackles of motherhood. *Vie d'Isabelle Eberhardt*, 391. Similarly, Zayzafoun sees in the writer's refusal to have children a challenge to the Victorian cult of domesticity. "La Roumia Convertie", 51.

<sup>245</sup> Eberhardt, "Oum Zahar", 120.

leaves her father's house; a fate which, in a sense, echoes that of the writer herself. In *Requiem pour Isabelle*, Denise Brahimi explains that Eberhardt's life-story revolved around the figure of Nathalie de Moerder, whose death, she maintains, was the central incentive behind the turn it took towards *vagabondage* and non-conformism.<sup>246</sup> While this focus on the figure of the mother alone is debatable, Eberhardt did place *L'Esprit Blanc* on a pedestal and looked up to her as an ideal of femininity, as has been shown.

Along with this valorisation of the mother-figure, which culminates in her idolisation of her own mother, Eberhardt did not shrink from the idea of being one herself. When her friend Robert Randau<sup>247</sup> asked her whether she envisaged having a child, her answer was that she had no such project, but that, if this happened, the child "serait son bonheur" and she would renounce her nomadic lifestyle for its sake.<sup>248</sup> While voicing no enthusiasm for maternity, this answer does not exclude it as a horrifying possibility either. Indeed, Eberhardt often manifested an eagerness to perform a mother's role, if not to be an actual mother. One of her major preoccupations as she planned to settle in Tunisia after her parents' death was taking care of Ahmed, a native child her mother had adopted during their sojourn in Annaba and to whom, revealingly, she liked to refer as "mon enfant".<sup>249</sup>

How, given Eberhardt's obvious valorisation of motherhood, can one account for her avoidance of this status? The answer might well reside, once again, in her subscription to colonial ethics. In the context of the imperial fear of the racial Other, preserving the purity of the "superior" white race became an urgent task; a task confided to the white woman and in which motherhood was a central imperative. Besides keeping the male agents of the Empire away from the temptation of sexual encounters with female natives, female settlers were expected to produce purebred whites, instead of the hybrids that such encounters would have produced.<sup>250</sup> Although Eberhardt's attempt to reconcile her patriarchal outlook with her will-to-power led her to favour hybrid amorous liaisons, she was, as already noted, no champion of racial hybridity herself. It is precisely in this light that her renunciation of motherhood can be read: as an ethical opposition to miscegenation. The very logic which urged same-race partners to beget children demanded that hybrid couples

<sup>246</sup> Denise Brahimi, *Requiem pour Isabelle* (Paris: Publisud, 1983), 17-18.

<sup>247</sup> Robert Randau (1873-1950) was a key figure of the so-called "Algerianist" school of literature.

<sup>248</sup> Robert Randau, *Isabelle Eberhardt: notes et souvenirs* [1945] (Paris: La Boîte à documents, 1989), 261.

<sup>249</sup> Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 156.

<sup>250</sup> Catherine Hall, "Of Gender and Empire: Reflections on the Nineteenth Century", *Gender and Empire*, Philippa Levine ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 46-76, 47.

refrain from doing so. Interestingly, Eberhardt is not the only Western woman who forbade herself to bear a native man's offspring. Jane Digby, who had had no less than seven children with her European lovers, had none with Sheikh El Mezrab; Aurélie Picard, who lived much longer than Eberhardt, never experienced maternity.

There might well also be in Eberhardt's renunciation of motherhood something of a self-punishing gesture. In "Dans la dune", the writer makes Hama Srir explain his deplored childlessness by the fact that he had "taken" his wife against her father's consent, thus infringing both patriarchal and religious laws: "Dieu ne nous a pas donné d'enfant [...] Peut-être est-ce parce que nous avons commencé dans le *haram* (le péché, l'illicite)."<sup>251</sup> The same sanction is reserved for transgressions of the racial code. Like Eberhardt herself, all Eberhardt's female characters involved in such transgressions invariably die childless, as is the case with Yasmina, and also Tessaadit. Like the eventual desertion of the hero of the romance and the subsequent death of the heroine, childlessness signals the unavoidably tragic failure of attempts to pass racial boundaries.

Banned from access to maternity on account of her infraction of the "intimate boundaries of the Empire", Eberhardt compensated for it through the all-too-colonial task of "mothering" the natives. Her acting out as a mother was not reserved for Oriental children like the one adopted by her mother; this was a role she also liked to assume with adult natives – "[c]es grands enfants",<sup>252</sup> as she often described them. As Zayzafoun notes, this was particularly the case with her husband, Slimène.<sup>253</sup> In a letter she sent him warning him against the danger of drinking, she insists that she is advising him "en mère".<sup>254</sup> Outside the domestic sphere, her (never fulfilled) project of educating Muslim girls and her devoted nursing of the native poor, which she herself boasted of in a letter sent to *La Dépêche algérienne*,<sup>255</sup> functioned as variants of this maternal drive, which, translated into colonial terms, also meant the infantilisation of the colonised. Thus, while failing to participate in the specifically female duty of perpetuating the white race, Eberhardt "made

<sup>251</sup> Eberhardt, "Dans la dune", 155.

<sup>252</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "Légionnaires" [1908], *Sud oranais*, 84-88, 88.

<sup>253</sup> Zayzafoun, "La Roumia Convertie", 42.

<sup>254</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 369.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.



up” by investing in other typically female imperial duties.<sup>256</sup> The infraction of the colonial law was duly atoned for.

### **Conclusion:**

Treated as pre-discursive givens, the categories of sex and desire are traditionally seen as independent of the oppressive mechanisms of power. Eberhardt’s own sexuality, with its unbridled character and its exclusive preference for native partners, has often been celebrated as a central part of her overall choice of freedom and her associated rejection of racial and gender laws. In particular, her supposedly uncompromising refusal of domesticity and bourgeois morality often goes unchallenged. Departing both from the assumed antagonism of desire and power and the myth of Eberhardt’s immunity to patriarchal and bourgeois influences, this chapter has attempted to read the Russian writer’s complex sexual economy in relation to her will-to-power on the one hand and her absorption of racial and gender laws on the other.

For the woman that Eberhardt was, reconciling the patriarchal code with her quest for empowerment could be made possible only through the seemingly carnivalesque practices of cross-dressing and interracial love. While transvestism allowed her to participate in the patriarchal denigration and oppression of women without having to undergo its strictures, her limitation of her sexual encounters to natives allowed her to balance her gender handicap – or what, in her phallogentric vision, she perceived as such – with her racial superiority. Instead of the subordinate condition that would have been hers in the face of a white male partner, the double choice of self-masculinisation and hybrid amorous/sexual relationships meant, for her, an empowering reversal of gender identities – one which re-defined her as male while, in conformity with the Orientalist logic, feminising the Oriental man. Within the Ehni couple, the native husband is written as an “Angel of the Hearth” – soft, gentle, forbearing, and inclined to sedentariness – and, in a reversed version of the Western ideal of domesticity, it is his Western wife who roams the land, leaving him behind to take care of the house. Of course, it is also this wife who is in charge of deciding the future of the couple, including the husband’s own career.

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<sup>256</sup> Apart from bearing children, colonial women were expected to educate female natives and act as nurses. Catherine Hall, “Of Gender and Empire”, 60.

Eberhardt's complicity with both colonialism/Orientalism and patriarchy also manifests itself through her eroticisation of the North African female. Instead of locating the writer's gender identity within the traditional heterosexual and homosexual matrices, what this discussion has tried to highlight is the significance of her homoerotic gaze as a typically patriarchal will to subject the female body, which, as such, fits within her overall performance of masculinity. Inasmuch as it is restricted to the female Oriental alone, this gaze is also a colonialist gesture, the possession of the native woman functioning, in the colonialist imagination, both as an allegory and as an actual sign for the appropriation of the land. As a writer immersed in the all-too-male Orientalist tradition and seeking to secure a name within it, Eberhardt, in writing the native woman as the object of her erotic fantasy, might well be simply reproducing its discourse. However, the premise of the inseparability of power and desire that underlies this chapter makes it possible to read it as more than a mere *exercice de style*; to argue that it was a translation of an *actual* attraction, which was both produced by power – that held by the writer as a “male” Westerner – and in turn produced it by positioning her as a possessing subject while subjecting the desired natives to her gaze.

While reflecting on the intervention of colonial and patriarchal laws (notably their definition of maleness as the superior gender category) in the production of homoerotic desire in Eberhardt, this chapter has also discussed her eagerness to define herself as exclusively heterosexual. By abstaining from homosexual practices (or by keeping silent about them), Eberhardt locates herself within the bourgeois grid of sexual normativity. Indeed, the writer hailed as an icon of anti-conformism often displayed a surprising attachment to bourgeois morality, revising her family narrative in conformity with the standards of “respectability” and laying emphasis on female virtue. This concern with propriety even went beyond the boundaries of “respectable” spaces. Eberhardt's understatement of *la chose sexuelle* in her rendering of prostitution sites and her focus on the modest attitudes of their inmates is reminiscent of contemporary female travellers' desexualisation and domestication of the harem.

As the gesture of a dutiful girl perpetuating the teachings of her father and as a re-writing of the age-old concept of feminine modesty, her very transvestism, for all its seeming subversion of the codes of femininity, is an enactment of such “virtue”. Ironically, in simultaneously challenging and submitting to the codes of bourgeois patriarchy,

Eberhardt's cross-dressing brings her close to the North African women from whom she sought to distance herself, and whose veil incarnates the Western male's fantasies of subjecting the Orient as much as resistance to this subjection. No less ironically, her sartorial practice also connects her to the bourgeois *mondaines* whom she denigrates as mere actresses and "slaves of visibility". The male mask she constantly wore not only made her an actress in her own right but also reinforced the very visibility she sought to elude.

Eventually, for all her attempts to overcome the marker of disempowerment that she took her female gender category to be, what Eberhardt inscribes – both in text and textile – is a female, all-too-female identity, as defined by nineteenth-century patriarchal gender regulations. Although transvestism and Orientalism provided her with an opportunity to perform an empowering masculinity at the expense of the feminised Easterner, neither strategy really freed her from the traditional gender schema. Even her gender-reversed relationship with Slimène is mocked by the state of dependence in which she often found herself towards him. In the midst of the advice, recommendations, remonstrance and other marks of infantilisation with which her letters to her husband teem, there sometimes appears a manifestation of gratitude which reminds us that it was thanks to him that she did not die of starvation; that it was becoming Madame Ehni that gave her access to Frenchness – that other signifier of power. Despite her claims to independence, her fate was not all that different from that of more "conventional" women of her age. She shared not only their concern with "respectability", but also the predicament of marriage, the vision of which as woman's only possible means of empowerment her own narrative seems to confirm. Given the hybrid character of her marital union, however, the interests of the Empire dictated an abstention from what Stoler has termed "reproductive sterility"<sup>257</sup> – endangering the purity of the white race by begetting mixed-blood children.

Eberhardt's double subscription to patriarchal and colonial laws accounts for the ambivalence which marks her performance of gender as well as her writing of the Orient. Her reluctance to depart too far from the codes of proper feminine conduct, even while appropriating the Western male's privileges of gazing at and objectifying the racial Other, resulted in a version of Orientalism half-way between the typically masculine version analysed by Said and the desexualised and more "sympathetic" feminine variants discussed

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<sup>257</sup> Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire*, 176.

by Melman and Lewis. As ambivalent as its writer's contradictory desires for empowerment and submission, the Orient produced by Eberhardt acts simultaneously as the site of the West's sexual fantasies and as the incarnation of its ideal of domesticity.

## Chapter 4

### Journeys: Travel, Writing, and the Changing Self

In the current context of “the new world order of mobility”,<sup>1</sup> the widespread practices of travel, migration, nomadism, and other forms of displacement have elicited profuse and not always converging academic responses. Authors like Deleuze, Bhabha, and Clifford have famously saluted in mobility a new mode of resisting power structures: Deleuze presents the space traversed by nomads as a “smooth” space free from the barriers and walls erected by the sedentary in their will to control both their living space and its inhabitants;<sup>2</sup> Bhabha sees in the movement of people and cultures a hybridising phenomenon prone to unsettle geographical and cultural frontiers and, in so doing, to shake the certainties on which power and its holders rest their legitimacy;<sup>3</sup> and Clifford argues that mobility challenges static visions of culture, replacing them by one which views it as a site for travel.<sup>4</sup> Yet the wide, and often enthusiastic, circulation of such celebratory readings in scholarly circles has not prevented other academic voices from pointing to the persistence of power mechanisms in the supposedly power-neutralising potential of mobility. While Ali Behdad, in “Globalisation, Again!”, explains that the much celebrated postcolonial global movement is nothing but a variant of colonial relations and other forms of hegemony that go back to Mediaeval times,<sup>5</sup> Paul Smethurst and Mary Louise Pratt, among others,<sup>6</sup> prefer to highlight the interconnectedness of travel and such practices of power as imperialism. Mobility thus seems to be an “undecidable” practice that simultaneously thwarts and reinforces *l’ordre établi* and its accompanying power structures.

This chapter aims precisely at discussing the ideological implications of Eberhardt’s mobile lifestyle – a handy phrase which, for the time being, circumvents the complicated

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<sup>1</sup> James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* [1980], trans. Brian Massumi (London: Athlone, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* [1994] (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> James Clifford, “Travelling Cultures”, *Routes*, 17-46.

<sup>5</sup> Ali Behdad, “On Globalization, Again!”, *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, Ania Loomba et al. eds (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 62-79, 76.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Smethurst, introduction to *Travel Writing, Form, and Empire: The Poetics and Politics of Mobility*, Julia Kuehn and Paul Smethurst eds (New York: Routledge, 2009), 1-18; and Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

questions pertaining to what ought to be ranged as “travel” and what belongs in a different, if neighbouring, category: nomadism, exile, migration. Although such taxonomic considerations are beyond the scope of this chapter, the distinction between these practices might be pertinent to the present study for two reasons. On the one hand, the ideological hues associated with them do not always converge: as has just been mentioned, while travel has often been shown to be a conservative practice which reproduces the ethnocentric discourse of the power holder, nomadism is traditionally read as the very antithesis of what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have termed “the State” – the power apparatus, with its hierarchical vision and its systems of regulation and control. Unlike nomadism, moreover, travel is always a short-lived parenthesis in an otherwise sedentary condition; the traveller inhabits fixed points, when the nomad inhabits an open, ill-defined path.

Despite these seemingly clear-cut differences, deciding which of the two terms defines the status of the mobile subject is not always an easy task. Eberhardt liked to refer to herself as a nomad, and the unplanned character she often assigns to her peregrinations does make her fit within this category; however, the supposedly improvised and aimless nature of her mobility is more than debatable. Although she did seem to have experienced a short period of nomadism following the death of her parents, when she wandered between different European cities, uncertain what direction to give to her future life, most of her displacements were well thought-out projects. This was the case with her sailing to Tunisia and with her decision to head to the desert, where, as explained in Chapter 1, she had hoped to run a school and launch her writing career respectively; this was also the case with her short stay in Paris, where she tried unsuccessfully to secure a social network that would help her with her literary project.

The fact that Eberhardt’s displacements were motivated by a desire to secure a “respectable” position within the Parisian literary (and, by extension, social) hierarchy contradicts the Deleuzian claim that nomadism is incompatible with the State’s system of power, a contradiction which can be settled only by denying Eberhardt the status of nomad or refuting Deleuze’s definition. In fact, whether nomadism, as actually practised, matches the French philosopher’s idealised picture *has* been questioned by ethnographers and literary critics. The existence of nomadic empires provides evidence for the fact that nomadism is immune neither to will-to-power nor to supposedly State approaches to space

nor even to the temptation of sedentarisation; at the very height of their power, nomadic conquerors erected cities, palaces, and monuments,<sup>7</sup> as if, in convergence with the sedentary prejudice, the State was necessarily the last stage on the “Nomad’s Progress”.

The temptation of the State in the nomad is illustrated by Eberhardt in more than one way. Not only, as has been previously discussed, did she put her nomadism at the service of what might be called the “Colonial State” by roaming the desert to plead General Lyautey’s cause among the natives, but her representation of the Southern routes she traversed is closer to the State’s striated space than to the de-hierarchised, “smooth space”. As will be developed, Eberhardt’s rendering of Saharan spaces is marked by a repetitive resort to images of walls and pyramids which subtly mock the supposed “smoothness” of the desert, while also metaphorising her own hierarchical world vision. This vision will be further highlighted through an analysis of the road chronotope in Eberhardt’s writings. As defined by Bakhtin, the road is the carnivalesque chronotope *par excellence*, permitting as it does the mixing of travellers usually separated by race, gender, and social status; in Eberhardt’s writings, however, this mixing erases neither distance nor social/racial hierarchies. Rather, it will be shown that the Eberhardtian repartition of the road-space is racially codified, privileging the Westerner – usually the writer herself – with elevated positions, while confining the racial subaltern to the spatially low. The road is, thus, stripped of its carnivalesque dimension in that it reproduces, rather than neutralises or reverses, prevailing hierarchies.

Bakhtin’s discussion of the chronotope of the road is inserted within a broader analysis of what he calls the “adventure novel”, of which he identifies two types. Termed respectively the adventure novel of ordeal, or the Greek romance, and the adventure novel of daily life, the two types share an “adventure time” in which the hero(ine) experiences an unfamiliar world – and indeed an unfamiliar self – as s/he finds himself/herself occupying a role miles away from that which is his/hers in “real time”, that is, in the daily routine which precedes the beginning of the adventure.<sup>8</sup> The nature and the implications of this new role, however, constitute a central difference between the two types. While the

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<sup>7</sup> Luc Kwanten, *Imperial Nomads: a History of Central Asia 500-1500* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 1979). The case of the Arab Bedouins, sedentarised quickly after the first Islamic conquests, can be added to that of the Mongol nomads studied by Kwanten.

<sup>8</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel” [1937], *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Carl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press), 86-129.

protagonist of the Greek romance is lifted up to a literally heroic status as s/he is involved in surviving shipwrecks, fighting enemies, and other daunting performances, it is for a more debased position that the main character of the second type unwillingly swaps his/her former status. Whether what is relinquished is social rank, with the protagonist turning from noble to subaltern, or human status itself,<sup>9</sup> the new lowly position proves to be unexpectedly empowering, albeit in a different way from the heroism bestowed on the protagonist in the first type of novel. Hiding his/her own identity behind his/her debasing mask, the hero(ine) becomes a witness to the unmasking of other persons than himself/herself: humans feel no embarrassment to unveil their real thoughts or behaviour in the presence of a servant or an animal. The insight thus gained into human nature marks an evolution from a state of ignorance to one of enlightenment, and it is with this reward of wisdom that the protagonist returns to his/her initial condition. Bakhtin's two types of adventure novel obviously illustrate two opposing conceptions of travel: while the second type is close to the common representation of travel as morally enriching and mind-opening, the hero(ine)'s imperviousness to moral and social change in the first type betrays a conservative vision.

Appropriating Jacques Derrida's famous argument that there is nothing outside the text<sup>10</sup> – that is, that supposedly extra-textual elements are like literary texts, interpretable constructs rather than merely objective facts – this chapter will treat Eberhardt's meanderings as an adventure novel in their own right; a novel of which the heroine is the writer herself. In writing this “novel”, Eberhardt repetitively emphasises the “metamorphoses” of the self that punctuated her wanderings both in and far away from her native Europe, congratulating herself on her growth from careless hedonism to the wisdom and spiritual elevation bestowed on her, she thought, both by her conversion to Islam and the afflictions that she had to endure. Although this moral evolution brings her close to the second, “mind-opening”, type of adventure, it will be argued that her travels were, ultimately, a conservative experience. On the one hand, the very changes she went through testify that hers was an evolution towards a more conservative world vision, consisting mainly in a rejection of her former “looseness” and a stronger identification with the West,

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<sup>9</sup> This is the case with Lucius, the hero of Apuleus's *The Golden Ass*, which Bakhtin mentions precisely as the prototype of the adventure novel of daily life. Bakhtin, “Forms of Time”, 111.

<sup>10</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* [1967], trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 158.



which culminated in her active endorsement of the colonial project. On the other hand, an examination of her late writings shows that she retained most of the clichés she had about the Orient while still in Europe: the fact that, as Behdad explains, the “belated traveller’s” relationship to the visited place is always mediated by previous travellers’ intertexts<sup>11</sup> limited the insight her personal observation might have been expected to achieve.

In attempting to situate Eberhardt’s “adventure novel” within the Bakhtinian classification, this chapter will also discuss her construction of the “adventure chronotope”, which, in her case, is also an *Oriental* chronotope. The “adventure chronotope” constitutes a major difference between the two types of novel as defined by Bakhtin; in opposition to the “realistic”, well-defined time and space frame of the second type, the plot of the Greek romance seems to evolve outside the frame of “rational” time and space, in a fantastic world where space is unlimited and time is bracketed, immobile. Eberhardt’s own chronotope seems to oscillate between the two. Although she has often been hailed for having supposedly renounced the image of the eternally lethargic East dear to Orientalist writers in favour of an uncompromising portrayal of the harsh and all-too-concrete colonial reality,<sup>12</sup> the Orient – the desert, in particular – is often, both in her early and late writings, a land of sweet slumber, where *le temps s’est arrêté* and which is cherished precisely on that account. In Saidian terms, Eberhardt’s writing of the Orient privileges the “vision” of an immobile, a-historical Levant over a “narrative” of a dynamic East fully implicated in the course of History.<sup>13</sup>

Eberhardt’s construction of the Oriental “adventure time” as “vision” confirms the Orientalist thrust that this study has repeatedly detected in her texts. If previous chapters have discussed her recourse to the typically Orientalist procedures of feminisation and eroticisation, the present chapter will focus on the exotic dimension of her writing, expanding, once again, on its colonialist implications. In *Essai sur l’exotisme*, Victor Segalen<sup>14</sup> defines this concept as “an aesthetics of diversity” – a valorisation of the

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<sup>11</sup> Ali Behdad, *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 64.

<sup>12</sup> Hedi Abdel-Jaouad, “Isabelle Eberhardt: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Nomad”, *Yale French Studies* 83, 2 (1993): 93-117, 101. Abdel-Jaouad argues that Eberhardt’s realistic portraits of the Orient make her the antithesis of Pierre Loti, taken as a representative of exotic writing.

<sup>13</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* [1978] (London: Penguin, 1995), 240.

<sup>14</sup> Victor Segalen (1878-1919) was a French naval doctor, writer, and explorer. His essays count among the earliest attempts to theorise exoticism. An incomplete version of *Essai sur l’exotisme* was first published in 1955; the full essay first appeared in 1978.

differences between the Self and the Other that prevents the sense of newness, in which the exotic mind sees the very justification of life, from dying away.<sup>15</sup> Eberhardt's own eagerness to preserve the Maghreb from change, to maintain it, as it were, in a state of purity that resists the cultural and moral influence of the West, testifies to her subscription to Segalen's aesthetic vision. Interestingly, diversity, as Bhabha has famously argued, is quite a conservative approach to the relations between Self and Other. Instead of the standpoint of cultural difference, which views both the Self and the Other as unstable categories, constantly redefining each other, cultural diversity looks at identity as a fixed given and at any alteration that affects it as a disorder introduced into an initially well-defined, binary world. And because binary categories are precisely an inherent feature of colonialist thinking, it will be shown that, despite its defence of the Other's culture against the intrusion of the coloniser, Eberhardt's exoticism is very much reconcilable with colonialism.

#### 4.1. Reflections on nomadism

##### 4.1.1. Was Eberhardt a nomad?

In *Requiem pour Isabelle*, Denise Brahimi traces the writer's renunciation of a stable, conventional lifestyle to the death of Nathalie de Moerder; the death of the idealised mother, she argues, shattered the young woman's world and made her roam Europe and North Africa in search of a substitute ideal.<sup>16</sup> Brahimi's thesis is obviously elaborated around the hypothesis, developed by early biographers, that Eberhardt headed directly to Tunis following her mother's death. Although this supposition was later contradicted by new evidence showing that the orphaned daughter docilely accompanied her stepfather to Geneva,<sup>17</sup> Brahimi's implicit argument that Eberhardt was not a born nomad, a rebel against the comfort of sedentariness, remains valid. When the Russian writer resolved to leave the Villa Neuve for good, all its other dwellers had already deserted it: "Vava" had died, her brother Vladimir had committed suicide, and Augustin had decided to marry the much despised "Jenny l'Ouvrière" and content himself with an obscure life in Marseilles, his wife's hometown. With little wealth and no established situation, what would have

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<sup>15</sup> Victor Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme: une esthétique du divers* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1978), 75-76.

<sup>16</sup> Denise Brahimi, *Requiem pour Isabelle* (Paris: Publisud, 1983), 16-17.

<sup>17</sup> See Eberhardt's letters to Ali Abd El Wahab in Isabelle Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes: lettres aux trois hommes les plus aimés* [1991, posthumous] (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2003), 123-256.

become of the lonely young woman that she was? Tunis, where she had a powerful and devoted friend and where she could concretise her well thought-out project – running a school for female natives – was the most sensible destination, *en attendant* the dreamt-of literary conquest of Paris. What this brief biographical summary shows is that the writer who has grown to become an icon of nomadism remained, for a long time, impervious to the temptation of wanderlust. Even the loss of all her closest attachments – her parents and her brothers – did not trigger a nomadic impulse; instead, she turned hopefully to the last bond she could still cling to – her Tunisian friend. It was only as this last link broke<sup>18</sup> that she resigned herself to nomadism. Told that she was no longer welcome in Tunis, she returned to Europe, wandered between France, Switzerland, and Sicily, before ultimately deciding to settle in the desert. It was around this time (in 1900) that she started, in her diary, to refer to herself as a nomad and a vagabond; these words are absent from texts written prior to this date.

In their treatise on nomadology, Deleuze and Guattari emphasise the difference between nomads and migrants: while the movement of the latter is triggered by a harsh, ungrateful environment, which they swap for less forbidding parts of the world, the former are neither pushed onto the road by some contingency nor eventually re-territorialised. As the philosophers' provocative sentence puts it, "the nomad [...] *does not move*"; s/he permanently inhabits an open space, an ever-crossed path.<sup>19</sup> Eberhardt, precisely, did *not* inhabit the open path. Inasmuch as her wanderings started as a quest for brighter horizons, a flight from a gloomy condition rather than from sedentariness itself, she was less a nomad than a migrant. She was a failed migrant, however: chased in turn from Tunis, the Algerian South, and even the hated Ténès,<sup>20</sup> her attempts at re-territorialisation all proved vain. The claim that Eberhardt was a nomadic spirit who eventually re-territorialised herself in the Maghreb<sup>21</sup> is therefore both self-contradictory – nomadism, according to the Deleuzian definition, at least, is irreconcilable with (re-)territorialisation – and contradicted by biographical evidence. Her life-plot was the very reverse of a nomadic lifestyle

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<sup>18</sup> Eberhardt's dissolute lifestyle caused her relationship with Ali to deteriorate shortly after her settling in Tunisia.

<sup>19</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 380-381. Deleuze's and Guattari's emphasis.

<sup>20</sup> Following a press campaign accusing him of illegally extorting money from the natives, Eberhardt's husband resigned from his position as an administrative secretary, although he was soon acquitted of all charges.

<sup>21</sup> Abdel-Jaouad, "Portrait".

eventually ending in re-territorialisation: it was a series of unsuccessful attempts at (re)territorialisation, unavoidably resulting in unwanted “nomadism”.

Reconciling Eberhardt with nomadism can only be possible if one abandons the Deleuzian definition in favour of less romanticised ones. Authors like Rachel Bouvet and, before her, Jean-Didier Urbain make a clear-cut distinction between nomadism and *errance*, which Deleuze seems to use synonymously: “Un nomade, c’est tout sauf un errant, un vagabond. Sa circulation est réglée, anticipée, programmée en quelque sorte, par des impératifs très précis, qu’ils soient pastoraux, commerciaux ou autres. C’est un homme de la répétition, ce n’est pas un aventurier.”<sup>22</sup> This definition, so at odds with the Deleuzian romantic equation of nomadism with freedom, renders well not only the condition of “modern nomads” forced into mobility by the professional exigencies/insecurities brought about by a fluctuating labour market, but also that of “traditional” nomads – the itinerant pastoral communities of Africa and Asia, whose movement is contingent upon the lack/availability of grass and water. Eberhardt’s own displacements were either motivated by meticulous plans – opening a school in Tunis or setting the ground for a brilliant literary career in the Algerian South – or imposed by “precise imperatives”: the appointment of her husband as a *khoudja* made her move with him to Ténès; her own appointment as a collaborator with, then as a reporter for, Barrucand’s newspaper dictated her heading in turn to Algiers and South Oran.

As “homme[s] de la répétition”, nomads privilege familiar spaces. Their movement may be constant, but their routes seldom vary; it is to water sources, to vegetation spots that previous displacements have permitted them to take as points of reference that they regularly return. As Michel Butor puts it, nomadism is simultaneously a matter of reading marks and marking: “a few recognizable sites, a few natural landmarks, are isolated, then named and consecrated; they are retained, preserved, in *récits*.”<sup>23</sup> In this connection, it is interesting to note that Eberhardt’s peregrinations were restricted to the relatively confined space of Geneva-France-North Africa. When she was expelled from the Algerian South by the colonial authorities, she headed for the familiar Marseilles, where she settled at her

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<sup>22</sup> Jean-Didier Urbain, quoted in Rachel Bouvet, “Du Parcours nomade à l’errance: une figure de l’entre-deux”, *Nomades, voyageurs, explorateurs, déambulateurs*, Rachel Bouvet, André Carpentier and Daniel Chartier eds (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2006), 35-50, 39.

<sup>23</sup> Michel Butor, “Travel and Writing” [1974], *Temperamental Journeys: Essays on Modern Travel Literature*, Michael Kowalewski ed. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 53-70, 57.

brother's, instead of seeking adventure in yet undiscovered regions; when she eventually married Slimène Ehni, the couple most conventionally settled at her parents-in-law, in the previously visited Annaba. In a sense, even her early Oriental destinations – Annaba, with her mother, Tunis and, eventually, El Oued, in the Algerian desert – were departures for the familiar. Although she had never set foot in these places when she chose them as destinations, they *had* been “retained [and] preserved in [the] *récits*” not only of Fromentin and Loti, her favourite writers, but indeed also in her own.<sup>24</sup> In her case, the marking of the visited space took place both before and after the visit.

#### 4.1.2. An undecidable concept

##### 4.1.2.1. Nomadism and power

If Eberhardt's nomadism was obviously closer to Urbain's definition than to Deleuze's, this was not the case with her discursive construction of it. Deploying her usual empowering strategy of re-inventing her personal history to her own convenience, she transforms the peregrinations which have been imposed on her by hapless circumstances into not only a deliberate choice but, indeed, a fulfilment of a long-cherished dream. More than a lifestyle, her “nomadism”, as re-written in her diary, becomes an inherent feature of her character, one that she already displayed as a child: “Nomade j'étais quand, toute petite, je rêvais en regardant les routes, nomade je resterai toute ma vie, amoureuse des horizons changeants, des lointains encore inexplorés.”<sup>25</sup> Arguably, however, this early fascination with open roads is more the mark of the conqueror than of the nomad. In its impulse to annex the remote and domesticate the unknown, her interest in faraway, unexplored territories alone is, like the fascination with maps and blank spaces, a manifestation of what might be called the “Marlow syndrome” – the desire to appropriate foreign spaces. As such, it prefigures another appropriating gesture: the urge to mark territories, which Orientalist travellers traditionally perform either by inscribing their own names on the visited monuments or parts of landscape or apposing their names on an

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<sup>24</sup> While still living in Geneva, Eberhardt published “Vision du Moghreb” (1895), which centres on a young native student's determination to seek martyrdom by fighting the intruding French “infidels”. The short story depicts scenes of religious life in North Africa in a manner which, albeit rather idealised, was judged strikingly accurate for someone who had hitherto never set foot in that part of the world.

<sup>25</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, *Journaliers* [1923, posthumous] (Paris: Joëlle Losfeld, 2002), 231.

Orient-made-text, an Orient trapped, as it were, within the frame of travel writing of their production.<sup>26</sup>

While herself taking part in such a marking-process through her Orientalist writings, Eberhardt's vision of displacement as appropriation – hence, empowerment – is also rendered in much more explicit terms. In a description more evocative of a soldier than of a nomad, she hails “le fier vagabond conquérant des horizons”;<sup>27</sup> in another, both conquest and ownership are associated with *vagabondage*:

Etre pauvre de besoins, être ignoré, étranger et chez soi partout, et marcher, solitaire et grand à la conquête du monde.  
 Le chemineau solide, assis sur le bord de la route, et qui contemple l'horizon libre, ouvert devant lui, n'est-il pas le maître absolu des terres, des eaux, et même des cieux?  
 Quel châtelain peut rivaliser avec lui en puissance et en opulence?  
 Son fief n'a pas de limites, et son empire pas de lois.  
 Aucun servage n'avilit son allure, aucun labeur ne courbe son échine vers la terre qu'il possède et qui se donne à lui, toute, en bonté et en beauté.<sup>28</sup>

This articulation of *vagabondage* in terms of possession is in obvious conflict with the Deleuzian argument that appropriation belongs to the State's logic of power.<sup>29</sup> Seeing in the spaces s/he traverses a mere support for his/her de-territorialisation,<sup>30</sup> the nomad's relationship to the land is free from will-to-possession; as such, nomadism is the antithesis of the empire that Eberhardt employs as a metaphor for the nomad's power and which, for Deleuze, is the culmination of the State's logic.<sup>31</sup> Unlike emperors, even the “most powerful” of nomads – tribal chiefs – do not have any power of their own; what they enjoy is a responsibility and an honorific title that is conferred upon them by fellow tribesmen, and which they are allowed to keep only inasmuch as they are judged to abide by the tribe's interests.<sup>32</sup> Not so with Eberhardt's nomad. As suggested by the profuse use of “State rhetoric” – “châtelain”, “fief”, “opulence” and, of course, “empire” – s/he is a

<sup>26</sup> Ali Behdad, *Belated Travelers*, 65-66.

<sup>27</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Trimardeur” [1922, posthumous], *Œuvres Complètes II : Ecrits sur le Sable (nouvelles et roman)* (Paris: Grasset, 1990), 391-513, 447.

<sup>28</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Untitled text”, *Œuvres Complètes I : Ecrits sur le Sable (récits, notes et journaliers)* (Paris: Grasset, 1988), 27-28, 27.

<sup>29</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 437.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 381.

<sup>31</sup> Deleuze and Guattari explain that the imperial State overcodifies the already codified agricultural societies, “submitting them to the despotic emperor, the sole and transcendent public-property owner”. *Ibid.*, 427-428.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

continuation, and indeed an extreme manifestation, of the State, surpassing as s/he does the very symbols of the State's power in riches and might.

Simultaneously, however, the passage points to the disempowerment of the nomad whose supposed strength it boasts: the signifiers of weakness “pauvre” and “ignoré” stand in sharp contrast to the tropes of power listed above. Such an incongruous juxtaposition is characteristic of the Eberhardtian discourse on nomadism; the nomad is s/he who “s'en [va], seul et pauvre, à la conquête de la terre” ; who “n'a rien et ne convoite rien” but is nonetheless “maître des choses qui ne le dominant plus, maître des horizons infinis.”<sup>33</sup> Incarnating at once the most extreme poverty and unrivalled wealth, Eberhardt's vagabond is an undecidable,<sup>34</sup> the author's endeavours to privilege the “empowering version” of the nomad narrative notwithstanding. As presented by Eberhardt, the nomad's social marginality is contemptible *only* for the “State”: “Le paria, dans notre société moderne, c'est le nomade, le vagabond, ‘sans domicile ni résidence connus’. En ajoutant ces quelques mots au nom d'un irrégulier quelconque, les hommes d'ordre et de loi croient le flétrir à jamais.”<sup>35</sup> Yet although the verb “croient” signals the distance the author takes from this State-vision, she herself occasionally betrays similar contempt. When, in “Trimardeur”, the omniscient narrator relates the protagonist's hesitation between resuming his studies and pursuing his dream of nomadism, it is in denigrating terms that the latter option is rendered: “redevenir étudiant, ou *sombrer* pour toujours *en bas*, devenir ouvrier ou vagabond”.<sup>36</sup> In addition to belying the idealisation of nomadism so recurrent in her writings, the analogy drawn between the nomad and the working class, which, it should be remembered, Eberhardt snubbed explicitly,<sup>37</sup> also points to the writer's inability to extirpate herself from the State's logic. The identification of the nomad's (and the workman's) status as lowly rehearses the vilification of this condition that she denounces elsewhere; more importantly, it conveys a vertical, pyramidal conception of the social order typical of the State's vision and already revealed by the fief and serfdom imagery deployed in the previously quoted passage. Unlike Deleuze, who defines the nomad's

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<sup>33</sup> Eberhardt, “Trimardeur”, 429.

<sup>34</sup> Derrida defines the undecidable as a category that fits within neither pole of a dichotomy, causing it to end in aporia.

<sup>35</sup> Eberhardt, “Untitled”, 27-28.

<sup>36</sup> Eberhardt, “Trimardeur”, 412. My emphasis.

<sup>37</sup> Examples of this contempt are the nickname “Jenny l'ouvrière” that Eberhardt chose for her loathed sister-in-law and her refusal, mentioned in a previous chapter, to dress like a working girl.

relation to the State as one of exteriority,<sup>38</sup> Eberhardt cannot dissociate him/her from the State's social apparatus; she can only place him/her on the top or at the bottom of the social pyramid, not outside it.

#### 4.1.2.2. Nomadism and freedom

The ambivalence which marks the nomad's relation to power also defines his/her relation to freedom. In most of Eberhardt's texts, the vagabond is opposed to various forms of enslavement. If, in the passage previously quoted – "aucun servage n'avilit son allure, aucun labour ne courbe son échine" – this enslavement is equated with work, and farming in particular, it is most often identified in the social/moral strictures imposed by community life. It is to flee just such strictures that Orschanov, in "Trimardeur", opts for nomadism. Disillusioned by the anarchist movement, which proves no less stifling than the more traditional codes it claims to fight, he comes to realise that real enfranchisement can only be achieved in solitary wandering: "S'en aller dans la brousse, vivre seul, à sa guise, sans courber la tête devant tous ces fantômes imbéciles qui accablaient les hommes de leur tyrannie."<sup>39</sup>

*Vagabondage* as freedom, sedentariness as tyranny: Eberhardt seemingly offers a schema which neatly opposes the two concepts; placed in the *vagabondage* column are (along with freedom) pride, strength, and passionate character, while the sedentariness row is filled with images of weakness and half-heartedness. In "Le Vagabond", for example, the vagrant protagonist's "cœur ardent",<sup>40</sup> also symbolised through recurrent sun imagery, is contrasted with the "lit tiède"<sup>41</sup> on which he is pictured lying as he provisionally renounces the road in favour of quiet domestic happiness. While this "tiédeur" stands for what the narrator presents as the mediocre character and "l'écrasant ennui de la vie sédentaire",<sup>42</sup> the bed itself, and the sleeping position of the former vagabond, subtly associate sedentariness with moral and physical apathy.

Jacques Derrida has famously argued that there is more to dichotomies than simple opposition, one of the two opposed concepts being always valorised at the expense of the

<sup>38</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 351, 354, and 380.

<sup>39</sup> Eberhardt, "Trimardeur", 508.

<sup>40</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "Le Vagabond" [1904], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 373-378, 376.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*



other; it is precisely this hierarchy that his deconstructive approach aims at dismantling.<sup>43</sup> In the Eberhardtian polar vision of nomadism and sedentariness, nomadism seems to be unambiguously given the *beau rôle*, and it is for this way of life that the protagonist, responding to the call of “la plaine libre”,<sup>44</sup> eventually opts. However, the very fact that the protagonist has, albeit momentarily, yielded to the temptation of a sedentary life questions the supposed superiority of nomadism. In the lulling tranquillity of the modest house where he has halted, the vagabond “pens[e] [...] qu’il [est] devenu meilleur”,<sup>45</sup> a feeling opposed to that experienced by Orschanov, whose growing attraction to nomadism coincides with the sensation that “tout ce qu’il y avait de bon et de tendre en lui s’engourdi[ssait]”.<sup>46</sup> The nomadic instinct is, thus, seen as antithetical to “goodness”; one is tempted by the road as one would be tempted by wrongdoing. When memories of his former wanderings return to haunt the “repented” vagabond, “il ferma les yeux pour chasser ces visions. Il crispa sa main sur celle de l’aimée. Mais *malgré lui*, il rouvrit les yeux”.<sup>47</sup> Eventually, it is with a heavy heart that he responds to the call of “la vieille maîtresse tyrannique”<sup>48</sup> – the road.

The phrase “malgré lui” and the repeated personification of the road as a tyrannical mistress belie the celebration of nomadism as freedom; like the condition of the sedentary person, that of the nomad is ultimately one of subjection. Simultaneously, while the rhetoric of possession that has been shown to pervade Eberhardt’s writing of nomadism is maintained, the nomad is now stripped of the privilege of possessing to become himself possessed – by the tyrannical mistress. “[Elle] l’avait pris et [...] il l’avait adorée”<sup>49</sup> and though he had momentarily freed himself from her grasp, “[d]e nouveau il était à elle, de toutes les fibres de son être.”<sup>50</sup>

In the case of Eberhardt herself, *vagabondage* was not only subjection by virtue of its being an irresistible impulse that gets the better of the nomad’s good inclinations. “Le Vagabond” was written in 1904, at a time when, like her protagonist, its author had taken to the road again, heading for the Moroccan frontier after a sedentary period spent in Ténès, then in Algiers. Unlike her character, however, she had nobody to leave behind, no

<sup>43</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* [1972], trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone, 1993), 5-6.

<sup>44</sup> Eberhardt, “Le Vagabond”, 376.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Eberhardt, “Trimardeur”, 440.

<sup>47</sup> Eberhardt, “Le Vagabond”, 377. My emphasis.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 376.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 377.

domestic happiness to renounce: her relationship with her husband had deteriorated, and he might even have directed his affections elsewhere.<sup>51</sup> Being, as it were, no longer wanted, the woman who had left Geneva when there was nobody there worth staying for, who had left Tunisia when told she was no longer welcome, probably thought it was time to set off again.

Nomadism is, for Eberhardt, the final option when there is nothing and, more importantly, nobody, to leave behind; no wonder that it is always associated with solitude.<sup>52</sup> With this in mind, the celebratory tone in which she writes of her rather unwilling peregrinations reads more like a self-consoling rhetorical strategy than as an actual satisfaction with her nomadic status. More often than not, her first impulse is to write of both her solitude and her homelessness as an object of lament, her celebration occurring only as “second thoughts” obviously resorted to as a means of “cheering herself up”. Reflecting on the course of her nomadic life, she writes plaintively of her lonely presence in a foreign land, only to hail this solitude as synonymous with happiness and freedom;<sup>53</sup> similarly, in the early pages of her diary, her laments over the fact that she has “renoncé à avoir un coin à [elle] en ce monde”, that she has “revêtu la livrée, parfois bien lourde, du vagabond et du sans-patrie”<sup>54</sup> are followed, a few lines later, with a self-exhortation obviously meant to chase away her melancholy thoughts: “Jouissons du moment qui passe et de la griserie qui bientôt sera dissipée...”<sup>55</sup> Thus, in a manner reminiscent of the rhetoric of pride she deployed in her struggle against her death drive and of her appropriation of the Islamic concept of *Mektoub* as a shield against the overwhelming sorrows she had to go through, her eulogising of nomadism functioned as an

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<sup>51</sup> Annette Kobak, *Isabelle: the Life of Isabelle Eberhardt* [1988] (New York: Vintage, 1990), 218.

<sup>52</sup> The following is an example:

Dormir, dans la fraîcheur et le silence profonds, sous l'écroulement vertigineux des étoiles, avec pour tout toit, le ciel infini et pour tout lit, la terre tiède..., s'assoupir avec la douce et triste sensation de ma solitude absolue, et la certitude que, *nulle part en ce monde*, aucun cœur ne bat pour le mien, qu'en aucun point de la terre, aucun être humain ne me pleure ni ne m'attend. Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 11. Eberhardt's emphasis.

<sup>53</sup> J'étais seule, seule dans ce coin perdu de la terre marocaine [...] Je n'avais pas de patrie, pas de foyer, pas de famille... J'avais passé comme un étranger et un intrus, n'éveillant autour de moi que réprobation et éloignement.

A cette heure, je souffrais [...] Puis lucide, calmée, j'ai méprisé ma faiblesse et j'ai souri.

Si j'étais seule, n'était-ce pas parce que je l'avais voulu aux heures où ma pensée s'élevait au-dessus des sentimentalités lâches du cœur et de la chair également infirmes? Isabelle Eberhardt, “Dans le mellah” [1906, posthumous], *Sud Oranais* (Paris: Joëlle Losfeld, 2003), 238-244, 244.

<sup>54</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 17.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

empowering strategy that helped her accept her imposed, and otherwise painful, departures.

Nomadism-as-freedom is thus an Eberhardtian construct ironically contradicted not only by (often insidious) textual evidence pointing to the contrary, but also by what nomadism actually was for Eberhardt: an unchosen experience, without which she could have gladly done. While travel and, even more, donning travellers' accoutrements had much appeal for the *poseur* that she was in her late adolescence, the displacements that were forced upon her by poverty and non-belonging were much less welcome, her odes to the strong and free, though impoverished and lonely, nomad notwithstanding. She certainly looked forward to her first trip, made with her mother, to Annaba, and just as obviously enjoyed posing for the photographer David dressed as a sailor;<sup>56</sup> but when, years later, she was forced to sail back to Europe following her expulsion from Algeria, she found the journey much less pleasurable. Lamenting the fact that she was “si pauvre, si seule et si abandonnée sur terre”, it was with nostalgia that her thoughts went back “aux décors de jadis, [aux] costumes de matelots arborés par goût [et non par nécessité] aux jours de prospérité”.<sup>57</sup>

#### 4.1.3. The temptation of the State

##### 4.1.3.1. Ships and harbours

The plaintive tone in which Eberhardt recounts her Marseilles trip indicates that her empowering strategy of glorifying *vagabondage* was restricted to contexts in which no ties were there to prevent her leaving. When displacement was necessary *in spite of* the presence of such ties, the “nomadic” writer, dispensing with the rhetoric of strength and freedom illustrated above, overtly laments her imposed mobility and mourns her renounced sedentariness. Indeed, what she deplores, as she embarks for Marseilles following the decision of the colonial authorities, is not only the poverty of her condition:

Mais qui me rendra mon *bled* éternellement ensoleillé, et nos blanches *zaouiya*, et les calmes maisons voûtées, et les horizons infinis des sables, et “Rouiha

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<sup>56</sup> Inserted in several of her biographies, this is arguably the best-known picture of Eberhardt. See, for example, Kobak, *Isabelle*, 82.

<sup>57</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Vers les horizons bleus” [1908, posthumous] *Ecrits sur le sable I*, 67-108, 103.

Kahla”,<sup>58</sup> et les bons domestiques fidèles, et Souf, mon humble et fidèle compagnon, et Belissa la malicieuse, et mes lapins, mes poules, mes pigeons, et tout l’humble trantran de notre humble existence de là-bas? Qui rendra au pauvre exilé son toit et à l’orphelin sa famille?<sup>59</sup>

A “toit”, a “famille”, a cherished husband, a handful of faithful servants, a quiet neighbourhood, and a decent, if modest, financial condition: Eberhardt’s aspirations are, in sum, nothing but the average sedentary man’s (and, even more typically, woman’s) dream of happiness. No dithyrambs are sung in honour of loneliness, poverty, and *vagabondage* when alternatives are available.

The passage could, of course, be read as a confirmation of the thesis, developed mainly by Hedi Abdel-Jaouad, that Eberhardt found in the Maghreb a substitute homeland and totally identified with the natives. However, as argued in Chapter 1, the “illusion” of belonging in the Algerian natives’ world was short-lived and coincided with the intrusion of Slimène Ehni into her life, which was precisely when she wrote the above lines. As the illusion dissipated, the Russian writer was to resume her wanderings and, with them, her romanticisation of the nomad. Moreover, North Africa is not the only place she mourned upon leaving. Because a similar tone of regret and nostalgia also marks her evocation of Europe, particularly of the Villa Neuve, on the eve of her departure for Africa,<sup>60</sup> it is legitimate to conclude that what she longed for was a space that she could call her own – a haven, to take up one of her favourite metaphors – without it being necessarily on African soil.

While hailing Eberhardt’s supposed re-territorialisation on Algerian soil, Abdel-Jaouad, blind to the contradiction his double argument entails, simultaneously salutes in her the “self-willed nomad”:<sup>61</sup> nomadism, he argues, was for Eberhardt not only a lifestyle but also a pre-requisite for writing.<sup>62</sup> Yet Abdel-Jaouad’s two points are irreconcilable, nomadism being, as already noted, the very antithesis of re-territorialisation – and indeed of territorialisation *tout court*. Instead of this reading, therefore, the idea developed here is

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<sup>58</sup> “Rouiha Kahla”, which literally means “Little Black Soul” in Arabic, refers to Slimène Ehni. The phrase seems to be a combination of “Rouh” (Soul) and “Rouissa Kahla” (Little Black Head), two other affectionate nicknames by which Eberhardt often referred to her husband.

<sup>59</sup> Eberhardt, “Vers les horizons bleus”, 104.

<sup>60</sup> In the wake of Eberhardt’s departure from Geneva, the abhorred Villa Neuve became the house which “abrita la bonté et la douceur de maman, les bonnes intentions, jamais réalisées de Vava”. Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 15-16.

<sup>61</sup> Abdel-Jaouad, “Portrait”, 93.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

that there was little that was willed about Eberhardt's nomadism; and while she did wish for a harbour, this was initially hoped to be European. The African home was taken *faute de mieux*; besides, its being a colony – a “terre française”<sup>63</sup> – meant that it was, in a sense, Europe all the same.

In “Vers les horizons bleus”, Eberhardt identifies two types of traveller: “les fous et les pauvres”.<sup>64</sup> In concordance with her usual practice of discursive self-empowerment, the writer abstains from classifying herself as a “pauvre” traveller, although financial need *was* often a motive for her displacements. More important, however, is the fact that neither category seeks mobility for its own sake; even “les fous” hope for a “promised land” beyond the horizons: they are “les émigrants et les espérants.”<sup>65</sup> Unlike Deleuze, Eberhardt cannot conceive of nomadism as a permanent dwelling-place: at best, it is a temporary state that ends when the hoped-for harbour is reached; at worst, death offers the nomad his/her ultimate abode – the tomb: “[a]u-delà de toutes les mers, il est un continent; au bout de chaque voyage, il est un port ou un naufrage”;<sup>66</sup> either way, what Eberhardt privileges is not lines – the in-between spaces dear to Deleuze's nomad, but *points* of arrival.

#### 4.1.3.2. Eberhardt and the Colonial State

As developed in Deleuze's *A Thousand Plateaus*, nomadism is inseparable from the concept of the “war machine” – an anarchic, non-disciplinary force that prevents either the formation of the State or its extension. Evolving in a space marked by a random dispersion of human groups, war, which Deleuze and Guattari contend, was the nomads' invention,<sup>67</sup> is incompatible with the interests of the State and its impulse to control both space and its occupiers. Yet the war machine need not be war as such; “an ‘ideological,’ scientific, or artistic movement can be a potential war machine”<sup>68</sup> if it threatens either the space-logic or the power apparatus which underwrites the State.

The colonised North African desert which hosted Eberhardt's wanderings was precisely home to a ferocious confrontation of the type described by Deleuze. Opposed to

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<sup>63</sup> This phrase is employed to describe Béchar, an Algerian southern city close to the Moroccan frontier. Isabelle Eberhardt, “L'Entrée à la zaouïya” [1906], *Sud oranais*, 176-178. 177.

<sup>64</sup> Eberhardt, “Vers les horizons bleus”, 74.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 422.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

the “State” incarnated by the French authorities were the native nomads who, rejecting the new colonial codes – including that of sedentarisation – clung to their own “primitive” laws, when they did not enter into outright conflict with the representatives of the new order. Of course, Eberhardt’s writings teem with these desert-wanderers, who, unlike her, did inhabit a continual path without eventually hoping for a “terminal”, and it is often with the same romanticisation which marks her writing of nomadism as a concept that they are rendered: they are “très grands et très beaux”.<sup>69</sup> Yet, when she has to position herself in the confrontation which opposed these objects of aesthetic fascination to the representatives of the Colonial State, it is invariably to the latter that her support goes. One case of such a confrontation is poignantly rendered in her *récit* “Amira”, where her idle touring in the Tunisian South is suddenly interrupted when she is summoned to assist native spahis and *deiras* in their mission of preventing the massacre of one nomadic tribe by another. Having murdered Hamza Ben Barek in the presence of several witnesses, Aly ben Hafid, from the Zerrath-Zarzour tribe, has fled to a ravine; in retaliation, the victim’s tribe – the Hadjedj – are determined to exterminate the culprit’s whole clan. The Deleuzian image of les “nomades [qui] se dispersent, courant”<sup>70</sup> towards the “enemy’s” refuge contrasts sharply with the portrait drawn of them after their defeat by the colonial side, to which Eberhardt herself belonged, as emphasised by her use of the first-person plural pronoun:

[N]ous traînons avec nous une troupe silencieuse et morne de vingt-cinq ou trente prisonniers, arrêtés par-ci, par-là, dans les tribus. Résignés, sans un geste ni un mot de révolte, ils marchent, enchaînés deux à deux par le poignet et la cheville [...]. Aly, le seul assassin, a les bras liés derrière le dos, les pieds entravés, et marche séparément entre les chevaux des spahis.”<sup>71</sup>

How she could accommodate herself to the sight of nomads, whom she so often depicts as the very incarnation of freedom, crushed by the chains of the colonial power to which she enthusiastically offers her services, is a question that does not seem to trouble the writer.

The distance between Eberhardt and the nomads to whom she supposedly belongs is further emphasised by the gap between her satisfaction with the success of the arrest-mission and the desolation which fills the nomad camp, including the now avenged Hadjedj tribe:

<sup>69</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Au Pays des sables” [1901], *Ecrits sur le sable I*, 41-44, 44.

<sup>70</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Amira” [1908], *Ecrits sur le sable I*, 55-60, 57.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

Les Hadjedj, apaisés maintenant, le regardent [Aly] passer en silence, sans haine presque, car il est entre les mains de la justice des hommes que les nomades, comme tous les hommes simples, redoutent instinctivement et n'aiment pas, car elle est étrangère à leurs mœurs, à leurs idées. Aly, pour eux, n'est plus l'ennemi qu'on a le droit de tuer comme prix du sang: il est prisonnier, c'est-à-dire un objet de pitié, presque une victime de ce fantôme redouté et haï: l'Autorité.<sup>72</sup>

As Aly is carried away by the soldiers, some of the Hadjedj even throw him some coins to help pay for his food in prison. This siding with the murderer rather than with their avengers seems to indicate their awareness of the implications of the successful intervention of the colonial authorities: more than the mere arrest of criminals, what is signalled by the successful mission on which Eberhardt congratulates herself is the triumph of the State's vision of justice and space – that which employs chains and subjection, extirpating the nomad from his “free” horizons. Instead of the “loi du sang”, which the Hadjedj tribe sought to apply and which obeys the typically nomadic principle of dispersion, the imprisonment for which the arrested men are destined belongs in the space-codification inherent in the overall “carceral system” characteristic of the modern State.<sup>73</sup> In placing their fellow nomad Aly in the hands of “l'Autorité” – Eberhardt's name for the State – nomads of both tribes seal their surrender to its system of laws and institutions. The clans separated by the enmity engendered by Aly's crime are, thus, eventually reunited by their common defeat in the face of the Colonial State; it is precisely this defeat of the nomadic war machine that is symbolised by the image of the chained nomads – Hadjedj and Zerrath-Zarzour alike.

Despite the neat opposition they draw between the State and the war machine, Deleuze and Guattari insist that this clear-cut opposition is purely theoretical; in point of fact, the two models often overlap, each of them assimilating the weapons of the other all the better to neutralise it. While the war machine remodels the State's science so as to fit its own pattern, the State, even more frequently, deploys an “apparatus of capture” to appropriate the otherwise menacing war machine. This appropriation can consist in recuperating nomadic sciences for the interests of the State; but the most typical case is the creation of armies, in which the two philosophers see nothing but the institutionalisation and codification of the body-without-organs that the nomads' war machine initially is.<sup>74</sup> In

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* [1975], trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991), 298-308.

<sup>74</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 418.

“Amira”, this type of appropriation is well-illustrated in the native spahis and *deiras* who have enrolled in the French army; it is precisely these “State-converts”, former nomads themselves, who undertake to neutralise those nomads who show resistance to “l’Autorité”. The colonial apparatus of capture thus functions like a Russian doll of sorts, with one capture engendering another: if the hiring and sedentarisation of former nomads itself participates in the weakening of the war machine both by disciplining it and thwarting its politics of space, making the new recruits the agents of the arrest of unruly nomads transforms them into an apparatus of capture – a most literal one – in their own right.

The metaphorisation of the colonial apparatus as a Russian doll is also applicable to the writer – and not only because of her Russian pedigree. In “Nomad Thought”, Laura Rice suggests that Eberhardt herself acted as a sort of war machine in that her identification with the colonised while also contributing to the colonial project disrupted the colonial order, with its strict space-distribution along racial lines.<sup>75</sup> Although Rice does not dwell on the writer’s instrumentalisation by the colonial “apparatus of capture”, arguing that Eberhardt always remained “in style and spirit an outsider”,<sup>76</sup> the Amira episode shows not only that she was “caught” by the Colonial State, but also that she herself became a full agent in the colonial apparatus of capture, to which she enthusiastically subjected the war machine embodied by the native nomads. Nor was this a unique case: the war machine that she undertook to crush through her collaboration with General Lyautey<sup>77</sup> – that is, the dissident tribes resisting the colonial intrusion – was an even more literal case of colonial capture.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Laura Rice, “‘Nomad Thought’: Isabelle Eberhardt and the Colonial Project,” *Cultural Critique* 17 (winter 1990-91), 151-176, 164-166.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>77</sup> Rice does mention this collaboration, but explains it away as a manifestation of Eberhardt’s naive faith in “[les] *français honnêtes*”. *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>78</sup> Eberhardt’s involvement in Lyautey’s strategy of “pacific penetration” and her discursive denigration of the nomads’ resistance are discussed at length in Chapter 1.



## 4.2. Eberhardt's adventure novel

### 4.2.1. Decarnivalised roads

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Mikhail Bakhtin, pointing to Dostoevsky's entrenchment in the generic tradition of the adventure novel, appropriates Leonid Grossman's analysis:

The traditional patterns of the European novel of adventure often served Dostoevsky as models for the construction of his intrigues.

[...]

It seems there is not a single attribute of the old adventure novel that Dostoevsky failed to use. Alongside secret crimes and mass catastrophes, titled personages and unexpected fortunes, we find that feature most typical of melodrama – aristocrats who wander through slums and fraternize with the dregs of society.<sup>79</sup>

An aristocrat fraternising with the dregs of Maghrebian society is precisely what Eberhardt was, and her meanderings in Europe and Africa were filled with just the titled persons, unexpected fortunes/catastrophes, and non-elucidated crimes that Grossman identifies as inherent in the adventure novel. From her possible implication in the euthanasia of her (step) father,<sup>80</sup> to her investigation of the obscure murder of the Marquis de Morès,<sup>81</sup> to the 1901 Behima assault, Eberhardt seems to have been related to crime in every possible way: she was in turn “criminal”, detective, and victim. The Marquis whose assassination she was supposed to elucidate was not the only “titled person” to intervene in her life-story; the woman who mingled with the riff-raff disdained neither the company of native dignitaries – *marabouts* and tribal chiefs – nor that of Western generals such as Lyautey.

Yet, of course, the purpose of this section, in treating Eberhardt's life-text as an adventure novel, is not to linger on the breath-taking episodes of her life. More important

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<sup>79</sup> Grossman, quoted in Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* [1929], trans. Caryl Emerson, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 102-103.

<sup>80</sup> Eberhardt and her brother Augustin might have administered Trophimowsky an overdose of chloroform so as to curtail the suffering caused by throat cancer. This thesis has been taken up by several biographers; see, for example, Marie-Odile Delacour and Jean-René Huleu, *Sables: le roman de la vie d'Isabelle Eberhardt* (Paris: Liana Levi, 1986), 30; and Lesley Blanch, *The Wilder Shores of Love* [1954] (London: Phoenix, 1993), 282.

<sup>81</sup> Le Marquis de Morès was an adventurer killed by desert natives while seeking to forge a route to central Africa on behalf of the French. Eberhardt met his widow in Paris and agreed to investigate the circumstances of the murder in return for the widow's financing of her move to the Sahara; however, many biographers affirm that the adventurer's wife cut Eberhardt's wages as she found out that she was not taking her task seriously.

than the features listed above, what characterises the adventure novel is, according to Bakhtin, the fact that it replaces the well-defined and stable identity, shaped by social class, age, and family position, characteristic of the “novel of everyday life” with one which focuses on the hero as a *human* rather than as a social being and which is constantly re-defined by plot events. Unlike that of the social-family novel, the hero of the adventure novel acts less as an aristocrat than as a human; universal needs like the instinct for survival and domination, rather than social imperatives, dictate his actions.<sup>82</sup> However, although Eberhardt did have to assume diverse identities to fit the requirements of her unstable living conditions, it will be argued that she never lost her sense of her privileged background. In the subjected Orient where she evolved, this privilege involved both her Westernness and the aristocratic birth discussed by Bakhtin.

The adventure novel is inseparable from the chronotope of the road and the theme of encounter. A heterogeneous space *par excellence*, the road detaches the well-born hero from the closed circle of those sharing his social and cultural identity, confronting him, instead, with a world where differences cohabit:

The road is a particularly good place for random encounters. On the road [...] the spatial and temporal paths of the most varied people – representatives of all social classes, estates, religions, nationalities, ages – intersect at one spatial and temporal point. People who are normally kept separate by social and spatial distance can accidentally meet; any contrast may crop up; the most various fates may collide and interweave with one another in distinctive ways, even as they become more complex and more concrete by the collapse of social distances.<sup>83</sup>

Yet although Bakhtin’s observations on the heteroclitic character of the road are hardly refutable, whether the encounters this space enables permit an actual abolition of distance is more doubtful. In the course of her peregrinations both in Europe and Africa, Eberhardt often had the most diverse companions; however, it is interesting to note that what she emphasises when evoking these seemingly carnivalesque gatherings is solitude – either her own or that of a fellow traveller. In “Vers les horizons bleus”, the gathering of the passengers travelling from Marseilles around a shared meal is anything but carnivalesque; both the “architectural”, carefully studied disposition of the seats and tables and the guests’ coldness contrast with the exuberance and sense of fusion characteristic of Bakhtin’s banquets. From these *convives*, Eberhardt feels separated by prejudice and

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<sup>82</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 104-105.

<sup>83</sup> Bakhtin, “Forms of Time”, 243.

incomprehension: “pas une [seule] tête sympathique”; “Je me sens seule et étrangère parmi ces gens qui ignorent tout de moi et dont j’ignore tout.”<sup>84</sup> A few pages later – she has now swapped the sea and the ship for the long desert roads – the gaiety of the spring landscape is belied by the silent/melancholic mood of the caravan she has joined: “les grands *Souafas* bronzés” sing in unison long plaintive songs and the *Targuis* Lakhdar and Nasser walk in silent gravity, while the *tirailleur* Rezki hums to himself a sad Kabyle tune that nobody but himself can understand and to which nobody cares to listen.<sup>85</sup> The road, as seen by Eberhardt, obviously fails to bridge ideological, racial, and linguistic differences; eventually, regardless of the traveller’s company, the road is always a solitary experience.

The road, which seems to reunite, actually separates. Such emphasis on distance is repetitively focused on in the writer’s descriptions of the towns that serve as stopovers in her long Saharan journeys and which seem to be invariably split into two by some natural architectural schism. In M’Sila, the “old town” and the “new town” are separated by a *oued* “coulant au fond d’un ravin large et profond”;<sup>86</sup> likewise, “Bousaada [...] est divisée en deux villes séparées par un ravin.”<sup>87</sup> Interestingly, in a reversal of the Bakhtinian idea that distance is an artificial creation of what Deleuze would call the “State” – official discourse and institutions – Eberhardt seems to suggest that it is *rapprochement* which, in the most literal sense of the word, is an artificial construct: kept apart by a “natural schism”, the two parts of M’Sila and Bou-Saada are reunited by an ingenious artefact: a bridge.

Just as interesting as Eberhardt’s emphasis on the lonely character of travel is her hierarchisation of travellers’ spatial distribution. Ill at ease in the company of fellow passengers on the Marseilles-Algiers trip, Eberhardt takes her leave as soon as an opportunity presents itself, preferring “remonte[r] sur le pont et [aller] sur l’avant.”<sup>88</sup> This elevated position, which she reserves for herself alone, is but a more literal version of the “look from on high” she directs at the travellers whose company she has scorned: those she leaves behind are “below” not only because they occupy a physically lower space on the ship, but because of their “grise banalité” and their equal want of energy, intelligence, and

<sup>84</sup> Eberhardt, “Vers les horizons bleus”, 72.

<sup>85</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Printemps au désert” [1901], *Ecrits sur le sable I*, 95-102, 99.

<sup>86</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Bou-Saada” [1902], *Ecrits sur le sable I*, 111-124, 114.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>88</sup> Eberhardt, “Vers les horizons bleus”, 72.

passion.<sup>89</sup> It is this supposed inferiority that Eberhardt symbolically escapes by taking refuge on the spatially elevated bridge. On Oriental roads, this space-hierarchisation predictably follows racial lines. Recounting a journey to Bou-Saada she made with a native guide, Eberhardt specifies that they spent the night, “[elle] *juchée sur une caisse, et Si Abou Bakr [the guide] roulé en boule au fond de la voiture*”.<sup>90</sup> In another account, she writes how she traversed South Oran on horseback while Embarek, her new guide, followed on foot.<sup>91</sup>

In thus hierarchising both the sea and the desert, Eberhardt departs from Deleuze’s identification of these spaces as “smooth”. Smooth spaces, Deleuze and Guattari argue, favour heterogeneity and are free of the walls and frontiers erected by the State in its eagerness to striate space and maintain distance between its different occupants. Yet striated space is not necessarily man-made; nature itself provides instances of the smooth/striated opposition, through, for example, the desert and the forest respectively. In opposition to the landmark-free, vague-contoured desert, the forest, with its “gravitational verticals” which symbolise both fixity and geometricality – the trees – bears in it the seeds of the State even as it shelters anti-State primitive societies. Desert nomads, the two philosophers argue, have nothing but hostility for forest dwellers.<sup>92</sup>

Eberhardt’s depictions of the desert sometimes bear such Deleuzian undertones. As a “chaos [de] dunes” which displays “[a]ucun contour net et précis, aucune forme arrêtée et distincte [and where] tout reluit, tout scintille à l’infini, mais tout est vague”,<sup>93</sup> the Saharan space is the very antithesis of order and geometry. In the same Deleuzian fashion, Eberhardt draws a sharp contrast between the “architecture” of the forest and that of the desert:

Jamais l’ombre épaisse et pesante des forêts n’égalera la splendeur fine et la grâce déliée des ombres ténues des palmes courbées en dôme sur le sable blanc! Jamais les rayons de la lune ne se joueront aussi magiquement entre les troncs grossiers des chênes ou des hêtres qu’ils se jouent entre ceux, graciles, semblables à de fines colonnes torsées, des dattiers élancés et sveltes! [...] Jamais aucun jardin d’ailleurs n’égalera en grâce et en splendeur les *rhitans* profonds du Souf ou s’assemblent les palmiers choisis, de grandeurs diverses, depuis les

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Eberhardt, “Bou-Saada”, 112. My emphasis.

<sup>91</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Kenadsa” [1906], *Sud oranais*, 174-176, 174.

<sup>92</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 384.

<sup>93</sup> Eberhardt, “Vers les horizons bleus”, 106.

palmiers nains, depuis les jeunes sujets aux immenses feuilles arquées, jusqu'aux géants vénérables, souvent inclinés au-dessus de la verte famille environnante...<sup>94</sup>

Although, like Deleuze's, the writer's preference goes to the desert, her representation of it far from matches the philosopher's definition of smooth space. While her comparison of palm-trees to erected columns confers on this "wild" space a geometricality and organisation typical of striated spaces, and of the State by and large, the marked emphasis she places on the pyramidal layout produced by the unequal sizes of the trees mocks the possibility of a space in which hierarchies would be abolished. The pyramid trope is actually as recurrent in Eberhardt's accounts of her journeys across the desert as the word "striated" itself. In the "innombrables archipels d'argile et de pierre multicolores, aux saillies *perpendiculaires et stratifiées*" of the Saharan *chotts*, she notices "deux petites pyramides de pierres sèches."<sup>95</sup> In another instance, the "archipels" are said to be "en forme de murailles perpendiculaires" and, here too, "deux pyramides de pierres sèches indiquent un endroit où deux tribus se sont battues";<sup>96</sup> elsewhere, it is "les étranges montagnes [...] du Sud" which, as an aggrandised version of the *chott* archipelagos, are "stratifiées et surmontées de montagnes inclinées, dont quelques-unes surplombantes."<sup>97</sup>

#### 4.2.2. Travelling to know

##### 4.2.2.1. Knowing the Other

Arguably even more familiar than the connection drawn between travel and adventure is that between travel and knowledge. As Roxanne Euben explains, this association is wide-reaching in both space and time. As early as 2000 BC, the Gilgamesh epic introduces the eponymous hero as one "who has visited all the countries of the world, thus attaining unsurpassed knowledge"; in ancient Greece, the word "*theoria*" suggests a link between "seeing the world", "observing", and achieving knowledge; and a similar polysemy characterises the Arabic root "k-sh-f", from which both the word explorer (*kashaf*) and inquiry (*kashf*) are derived.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 101-102.

<sup>95</sup> Eberhardt, "Printemps au désert", 97. My emphasis.

<sup>96</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 113.

<sup>97</sup> Eberhardt, "Bou-Saada", 119.

<sup>98</sup> Roxanne L. Euben, *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 20-21.

Yet this simple and apparently universally accepted axiom engenders much more problematic issues relating to the nature, desirability, and transmissibility of the traveller's knowledge. In *The Laws*, Plato, recommending that travel be allowed only to "respectable" and mature-aged males – and for a period of time not exceeding ten years – explains how the observation of foreign lifestyles and institutions can help travellers get a better apprehension, as well as encouraging a better preservation, of those in force at home. However, travel can be as much a corrupting as an enlightening experience, and even carefully selected candidates such as those he recommends are not wholly immune to its dangers; which is why, Plato insists, the profitability of the knowledge they propose on their return needs to be submitted to the evaluation of even wiser spirits, capable of distinguishing between wisdom and contamination.<sup>99</sup> Plato thus articulates travel as a *pharmakon* of sorts, at once beneficial and potentially noxious, and, with stricter relevance to this discussion, at once necessary for and antithetical to knowledge, as suggested by the formulated imperative of submitting the wisdom acquired abroad to home-made knowledge. In privileging home as the ultimate authority with regard to knowledge, as much as in his eagerness to preserve the city's order of things, Plato, for all his awareness of the utility of interacting with the Other, voices a conservative, and certainly self-centred, approach to this interaction.

It was this vision which, centuries later, was to culminate in nineteenth-century Western travellers' ethnographic writings. In their attempt at establishing their own authority at the expense of their native objects of study, ethnographers deployed a series of methodological and rhetorical strategies: to impose their reading of native culture as truthful, they privileged direct observation, acquired through contact with its members and acquisition of their language; to confer scientific validity upon their works, they combined epistemological methods such as classification, rhetorical elements like synecdochal descriptions, and the use of the "ethnographic present". Through such techniques, their necessarily truncated, because limited in both time and space, findings are presented as general and eternal truths.<sup>100</sup> Yet the authority these scientists sought did not only translate a quest for scientific legitimacy; as Mary Louise Pratt explains, it also manifested itself through a series of "hegemonic reflexes" that betray a fundamentally ethnocentric vision.

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<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>100</sup> James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority", *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 21-54, 24-26.

Such reflexes include the infantilisation, primitivisation, and homogenisation of the natives.<sup>101</sup>

Most of these self-empowering gestures have already been detected in Eberhardt. Her life among the natives was nothing but an enforcement of the ethnographic principle according to which “true” knowledge of the natives can only be attained through immersion within their life; a belief to which, as has previously been noted, she explicitly voiced her subscription.<sup>102</sup> Her rendering of the natives has also been seen to follow classificatory and homogenising schemas. In the same vein as Linnaeus’s classification of humans into choleric and obstinate (native) Americans, gentle and inventive Whites, rigid and melancholic Asians, and phlegmatic Blacks,<sup>103</sup> Eberhardt disposes the human constituents of North Africa in a virtual table, in which Arabs, Berbers, Jews, and “Negroes” are neatly separated by a set of intrinsic features which simultaneously makes each of these groups narrowly homogeneous: all Berbers are greedy and assimilable, just as all Arabs are generous and passionate, and all blacks are immoral and undignified. Regardless of his/her ethnic category, however, the North African is always liable to infantilisation. The word “enfant” is used to qualify, among other natives, the nomads resisting the colonial intrusion,<sup>104</sup> her guide Djilali,<sup>105</sup> the respected old man Sidi Djeridi,<sup>106</sup> and even her husband Slimène.<sup>107</sup>

Yet despite her appropriation of ethnographic strategies and an aspiration to rigour evidenced by her scrupulous note-taking, Eberhardt, in a Platonician fashion, seems to doubt the very value of the knowledge accessed through travel. In “L’Illuminé”, the anchorite she describes had, in his youth, roamed the world, travelling through Morocco, Algeria and the Sudanese desert; but that was a time when “la grâce de l’inconscience [ne

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<sup>101</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 63-65.

<sup>102</sup> “[c]’est une grave erreur [...] que de croire que l’on peut faire des études de mœurs populaires sans se mêler au milieu que l’on étudie, sans vivre de leur vie...” Isabelle Eberhardt, “Amara le forçat” [1903], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 232-235, 232.

<sup>103</sup> Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 32.

<sup>104</sup> “grands enfants turbulents et batailleurs”. Isabelle Eberhardt, “Légionnaires” [1908], *Sud oranais*, 84-88, 88.

<sup>105</sup> “Djilali se mit à rire, en grand enfant qu’il est”. Isabelle Eberhardt, “Eau de Mensonge” [1906], *Sud oranais*, 165-166, 166.

<sup>106</sup> “Son visage [...] portait l’empreinte d’une douceur et d’une simplicité tout enfantine”. Isabelle Eberhardt, “Silhouettes d’Afrique: les oulémas” [1898], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 58-67, 62.

<sup>107</sup> Eberhardt’s infantilisation of her husband is discussed in the third chapter.

l’]avait pas encore touché”.<sup>108</sup> Years later, “lassé de la vanité du savoir humain et de la monotonie des choses, le saint est revenu au sol natal et s’est retiré pour toujours dans sa cellule grise.”<sup>109</sup> And it is a very similar fate that the writer wishes for herself. Reflecting on her life during her seclusion in Sidi Brahim’s *zaouïa*, where she had been dispatched by General Lyautey, she vents her disapproval of her restless, travel-loving side: “Mais ce qui parle en moi, ce qui m’inquiète et qui demain me poussera encore sur les routes de la vie, ce n’est pas la voix la plus sage de mon âme, c’est cet esprit d’agitation pour qui la terre est trop étroite et qui n’a pas su trouver en lui-même son univers.”<sup>110</sup> Weariness and disillusionment, she trusted, would eventually conquer these unwise inclinations; when that time came, she gladly envisaged the possibility of returning to this silent *zaouïa*, or another of the same sort, as a last retreat.<sup>111</sup>

“L’esprit d’agitation” seems to have been conquered sooner than she expected: invited by a group of Sidi Brahim’s men to join them in their planned travel towards the Moroccan outback, Eberhardt, weakened by fever and perhaps sensing her approaching death, wisely declined the offer. However, instead of choosing to end her days in the Moroccan *zaouïa*, as she had contemplated a few weeks earlier, it is the doubly symbolic Aïn Sefra – a French territory which also hosted the headquarters of the general whose colonial policy she had actively endorsed – that she chose as a final destination. As with Plato’s travellers, the last journey is, for her, that which leads back home. If, in the case of her anchorite character, this was “le sol natal”,<sup>112</sup> for the *Heimatlose* that she was, home was the adopted France, whose project of pacifying the natives she espoused along with French citizenship.

#### 4.2.2.2. Knowing the Self

Eberhardt’s qualification of her wanderlust as unwise runs counter to the familiar association between travel and wisdom. As Euben, among many others, argues, travel is as much a movement in external space as an inner route towards change and self-improvement.<sup>113</sup> For Carl Thomson, journeys are “important rites of passages”<sup>114</sup> and “the travel account [...] is [...] plotted as a developmental narrative of growing self-knowledge

<sup>108</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “L’Illuminé” [1906], *Sud oranais*, 187-188, 187.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Moghreb” [1906], *Sud oranais*, 249-252, 251-252.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>112</sup> Eberhardt, “L’Illuminé”, 187.

<sup>113</sup> Euben, *Journeys to the Other Shore*, 108.

<sup>114</sup> Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing* (London: Routledge, 2011), 117



and self-realisation. It thus becomes a record not just of a literal journey, but also of a metaphorical interior ‘voyage’ that represents an important existential change in the traveller;”<sup>115</sup> similarly, Bakhtin points out the metaphorical implications of the time/road pairing, which can simultaneously refer to “the course of history”, “the course of a life”, or simply “to set out on a new course”.<sup>116</sup>

Bakhtin illustrates this association between the road and (positive) change through what he terms the “second type of ancient novel” or the “adventure novel of everyday life”. In Apuleus’s *The Golden Ass*, which Bakhtin mentions as a prototype of this subgenre, the road/change association takes a literal form in that the beginning of the protagonist’s peregrinations coincides with his metamorphosis into the creature to which the novel owes its title. Accidentally transformed into this animal while attempting to learn witchcraft, Lucius, the protagonist, undergoes a series of misfortunes which include beating, repeated sales, hard labour, and only just falling short of ending up on a dinner table. Simultaneously, however, these mishaps endow Lucius with a knowledge that his initial condition as a country aristocrat would have eternally denied him. In his animal guise, he learns as much about the dubious mores of supposedly dignified personages like priests as about the daily miseries of slaves and destitute freemen, themselves reduced to a near-animal condition by the exploitation and cruelty they suffer at the hands of their wealthy owners/employers. As a last stage in his progress towards enlightenment, Lucius is initiated into the cult of the goddess Isis, who offers him the opportunity of resuming his former condition in return for proselytising her teachings. At the end of the novel, Lucius retrieves not only his appearance but also his privileged social status, as the goddess promises him a prominent position in the legal profession.

In contrast to *The Golden Ass*, in which the course of Lucius’s life is modified by the course of his wanderings, is the “Greek romance”. In such a novel, the road serves as a framework for the protagonists’ heroic deeds without impacting on their insight into themselves or into others; as Bakhtin himself puts it, “it is as if absolutely nothing had happened” between the heroes’ initial meeting and their ultimate reunion. Their vision of each other – and of the world – does not gain in maturity; their passion neither dwindles nor grows under the effect of their ordeals; “adventure time” does not even affect them

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<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>116</sup> Bakhtin, “Forms of Time”, 243-244.

biologically: after years of ordeals and peregrinations, they remain as fresh and young as at the beginning of the novel.<sup>117</sup>

Eberhardt's own adventure novel seems closer to the "adventure novel of daily life" than to the Greek romance. Like Apuleus's Lucius, Eberhardt swapped her initial condition as a European aristocrat for the garb of an impoverished native; like Lucius, this disguise allowed her to discover a North African reality that had little to do with the exotic fantasies she had constructed at home; and like Lucius, her peregrinations introduced her to the realm of mysticism and spirituality which she encountered with her espousal of Islam and joining of the Qadiriya community. Her metamorphosis thus seems to have been complete; as Edmonde Charles-Roux notes, few could have foreseen, in the mischievous adolescent the writer was in Geneva, the dark-minded adult she was to become after a life of wandering and its vicissitudes.<sup>118</sup> Eberhardt herself looked back to her early days of hedonism with disgusted disapproval, congratulating herself on her spiritual growth and moral improvement.<sup>119</sup>

Yet affirming that Eberhardt's meanderings were an enlightening and radically transforming experience is mitigated by two significant qualifications. First, it is interesting to note that, both politically and morally, Eberhardt's progress was towards a conservative stance. At a moral level, it was a renunciation of a wild, licentious lifestyle in favour of temperance, and of anarchist atheism in favour a fervent recognition of God's authority; at a political level, the never-fulfilled vow to fight by the side of the oppressed natives gave way to an unapologetic espousal of the cause of the oppressor. In all these cases, the writer eventually chose order and authority – that of God and of the (Colonial) State – over "l'agitation" which, in different ways, the native rebels and her former self embodied. Interestingly, similar remarks can also be made about the metamorphoses of Apuleus's character. As with Eberhardt, the thoughtless, playful temperament to which Lucius precisely owes his unfortunate transformation is eventually abandoned for the serious and dignified attitude which befits his new role as a goddess's oracle. Similarly, just as Eberhardt's direct witnessing of the injustices inflicted on the North African

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<sup>117</sup> Bakhtin, "Forms of Time", 89-90.

<sup>118</sup> Edmonde Charles-Roux, *Un Désir d'Orient : jeunesse d'Isabelle Eberhardt 1877-1904* (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1988), 177.

<sup>119</sup> In *Sud Oranais*, Eberhardt writes: "Depuis que je suis dans cette *zaouïa* [...], j'ai pris certains aspects de mon passé turbulent en horreur." Isabelle Eberhardt, "La Révoltée" [1906], *Sud oranais*, 213-215, 215.

colonised does not prevent her from siding with the agents of such injustice, Lucius's contact with other wretched of the earth – slaves and exploited workers – does not bring him any closer to them: nothing, in the novel, suggests that his new insight into their condition is used, or even remembered, as he resumes his privileged status.

This reading of these two adventure plots – Lucius's and Eberhardt's – deconstructs the Bakhtinian opposition between the Greek romance and the adventure novel of everyday life. Despite the anti-conservative conception of travel that the latter is implicitly made to illustrate, this type of adventure novel is barely less conservative than the openly "narrow-minded" vision conveyed in the first type. As models of virtue, bravery, and fidelity who, as such, fit perfectly well within the moral order, the heroes of the Greek romance are not expected to change; transformation is what is expected of those who, like Lucius (and Eberhardt) fail to conform to the established codes of behaviour. In other words, it is the same instinct to conserve the prevailing order of things that governs both types of novel.

Eberhardt's conservative stance does not manifest itself only in her final subscription to the political and moral codes from which she had departed. Indeed, despite the similarities between Eberhardt and Apuleus's hero, their itineraries are separated by one significant difference. Lucius's moral transformation has nothing anticipated about it; it was neither planned nor expected. By contrast, as has been mentioned in the previous parts of this study, Eberhardt set moral improvement as a clear purpose to her decision to leave Europe for the Algerian desert. Moreover, although she did, like Lucius, go through a period of careless hedonism, mainly during her Tunisian stay, this was but a brief period both preceded and followed by a much less unconventional lifestyle marked by a scrupulous enforcement of her (step)father's teachings, as has been discussed in the previous chapter. Rather than an initiation to a conservative code from which she had hitherto been totally estranged, the moral "change" experienced during her Saharan journey was reconciliation with an order only temporarily abandoned. In a sense, there was no abandonment at all; as the previous chapter has also highlighted, Eberhardt took particular care to erase/understate those episodes of her life that might shock conventional moral sense, thus voicing her ideological loyalty to the traditional moral order even as she transgressed it.

### 4.3. The politics of exoticism

#### 4.3.1. Exoticism and conservatism

Travel also seems to have had little impact on Eberhardt's vision of the Maghreb. Her later writings often smack of the same exotic and Orientalist clichés as those which fill her early productions, including those she wrote before setting foot in North Africa. Images of passivity and sweet drowsiness pervade both texts like "Silhouettes d'Afrique", published in 1898, and her descriptions of South Oran and Kenadsa in 1904. If, in the first text, the Oriental quarter of Annaba is "endormi depuis des siècles à l'ombre protectrice de la sainte *zéouiya* des *Aïssaouas*",<sup>120</sup> the *Aïssaoua* religious chants she hears, six years later, in the Moroccan town of Oujda inspire in her a similar "impression de paix immense, d'immobilité [...] poursuivant à travers [l]es siècles [...] son grand rêve serein d'éternité."<sup>121</sup>

In locating the North African chronotope outside the frame of the West's modernity, Eberhardt rehearses a typically exoticist gesture. As defined by Chris Bongie, "exoticism is a nineteenth-century literary and existential practice that posited another space, the space of an Other, outside or beyond the confines of a 'civilization' [...] that, by virtue of its *modernity*, was perceived by many writers as being incompatible with certain essential values – or, indeed, the realm of value itself."<sup>122</sup> Associated with modernity and backwardness respectively, both the exotic writer's world and its Other are simultaneously spatial *and* temporal categories; to take up Johannes Fabian's famous terms, the writer (and his/her modern world) stands for the "here and now", while the Other s/he describes is the "there and then". In other words, like ethnology and anthropology, which are the objects of Johannes's analysis, exoticism spatialises time, articulating the globe as a "temporal slope", "which "places Western societies upstream and non-Western societies downstream."<sup>123</sup>

<sup>120</sup> Eberhardt, "Silhouettes d'Afrique", 60.

<sup>121</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, "Oujda", *Sud oranais*, 135-144, 141.

<sup>122</sup> Chris Bongie, *Exotic Memories: Literature, Colonialism, and the Fin-de-siècle* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 4-5. Bongie's emphasis.

<sup>123</sup> Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: how Anthropology Makes its Object* [1983] (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 17.

Jennifer Yee defines exotic literature as “literature taking as its subject a culturally and geographically distant place and people”.<sup>124</sup> Although this broad and “neutral” definition already qualifies Eberhardt as an exotic writer, exoticism is anything but neutral; while incorporating definitions similar to Yee’s, most other authors suggest that this concept always entails a comment both on the exotic writer’s own world and the remote space s/he describes. In the same way as Bongie’s definition identifies it as a disapproval of modernity, for which the longed-for Other functions as an alternative, Tzvetan Todorov, in *On Human Diversity*, explains it as that practice which obeys the “Rule of Homer”, according to which “the most remote country is best.”<sup>125</sup> For the exotic mind, it seems, “the country with superior values is a country whose only relevant characteristic is that it is not my own”,<sup>126</sup> a standpoint previously shown to have been voiced by Eberhardt herself: while hailing the Arabs’ faith, passion, prodigal generosity, and an old-fashioned sense of honour, her own culture inspires in her nothing but a sense of vulgar superficiality. What is thus valorised in the exotic Other, however, is less Otherness in itself than an order that has vanished from the writer’s own world; in other words, exoticism is an act of self-criticism which, as such, is more concerned with the Self than with the celebrated Other.<sup>127</sup> Thus, in “L’Age du néant”, Eberhardt evokes the fervour of Muslims’ faith only to better illustrate the nihilism into which the West has fallen. Her plea is less for an espousal of this religion than for a retrieval of *any* form of faith; her essay closes on a call for all “believers”, whether their faith be in God, Science, or Humanity, to unite against the West’s only surviving cult: the void.<sup>128</sup>

Exoticism is thus less a quest for the remote Other than for something once familiar, but now on the verge of vanishing. As a narrative, it is a story about loss – of tradition, values and the possibility of authentic experience – brought about by the urbanisation and industrialisation which triumphed in the nineteenth century;<sup>129</sup> as a project, it aims at retrieving that which has been lost elsewhere; at achieving “a recovery of *a past* and of all

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<sup>124</sup> Jennifer Yee, *Exotic Subversions in Nineteenth-Century French Fiction* (London: Modern Humanities Association and Maney, 2008), 1.

<sup>125</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *On Human Diversity: Nationalism, Racism, and Exoticism in French Thought* [1989], trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 265.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “L’Age du néant” [1900], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 529-533, 532-533.

<sup>129</sup> Bongie, *Exotic Memories*, 6.

that modernity has effaced.”<sup>130</sup> In its endeavour to rescue an evanescent world order, exoticism is an obviously reactionary ideology, a conservatism that exotic writers rarely confined to the limits of their textual productions alone. Prominent figures of nineteenth century exoticism like Loti and Fromentin unapologetically and ostensibly positioned themselves on the conservative side of the public debate. Eugène Fromentin displayed the same conventionality in his art and his political positions; although his desire to liberate himself from the strains of conventional painting had, in his early years, been the cause of a tense relationship with his conservative father, he soon deliberately opted for conventional art, achieving rapid official success – so much so that, in 1861, Hector de Callias<sup>131</sup> quipped that Fromentin’s art was one of the benefits of the colonial occupation of Algiers.<sup>132</sup> Fromentin’s benediction by the political and literary establishment was later to crystallise in *La Légion d’Honneur* awarded in 1859.<sup>133</sup>

Loti was no less sensitive to the temptations of officialdom. His position as an officer in the French navy signalled both his endorsement of the concepts of the State and the Empire and his respect for eminent institutions; a respect shown by his energetic protests against the 1898 decision to retire him as part of a new policy aiming at rejuvenating the Navy.<sup>134</sup> Six years earlier, his fascination with prestige had culminated in his controversial membership of the prestigious *Académie Française*. Elected at the expense of a Zola deemed too critical of the bourgeoisie, Loti pronounced, in April 1892, a lengthy speech in front of an aristocratic audience that had widely backed his candidacy.<sup>135</sup> Loti actually proved to be too conservative even for the guardian of tradition that *l’Académie* was. In a paper devoted to the *coulisses* of this “consecration”, Francis Lacoste reveals that the newly elected writer had to shorten his speech considerably so as to make it appeal to an assembly that was increasingly being won over to bourgeois views. The “censored” parts included a quoted sermon from the reactionary “romancier chéri de l’aristocratie” Octave

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>131</sup> Comte de Callias was a writer and journalist on the newspaper *Le Figaro*.

<sup>132</sup> Barbara Wright, “A Third Republic Variant of the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns: the Case of Fromentin”, *On Verbal/Visual Representation, Word & Image Interactions 4*, Martin Heusser et al. eds (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 23-32, 23-25.

<sup>133</sup> John Zarobell, *An Empire of Landscape: Space and Ideology in Colonial Algeria* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 91.

<sup>134</sup> Alec Hargreaves, *The Colonial Experience in French Fiction: a Study of Pierre Loti, Ernest Psichari and Pierre Mille* (London: Macmillan, 1981), 74. Loti’s resistance was such that he succeeded in having himself reinstated.

<sup>135</sup> Francis Lacoste, “Les Enjeux d’une consécration: Loti, Feuillet et quelques autres”, *Romantisme* 23, 81 (1993), 85-94, 85.

Feuillet and, more importantly, passages that were overzealously laudatory of the Empire.<sup>136</sup>

It is precisely this vanishing aristocratic ethos that both Loti and Fromentin sought in the Orient. While, in his accounts of his adventures in Japan and Ottoman Turkey, Loti lingered on the aesthetic details of the old-fashioned deference with which Easterners manifested hospitality,<sup>137</sup> Fromentin's art translated his fascination with the Arab nobility he encountered in the Maghreb. Admiring their majestic bearing and attitudes – which he himself reportedly emulated<sup>138</sup> – his paintings privileged typical scenes of the local aristocracy, such as falconry and horse-riding.<sup>139</sup> In seeking exotic alternatives to their society's decline into modernity, while nevertheless valuing its recognition, Loti and Fromentin displayed an oscillation between Classicism and Romanticism, which Frank Lukas sees as governed by a social ideal and an impulse to flee society's tyrannical restrictions respectively.<sup>140</sup> But although Romanticism has often been interpreted as a rebellion against classical conventions, the two impulses are, as Roland Barthes argues in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, merely variants of the same conservative, bourgeois ideology.<sup>141</sup> While such identification of Romanticism with the bourgeoisie has been voiced by several Marxist critics,<sup>142</sup> an even more common leftist reading, represented chiefly by Georg Lukacs, is that which sees in Romanticism a manifestation of reactionary anti-capitalism.<sup>143</sup>

With Fromentin and Loti, who counted among her favourite writers, Eberhardt shared that liminal position which made her seek at once distance from and integration within the nineteenth century European cultural and ideological system. She shared their class

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>137</sup> Matt K. Matsuda, *Empires of Love: Histories of France and the Pacific* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 40.

<sup>138</sup> Sarah Anderson reports that Fromentin "was known for his aristocratic bearing, restraint, and good taste". Introduction to Eugène Fromentin, *Between Sea and Sahara: an Orientalist Adventure*, translated by Blake Robinson (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2004), xiii-xiv, xiii.

<sup>139</sup> Examples are his famous "Hawking in Algeria" (1863), "Arab Falconer" (1863), and "Arab Horsemen" (1868).

<sup>140</sup> F. L. Lukas, "La Princesse lointaine or the Nature of Romanticism" [1936], *Romanticism: Points of View*, Robert F. Gleckner and Gerald E. Enscow eds (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1974), 125-135.

<sup>141</sup> Roland Barthes, *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture, suivi de Nouveaux essais critiques* [1953] (Paris: Le Seuil, 1972), 42-44.

<sup>142</sup> Michael Lowy and Robert Sayre, *Romanticism against the Tide of Modernism*, trans. Catherine Porter (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 10.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

prejudice, voicing contempt for the bourgeoisie, admiration for aristocratic ways, and sympathy for nomads and peasants, who, though destitute, represented for her vestiges of the same pre-capitalist order. Because they had preserved the dignified manner that the superficiality and calculating spirit of the modern age had erased, these figures looked “loqueteux et superbes”<sup>144</sup> – majestic even in the most beggarly costumes. Appropriating this costume herself, she also displayed the aristocratic qualities she celebrated in the Arab natives. In the short period of enrichment she experienced following the death of her (step)father, the careless prodigality with which she spent, and lent, huge amounts of money indicated not only an anti-bourgeois disregard for wealth, but a glaring lack of budget management skills, which were foreign to her “nature d’aristocrate”, to take up her own phrase.<sup>145</sup>

What Eberhardt despised in the modern Western world, apart from its aesthetic deficiency, was its aspiration to level down individualities, a reproach strongly articulated in her diary: “Comme la plèbe s’irrite, quand elle voit surgir un être – une femme surtout – qui veut être *lui-même* et ne pas lui ressembler! Comme la médiocrité s’enrage de ne pouvoir tout niveler, tout réduire à son niveau bête et bas!”<sup>146</sup> It is precisely this eagerness to preserve the Self from the homogenising effect of modernity that triggers the exotic impulse. Emphasising the complementariness of exoticism and individualism in *Essai sur l’exotisme*, Victor Segalen writes that strong individualities welcome the exotic as an opportunity for confrontation with the different Other.<sup>147</sup> Where a Self lacking in confidence and assertiveness seeks the reassuring discretion provided by the homogenising crowd, the “*exote*” confidently exposes himself/herself to the contact of exotic individualities which, as such, sharply contrast with him/her. Exoticism is, thus, not a wish for *rapprochement* with the Other; rather, it is the self-challenging gesture of those who aspire to maintain distance from the Other even in the closest proximity with him/her as the ultimate consecration of the Self. The *exote* is s/he who remains not only unabsorbed, but indeed indifferent to the Otherness s/he is so eager to encounter.<sup>148</sup>

<sup>144</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Marché d’Aïn Sefra” [1908], *Sud oranais*, 118-120, 119.

<sup>145</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 123.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 207. Eberhardt’s emphasis.

<sup>147</sup> Segalen, *Essai sur l’exotisme*, 25.

<sup>148</sup> Segalen here cites the example of his own discovery of China, affirming that not only did he never wish to be Chinese, but that he remained indifferent to China. *Essai sur l’exotisme*, 57 and 67.



While celebrating the individual, Eberhardt's contempt for the crowd simultaneously translates obvious irritation with the democratising aspect of modernity. As has been repeatedly shown, her vision of human relations – whether they be social, racial, or gender relations – is hierarchical; this vision seemed to have found its perfect illustration in North Africa – particularly in the Southern *zaouïas*. While looking up with admiration to the *marabouts* occupying the highest positions within it, only those “subalterns” able to display a graceful acceptance of their lowly rank are spared her contempt. With their attempts at circumventing authority through ruse, the black slaves she meets during her sojourn in Sidi Brahim's *zaouïa* inspire in her nothing but revulsion; and if she does write approvingly of one of them – Baba Mahmadou – it is precisely because he complies with dignity with what is expected from him as an “inferior”:

Ba Mahmadou se distingue des autres Nègres. Il trouve au fond de lui-même ou dans sa culture d'esclave, le secret des gestes graves et des attitudes respectueuses. Ce sentiment n'est pas celui de la servitude déprimante. Il met de la noblesse dans les salutations. – Les Nègres, d'ordinaire, ne savent pas saluer. Toutes les fois que Ba Mahmadou se présente devant les musulmans blancs, il commence par s'incliner trois fois devant eux, et ne s'approche que pieds nus, laissant ses savates à la porte. Cependant, le sens qu'il a du respect ne le diminue pas.<sup>149</sup>

This aestheticisation of inequality is, in a different way, echoed in Segalen's essay. Heralding with apprehension a forthcoming triumph of “l'homogène”, he writes: “Alors peut venir le Royaume du Tiède; ce moment de *bouillie visqueuse sans inégalités*, sans chutes, figuré d'avance grossièrement”.<sup>150</sup> As defined by Segalen and illustrated by Eberhardt, exoticism, in its disapproval of equality as much as in its celebration of individualism, reveals itself to be a doubly anti-carnavalesque concept. In turn, this anti-carnavalesque character highlights exoticism's (and Romanticism's) complicity with the very modern order it purports to reject. Indeed, while decrying the disenchantment of the world brought about by capitalism, it readily takes up one of its chief features: individualism.

There is, however, one outstanding difference between Eberhardt's relationship to the places she visits and Segalen's concept of the *exote*. In Segalen's vision, the perpetual quest for newness which is the mark of exoticism is threatened by prolonged stays; to

<sup>149</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Esclaves” [1906], *Sud oranais*, 180-182, 182.

<sup>150</sup> Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme*, 67. My emphasis.

preserve the enchantment experienced at the first contact with the place, the *exote*'s quick impulse is to leave it as soon as this enchantment starts to give way to a sense of the familiar. Severing the link that had barely started to relate him/her to the place, it is without nostalgia that the *exote* heads for other and unknown parts of the world.<sup>151</sup> Eberhardt's own relationship to space is somewhat different. Unlike Segalen's *exote*, she never displayed particular eagerness to leave a place and certainly never voiced fear of letting familiarity settle in. Not only was it, as has been seen, with reluctance that she left in turn Switzerland, Tunisia, and the Algerian desert, but she always retained for these places – and indeed for all places she happened to visit – a deep sense of that nostalgia that Segalen dismisses as incompatible with the exotic spirit. Even the least cherished places are, on the eve or in the wake of departures, evoked with fond tenderness: Batna, “ville d'exil et d'amertume” is regretted as a “ville d'amour”;<sup>152</sup> abhorred Marseilles becomes, as she is preparing to leave it, “cette ville [qu'elle] aime d'un drôle d'amour [bien qu'elle] n'aime pas y habiter.”<sup>153</sup> When the place in question *was* a cherished one, Eberhardt's nostalgia often urged her to return to it. Interestingly, however, the writer herself notes that she returned to a previously visited place only once: “dans ma vie, je ne vais que deux fois dans chaque endroit: Tunis, le Sahel, Genève, Paris, le Souf...”.<sup>154</sup> The attempt to retrieve the sensations of the first encounter proves to be a failure, as the place where one returns is never the same as the one previously visited and preciously kept in a corner of one's mind; it is this realisation, which systematically discouraged Eberhardt from undertaking a third visit anywhere (unless out of necessity), that she illustrates in writings like “Nostalgies”. In this short story, the protagonist dreams of setting off again to the distant regions whose sight had once enchanted him only to realise the absurdity of his wish: “A quoi bon?... Ce charme passé, je ne le retrouverais pas... Il n'est point de plus irréalisable chimère que d'aller, en des lieux jadis aimés, à la recherche des sensations mortes.”<sup>155</sup>

The disillusionment that Eberhardt sees as inseparable from the experience of return belatedly reconciles her with the Segalenian belief in the vanity of nostalgia. However, whereas Segalen's *exote* finds salvation in departure, which preserves him from the sense of the familiar, Eberhardt, wishing to preserve just this sense of the familiar, equally

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>152</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 134.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 258.

<sup>155</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Nostalgies” [1905, posthumous], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 200-205, 204-205.

disapproves of departures and returns. Although taking leave of a beloved place is a melancholy experience, the nostalgic attempt to retrieve it erases this feeling only to replace it with disappointment; in the Eberhardian version of exoticism, the two major constituents seem to be “la tristesse des [...] départs”<sup>156</sup> and *le désenchantement du retour*; and both are governed by a will-to-observe rather than by a quest-for-change.

### 4.3.2. Exoticism and colonialism

#### 4.3.2.1. Subtle complicities

In its eagerness to constantly preserve a sense of difference and newness, exoticism is, *a priori*, incompatible with colonialism; as Bongie notes, the homogenisation it combated in the nineteenth century was, to a large extent, wrought by the “specifically modern form of territorial expansion”<sup>157</sup> which exported, along with people, the institutions and culture of the colonising country. In effect, “*exotes*” like Segalen aired a seemingly unequivocal distance from colonialism both as a political and literary project. Despite his anxious prediction that his exotic writings might be wrongly classified as colonial literature, Segalen affirms that “colonial literature is not in [his] line”: the settler and the colonial administrator are too preoccupied by commerce and administration respectively to “preen themselves on aesthetic contemplation”.<sup>158</sup> At a less theoretical level, exotic novelists like Loti are known to have written scathing denunciations of colonial attempts to erase the Other’s difference. A visit to Arab encampments in Mers El Kebir causes him to lament “ces débris d’une nation puissante qui succombe aujourd’hui, comme autrefois les Natchez et tant d’autres, sous la main de notre civilisation envahissante et impitoyable”; other visits to Algeria make him deplore the disfigurement of local architecture and culture as a whole.<sup>159</sup>

The antagonism between the two contemporary projects has also been pointed out by critics like Todorov and Yee. While the former explains that exoticism glorifies foreigners where colonialism denigrates them,<sup>160</sup> Yee sets out to demonstrate the subversive character of exoticism in nineteenth century French literature, a subversion she detects in exotic

<sup>156</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Dernières visions” [1906], *Sud oranais*, 114-118, 115.

<sup>157</sup> Bongie, *Exotic Memories*, 11.

<sup>158</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 114.

<sup>159</sup> Edward J. Hughes, *Writing Marginality in Modern French Literature: From Loti to Genet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 13.

<sup>160</sup> Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, 323.

writers' giving voice to "the elegiac loss experienced in the face of a colonisation that is essentially destructive"<sup>161</sup> and their reactionary celebration of a culture that preceded both colonialism and modern capitalism.<sup>162</sup> In her eagerness to emphasise this subversive character, Yee actually goes so far as suggesting that exotic literature was the immediate precursor of postcolonial writing".<sup>163</sup> However, both Yee and Todorov end up considerably toning down their positions: Todorov argues that, because they stem from the same vision of Self and Other which makes the author "the only subject on board", relegating cultural Others to the status of mere objects, the colonialist and exotic impulses can cohabit in a single author;<sup>164</sup> similarly, Yee states that exotic writing is always "on the verge of being 'colonial literature', proto-imperialist or Orientalist [in that it] is not the voice of the Other come to disturb a monolithic European Self, but a European representation of an Other's voice."<sup>165</sup>

About a century earlier, Segalen himself revised his earlier expropriation of the colonial from the realm of the exotic, commenting, towards the end of his *Essai*, that "le 'colonial' est exotique, mais l'exotisme dépasse puissamment le colonial."<sup>166</sup> Noting this shift in Segalen's position,<sup>167</sup> Bongie argues that his realisation of the kinship between colonialism and exoticism grew even sharper in his later works, as in the novel *René Leys*, in which the author "accepts colonialism as exoticism's necessary point of departure",<sup>168</sup> and exoticism itself as "a sophisticated version of the anti-exotic colonialism he wanted to rule out."<sup>169</sup> As an exotic traveller, Segalen himself displayed a multi-faceted complicity with colonialism. For one thing, the imagery he deploys to convey his idea of exoticism is quintessentially colonialist, rehearsing as it does the feminisation of the exotic space and the coloniser's fantasy of possession: "Toute l'île [la Polynésie] venait à moi comme une femme. Et j'avais précisément de la femme là-bas, des dons que les pays complets ne donnent plus."<sup>170</sup> On the other hand, putting into practice his advocacy of the prioritisation of the Self, the traveller Segalen was less interested in discovering the exotic Other than in

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<sup>161</sup> Yee, *Exotic Subversions*, 2.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 8

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>164</sup> Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, 323.

<sup>165</sup> Yee, *Exotic Subversions*, 5.

<sup>166</sup> Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme*, 81.

<sup>167</sup> Bongie, *Exotic Memories*, 114.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>170</sup> Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme*, 53.

the ego-gratifying task of retrieving the traces of fellow Westerners who had preceded him to his destination. In Hiva Oa, the Polynesian island where the painter Paul Gauguin had spent the last part of his life, Segalen's concern was to preserve the artistic legacy of "the self-proclaimed European savage" rather than native culture.<sup>171</sup> Interestingly, the self-proclaimed savage in question displayed a no less proud attachment to his European identity. While willingly taking part in the probably thrilling experience of drinking a Maori companion's blood in fulfilment of a native ritual, the suggestion of relinquishing his French name in favour of a native one (his Maori companion's precisely) struck Gauguin as appalling, and he energetically ruled it out.<sup>172</sup>

Like Segalen and Gauguin, Loti, that other icon of exotic literature, revelled in Oriental accoutrements only as a recreational practice, a theatricality that spared him the effort of genuine and deep cultural appropriation.<sup>173</sup> The three *exotes* further agree in their construction of the exotic space as a site of erotic desire. If, in the case of Segalen, this construction remained strictly metaphorical, as illustrated above, Gauguin concretised it both through his eroticised portrayals of Tahitian wahines and his own numerous adventures with these native women, while Loti recounted his meanderings in the Orient with a rather boastful focus on his (real or fictitious) amorous exploits, in novels like *Aziyadé* (1879) and *Mme Chrysanthème* (1887). Acting on the "living, loving, leaving"<sup>174</sup> principle dear to the Westerner abroad, the writer invariably structured all his travel narratives (whether his own or his characters') around the motif of seducing, then abandoning, the native woman: "[s]o long as the ship is in port, Lieutenant Loti can pursue his amorous adventures ashore. But once the order to set sail is issued, the liaison must end."<sup>175</sup>

The "leaving" part of the *exote's* syndrome apart – like Gauguin, and unlike Loti and Segalen, she died in an "exotic" land – Eberhardt has been seen to display all the features of exotic writing, including the eroticisation, appropriation, and even the feminisation of the exotic space. While the feminisation of the male natives relates, as argued in Chapter 2, mainly to the writer's wish to denigrate natives unwilling to accept colonial rule, the

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<sup>171</sup> Edward J. Hughes, *Writing Marginality*, 11.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>174</sup> Lesley Blanch, quoted in *ibid.*, 13.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

feminisation of the Oriental space is to be integrated within the simultaneously patriarchal and colonial rhetoric of possession. In “Trimardeur”, Orschanov ranges his desire to see Africa among his long series of infatuations, adding that the desire is worth fulfilling only if this new mistress proves to be as loyal and submissive as he wishes her to be: “Orschanov songea que tout était arrivé par la faute de l’un de ses nombreux coups de passion, qui le jetaient les yeux fermés sur certaines femmes. Il était devenu amoureux de l’Afrique. Du moins, il faudrait qu’elle lui soit docile, pensa-t-il, qu’elle se donne toute.”<sup>176</sup>

Like the eroticisation of the native females discussed in the previous chapter, it is possible to argue that this feminisation owes much to the weight of the exotic and, more narrowly, Orientalist canon. As Carl Thompson explains in *Travel Writing*, travellers were, as early as Mediaeval times, expected to produce accounts that matched those of their predecessors – indeed, that any departure from the well-established epistemological decorum involved the risk of a sceptical reception, regardless of the veracity of the account.<sup>177</sup> The weight of tradition is even harder to elude in the case of “belated travellers”. As Behdad demonstrates, even those who had set off for remote spaces with the intention of disregarding textual mediation in favour of authentic observation could only come up with a hybrid product, halfway between transgression and subscription to textual authority.<sup>178</sup> But although Behdad includes Eberhardt among the “belated travellers” he discusses, whether she had any intention to break with the exotic canon is doubtful; rather, her intention, it seems, was to follow in the footsteps of her predecessors, as suggested by her insertion in her diary of St Jeremy’s advice: “Placez-vous sur les chemins, regardez, et demandez quels sont les anciens sentiers, quelle est la bonne voie [et] marchez-y”.<sup>179</sup> Eberhardt’s diary is, in fact, filled with quotations diligently copied from the works of her most successful contemporaries/direct predecessors and meant to serve as an inspiration for the literary career she hoped to launch in the Algerian desert. The very writing of this diary seems to have been undertaken under the influence of the Goncourt brothers’ *Journal*, which Eberhardt was reading at that time.<sup>180</sup> Two other writers intensively quoted are, unsurprisingly, Loti and Fromentin. Following in the footsteps of the latter, the

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<sup>176</sup> Eberhardt, “Trimardeur”, 487.

<sup>177</sup> Thompson, *Travel Writing*, 72-73.

<sup>178</sup> Behdad, *Belated Travelers*.

<sup>179</sup> Quoted in Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 28.

<sup>180</sup> Eberhardt, *Journaliers*, 36.

ambitious Orientalist dreamt of writing her own *Été dans le Sahara* and visiting the Sahel.<sup>181</sup>

In its functioning as an essentially Western textual network, as well as in its focus on Western individual, exoticism reveals itself to be a closed system in which the exotic Other has little relevance: the Westerner is both subject and object of the exotic project. In *Infelicities*, Peter Mason contends that the exotic is not the Other, but the dumb product of the exotic writer's dismissal of the Other's voice;<sup>182</sup> as a result, "the supposed communication between the European and the native [is] in effect a European monologue".<sup>183</sup> Eventually, exoticism says little that is not about the *exote* himself/herself – and the epistemological violence s/he inflicts on the Other.

#### 4.3.2.2. A certain vision of identity

Expanding on the idea of what might be called "exotic distance" – distance between the *exote* and the exotic object – Segalen explains that it is entrenched in the belief that races and, more broadly, the Self and the Other, are equally impenetrable: "Partons de cet aveu d'impénétrabilité entre races, mœurs, nations".<sup>184</sup> This trope of impenetrability is also recurrent in Eberhardt's portrayals of interracial relationships, often metaphorised, in conformity with the Orientalist rule of feminising the East, through a liaison between a male European and a female native; this is the case with "Légionnaire" (1903) and "Le Major" (1944), which both focus on the impenetrable attitude/gaze of the colonised woman – Sadia and Embarka, respectively. Occasionally, imperviousness is also shown to characterise the coloniser, as in the case of the French captain's "regard impénétrable" in "Le Major".<sup>185</sup>

Although this trope of impenetrability is obviously at odds with the assimilationist thrust of colonialism, the strategy of association which marked British colonial politics and to which France also subscribed at the turn of the century is evidence that preaching racial/cultural distance is by no means incompatible with colonialism. While the (complex) ideological implications of the two major colonial policies were discussed at length at the

<sup>181</sup> Raoul Stéphan, *Isabelle Eberhardt ou la révélation du Sahara* (Paris: Flammarion, 1930), 32 and 54.

<sup>182</sup> Peter Mason, *Infelicities: Representations of the Exotic* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 6.

<sup>183</sup> Peter Hulme quoted in *ibid.*, 152.

<sup>184</sup> Segalen, *Essai sur l'exotisme*, 25.

<sup>185</sup> Eberhardt, "Le Major" [1944, posthumous], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 157-176, 174.

outset of this thesis, it may be worthwhile to take up the discussion in a more theoretical vein. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha identifies two major conceptions of identity. Seen from the standpoint of “cultural diversity”, culture is a pre-given set of practices and beliefs inherited from the past in a state of unsullied purity made possible by the supposed incommunicability of cultural identity:

Cultural diversity is the recognition of pre-given cultural ‘contents’ and customs, held in a timeframe of relativism; it gives rise to anodyne liberal notions of multiculturalism, cultural exchange, or the culture of humanity. Cultural diversity is also the representation of a radical rhetoric of the separation of totalized cultures that live unsullied by the intertextuality of their historical locations, safe in the Utopianism of a mythic memory of a unique cultural identity. Cultural diversity may even emerge as system of articulation and exchange of cultural signs in certain ... imperialist accounts of anthropology.<sup>186</sup>

As a rather ambivalent outlook – open in that it acknowledges the value of other cultures than one’s own, narrow in that it refuses to reach out for the Other – cultural diversity is precisely the vision that seems to underpin exoticism. In conformity with the above definition, Segalen’s concept preaches distance even as it gestures towards cultural exchange; in a similar way, the examples, given above, of Gauguin’s refusal to relinquish his name and the ease with which Loti repeatedly turned his back on the supposedly beloved Orient (and its women) show that seeming manifestations of absorption of the Other’s culture, like Loti’s theatrical donning of Oriental costume, belong to what Stanley Fish has, in another context, termed “boutique multiculturalism” – a form of cultural tolerance that is limited to “unthreatening” aspects of the Other’s culture, like dress, food, or art.<sup>187</sup>

Eberhardt’s own case is more complicated, as the Russian writer, in converting to Islam and being fluent in Arabic, did not only appropriate “superficial” aspects of the culture she encountered in the Orient. Although the racial and cultural distance she preached are akin to the just discussed politics of diversity, her performance of her own identity seems closer to the vision that Bhabha terms “cultural difference”. In opposition to “diversity”, “difference” envisions identity as a permanent building-site, a never-

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<sup>186</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, “Cultural Diversity and Cultural Difference” [1994], *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Bill Aschcroft et al. eds (London: Routledge, 1995), 206-212, 206.

<sup>187</sup> Stanley Fish, “Boutique Multiculturalism or why Liberals are Incapable of Thinking of Hate Speech”, *Critical Inquiry* 23, 2 (1997): 378-395, 378.



completed process of construction that constantly revises itself in contact with the Other;<sup>188</sup> refuting the idea of identity as a homogeneous and fixed entity, it assumes that “[cultural] signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew.”<sup>189</sup> While Eberhardt did constantly revise her writing of her identity – a process facilitated by the ambiguous character of her birth – this revision is not necessarily an illustration of Bhabha’s celebrated concept. Her self-reinvention as a Muslim, for instance, seems to oppose the “traditional” vision of cultural identity as static; however, the simultaneous (and fake) Islamic identity she bestows on her unknown father reconciles her with this vision, after all. At a more “political” level, her endorsement of the policy of association, with its rigidly totalising vision of (racial and cultural) identities, also testifies to her subscription to the politics of diversity. As indicated in the quotation inserted above (in which the author states that diversity can often be detected in imperialist anthropological accounts), Bhabha himself implicitly associates diversity with imperialism. Like Said before him, Bhabha identifies Manicheism and oppositional categories as the philosophy underwriting the imperialist world vision, and it is precisely such definitions that are at the core of cultural diversity, with its neat separation between Self and Other.

The purpose of this section has been to argue that, as an ideology that is governed by a Manichean vision of identity, exoticism is *not* an anti-colonialist stance; rather, it functions as a form of ideological corollary to the strategy of association. However, one should not conclude from Bhabha’s enthusiastic hailing of “cultural difference” that this concept is incompatible with the spirit of colonialism. This concept is obviously part of Bhabha’s celebration of hybridity, in which he sees an efficient weapon against colonialism in that it thwarts colonial knowledge in its attempts at classifying and categorising.<sup>190</sup> And yet, a policy such as assimilation is, in a sense, an acceptance of hybridity and an acknowledgement that cultures – some of them, at least – are not expected to remain fixed entities. What this shows is that power mechanisms such as colonialism can accommodate themselves to different and seemingly contradictory visions; as Behdad, again, argues about Orientalism, these mechanisms are themselves never completed-processes which

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<sup>188</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 50.

<sup>189</sup> Bhabha, “Cultural Diversity”, 208.

<sup>190</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 141.

continually revise themselves in reaction to unexpected impediments – including hybridity – so as to perpetuate their hegemony.<sup>191</sup>

#### 4.4. The writing journey

##### 4.4.1. Writing and movement

One of the several metaphorical implications of the word “journey” relates to the process of writing. In an essay pointedly entitled “Travel and Writing”, Michel Butor analyses the multiple facets whereby the two acts intertwine. Travel is always simultaneously a reward and a promise of a text: often urged by the reading of other travellers’ descriptions of the intended destination, travel in turn serves as pretext to other writing – in a more literal sense, as pre-text, *tout court*. The traveller’s impulse is to inscribe his/her name on exotic monuments; to take notes; to write a review, a travel account, an “exotic” novel. Most travellers actually set off with the intention of writing something “because for them travel *is* writing”;<sup>192</sup> and there is more to this last sentence than a hyperbolisation of the interconnectedness of the two processes. After all, travelling is nothing but the inscription of one’s marks along a traversed surface; writing (and reading), on the other hand, is a journey taken simultaneously on a linear route of words and an even more intricate map of thoughts.<sup>193</sup>

The association – indeed the equation – between travel and writing has been taken up in different ways by different authors. Ali Behdad opens his *Belated Travellers* by identifying himself with the objects of his study. Like them, he is a traveller: if, as some postcolonial authors have argued, the chronotope of travel illustrates the very nature of intellectual practice, this is even more the case with the displacement in time and space involved in the project of writing about colonialism in a postcolonial West, which is precisely at the core of his book.<sup>194</sup> For his part, taking as a point of departure the double meaning of the word “metaphor”, which, in modern Greek, is used both to indicate a means of transportation – a bus or a train – and a story, Michel de Certeau goes on to explain that like such means of locomotion, stories “traverse and organize places, [...]”

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<sup>191</sup> Behdad, *Belated Travelers*, 137.

<sup>192</sup> Michel Butor, “Travel and Writing”, 67-68. Butor’s emphasis.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>194</sup> Behdad, *Belated Travelers*, 1.

select them and link them together”;<sup>195</sup> and because they necessarily connect places, either in a linear or an interlaced way, stories are always travel stories.<sup>196</sup> Holding a similar view, Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs explain that all writing is necessarily about travel; that there is “almost no statuesque literature”.<sup>197</sup>

Despite such analyses, the relationship between writing and mobility is too complicated to be summed up in terms of analogy or a cause/effect relationship. If writing may be viewed as the travel of signs and ideas, it can also, with no less pertinence, be read as the act of fixing such signs and ideas on a well-defined surface; of forcing them into sedentariness, as it were. From other perspectives, while Barry Powell reminds us that writing was, as “a technology of civilisation”, born in a sedentary context,<sup>198</sup> others note the incompatibility of the act of writing with mobility: notwithstanding the Nietzschean plea for writing-as-dance,<sup>199</sup> “on ne peut écrire qu’assis.”<sup>200</sup> Arbitrating the debate between these two visions – formulated by Nietzsche and Flaubert respectively – Jacques Derrida agrees that the writer could never be upright but does articulate his/her activity in terms of movement. Focusing on the writer’s seated position, Derrida sees in it a metaphor for writing as a descent which imitates the earthward movement of gravity.<sup>201</sup> Significantly, metaphors, for Derrida, are never innocent.<sup>202</sup> Read in the light of this assumption, Flaubert’s, Nietzsche’s, and Derrida’s own representation of writing are in turn revelatory of what they perceive to be the philosophy underlying this activity. While Nietzsche’s resort to the metaphor of the dance stands for his vision of writing as a Dionysian performance – one that resists the diktat of order and rational structure – Flaubert’s visualisation of the same activity as a writer sitting and, one can imply, diligently working at his desk, matches his representation of literature as labour – the process of methodical production that obeys well-defined rules which Barthes analyses in his *Degré zéro de*

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<sup>195</sup> Michel de Certeau, “Spatial Stories” [1984], *Defining Travel: Diverse Visions*, Susan L. Roberson ed. (Oxford, MS: University Press of Mississippi), 88-104, 88.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>197</sup> Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs, *Talking about Travel Writing: a Conversation Between Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs* (Leicester: The English Association: 2007), 3.

<sup>198</sup> Barry B. Powell, *Writing: Theory and History of the Technology of Civilization* (Chicester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 65. Powell argues that the invention of writing related to a wish to classify early sedentary communities’ goods.

<sup>199</sup> Christopher Johnson, *System and Writing in the Philosophy of Jacques Derrida* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 37.

<sup>200</sup> Gustave Flaubert, quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-38.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

*l'écriture*.<sup>203</sup> Characteristically located in an undecidable space between these two conceptions, Derrida's image of writing confirms his vision of it as at once conservative and metamorphic.<sup>204</sup>

It is precisely as ideology that Barthes's *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* treats writing, although the term "*écriture*" is here used to mean less the physical act of writing itself than a writer's characteristic style. Barthes's central argument is that there is no such thing as "neutral" writing; one always writes in a specific form shaped by one's vision of the world. Form, he explains, is not a mere aesthetic element; it is itself content, either confirming or belying the actual ideological "content" of a literary work. However, inasmuch as writing always exists prior to its use by the writer, the latter has but a limited choice of forms and is necessarily conditioned by the weight of tradition and history, which determine the available writing modes. It is within this choice/determinism dialectical frame that Barthes reads successive literary movements. Surveying the history of French literature, he shows how these movements translated either a wilful subscription to the linguistic and ideological codes prevailing in the writer's time and community, as with Classicism,<sup>205</sup> or an (almost always failed) attempt to subvert these codes, as with Modernism.<sup>206</sup>

While retaining the Barthesian idea of style as ideological content, the triangular writing-movement-ideology association has, with more recent authors, taken on yet another manifestation. In the wake of Deleuze's and Guattari's "Treatise on Nomadology", in which the French philosophers explain that nomadism, far from being a mere mode of living, is a philosophy that may also be reflected in certain scientific disciplines or artistic styles,<sup>207</sup> concepts like "nomadic writing" and "nomadic poetics" have emerged. In line with the anti-conventional character of Deleuze's "nomadic thought", these new concepts are defined as fundamentally subversive; characteristically, they are associated either with feminine/feminist writing or with postcolonial literature – that is, opposed to the Patriarchal and Colonial States, respectively. More importantly, it is the traditional linguistic and literary orders, based on logic, coherence, and linearity that such an aesthetics rejects. Further justifying the appellation "nomadic", this mode of

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<sup>203</sup> Barthes, *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, 47-48.

<sup>204</sup> Christopher Johnson, *Derrida: the Scene of Writing* (London: W&N, 1991), 46.

<sup>205</sup> Barthes, *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, 19 and 42.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-64.

<sup>207</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 422.

writing is marked by continual wandering from one language to another, one cultural setting to another, one narrative thread to another, and one text to another through an intensive resort to intertextuality. In Pierre Joris's words, "nomadic poetics is a war machine, always on the move, always changing, morphing, moving through languages, cultures, terrains, times without stopping."<sup>208</sup>

#### 4.4.2. On Eberhardtian *écriture*

##### 4.4.2.1. Nomadic writing?

It is precisely a nomadic poetics that Hedi Abdel-Jaouad assigns to Eberhardt in his "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Nomad". Eberhardt's textual nomadism, he argues, is easily detectable in the dynamic interplay of French and Arabic which characterises her writings, her combination of textual and visual elements,<sup>209</sup> and her "verbal inventions and audacity in imagery".<sup>210</sup> Paralleling Yee's comments on exotic literature, Abdel-Jaouad even holds that these features make Eberhardt a precursor of postcolonial writing. Yet while "code mixing" is widely recurrent in Eberhardt's texts, which teem with Arabic words like "*roumi*", "*kéfer*", and "*mektoub*" and phrases like "*fi Fransa*" (in France),<sup>211</sup> the other stylistic elements mentioned by Abdel-Jaouad are *not* present. The insertion of visual characters is restricted to a few sketches that accompany some of her travel notes and letters sent to her husband, Slimène,<sup>212</sup> and her "verbal inventions" are nothing but either a sort of family jargon to which she resorted in her early – and rather coded – letters to her brother Augustin or affectionate nicknames she gave Slimène. What Abdel-Jaouad calls "audacity in imagery" is even harder to locate; the phrase is rather surprising for a writer who doubted her own originality and who is often dubbed a less-than-average writer, if a formidable liver.<sup>213</sup> Of course, such a judgement by no means justifies the neglect of

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<sup>208</sup> Pierre Joris, *A Nomad Poetics: Essays* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 26.

<sup>209</sup> Abdel-Jaouad, "Portrait", 113.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>211</sup> A good illustration is Eberhardt's short story "Yasmina", from which Abdel-Jaouad quotes at length. See *ibid.*, 112.

<sup>212</sup> These visual characters usually consist of two pairs of eyes – supposedly hers and her husband's. An example is inserted in Isabelle Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 318.

<sup>213</sup> In *L'Amazone des sables*, for example, Claude-Maurice Robert reports that, upon learning of his intention to devote a book to Eberhardt, the writer Montherlant objected that she was not a writer. Instead of refuting this statement, Robert answered: "peut-être. Mais elle est mieux. Isabelle est un caractère. Isabelle est une grande vivante, un grand cœur mis à nu." Claude-Maurice Robert, *L'Amazone des sables: le vrai visage d'Isabelle Eberhardt* (Algiers: Soubiron, 1934), 13. For his part, Doyon dubs Eberhardt a "notatrice simple [...] dépourvue de tout appareil que nous jugeons de *la littérature*". René-Louis Doyon, "Une Russe

Eberhardt's texts that it has engendered; in conformity with the Barthesian thesis summed up above, this study has endeavoured to demonstrate precisely Eberhardt's ethics and politics as reflected by her writings – her imagery, in particular. What has come of this endeavour is that most of her metaphors are firmly enmeshed within the colonialist/Orientalist traditional construction of the East as a site of power and desire. Similarly, it is difficult to find anything inventive about images of “l'heure rose et verte de l'aube”<sup>214</sup> or of a morning “qui se pare de teintes roses”,<sup>215</sup> both of which are evocative of Homer's famous “rose-fingered dawn” in *The Odyssey*.

In his eagerness to present Eberhardt's texts – as indeed Eberhardt herself – as nomadic, Abdel-Jaouad discards significant features of Eberhardtian aesthetics that are in contradiction with his thesis. Analysing the poetics of nomadic writers such as Serge Patrice Thibodeau and Jean Echenoz, critics have illustrated how the rule of mobility which governs their writing manifests itself not only through their intensive recourse to imagery suggesting movement,<sup>216</sup> but also through the scattering of the narrative authority across a multitude of points of view (in turn first, second, and third), the disruption of linearity, and the privileging of equally sinuous plots and sentence structures.<sup>217</sup> Interestingly, Eberhardt's texts present none of these features. Her plots are nothing if not linear, and this is the case not only with her shorter texts, but also with her two uncompleted novels. Although *Rakhil* opens *in fine*, with the narrator's musings over the tomb of the eponymous heroine, the rest of the events are rendered chronologically. “Trimardeur”, written five years later, is an even more straightforward relation of the protagonists' successive journeys; not only is it most conventionally linear, but it also reveals glaring incompetence at weaving an intricate narrative; an incompetence which, one can plausibly conclude, was probably the reason why Eberhardt felt more at ease with much shorter texts. The simplicity which marks her plots also characterises her sentences, a feature with which her employer Barrucand – himself only too inclined for sometimes over-adorned and unnecessarily lengthy *tourneures* – often faulted her. In his posthumous

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au désert: l'invention d'Isabelle Eberhardt”, *Revue de la semaine* (Sep. 1921), 411-424, 418. Doyon's emphasis.

<sup>214</sup> Eberhardt, “Kenadsa”, 174.

<sup>215</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “La Barga” [1906], *Sud oranais*, 185-187, 185.

<sup>216</sup> Marie-Odile André, “Jean Echenoz ou le roman errant”, *Errance et marginalité en littérature: recherche sur l'imaginaire*, Arlette Bouloumié ed. (Angers: Presses de l'Université d'Angers, 2007), 113-122, 116-118.

<sup>217</sup> Denise Brassard, “Enjamber le désert: l'écriture nomade chez Serge Patrice Thibodeau”, *Nomades, voyageurs*, 51-70, 56-57.

publication of the drowned writer's texts, he even undertook to "mend" what seemed to him to be her glaring stylistic flaws, with the result that "[w]here Isabelle wrote 'Everybody laughed', Barrucand elaborated: 'People laughed at his rusticity: this gesture belonged to a shepherd.'"<sup>218</sup>

The literary genre which seems to have indisposed Eberhardt is precisely the one that Bakhtin identifies as *the* carnivalesque literary form *par excellence*: a poly-discursive world, the novel brings together antagonistic cultural languages and incompatible literary genres, turning, in thus blurring generic frontiers and renouncing stylistic unity, into an anti-genre itself.<sup>219</sup> Of course, this does not exclude the possibility of identifying such features in other writings than the novel; the mixing of genres, for instance, has been identified as a typical characteristic of travel writing. As Charles Forsdick writes, "'travel literature' depends [...] on a sense of dynamic genericity that presents the material to which the label relates in terms of intergeneric uncertainty or transgeneric vogueing between different forms."<sup>220</sup> In the same vein, Jonathan Raban states: "travel is a notoriously raffish open house where different genres are likely to end up in the same bed. It accommodates the private diary, the essay, the short story, the prose poem, the rough note and polished table talk within indiscriminate hospitality."<sup>221</sup> While not thoroughly absent, this feature is much less pronounced in Eberhardt's writings. Although she did write most of the genres listed above, she took care to keep them strictly separate: no fiction is inserted in the midst of an essay or a journalistic report; no newspaper articles are there to provide digression from the main narrative(s) of her stories. Eberhardt does often insert popular songs, but, they are usually no more than part of her ethnographic rendering of native milieus and never unsettle the linear continuity of the narrative.<sup>222</sup>

The other major features Bakhtin attributes to carnivalesque writing – *heteroglossia* and multi-voicedness – seem much more relevant to Eberhardt's texts. Eberhardian characters do not only speak different languages (French, Arabic, Turkish and Russian); their language also represents their social speech types and their world view. *Légionnaires*,

<sup>218</sup> Kobak, *Isabelle*, 240-241. On Barrucand's "polishing" of Eberhardt's style see, among others, René-Louis Doyon, "une Russe au désert", 418.

<sup>219</sup> Bakhtin, "Epic and the Novel" [1941], *The Dialogic Imagination*, 6-8.

<sup>220</sup> Charles Forsdick, *Travel in Twentieth-Century French and Francophone Cultures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), xii.

<sup>221</sup> Jonathan Raban quoted in Thompson, *Travel Writing*, 11.

<sup>222</sup> See, among other texts, "Douar du Makhzen" [1908], "Veillée" [1908], "Retour" [1908], and "Mort musulmane" [1906] in Isabelle Eberhardt, *Sud oranais*, 67, 112-113, 123-124, and 154 respectively.

for example, do not express themselves in the polished manner of their captains or lieutenants, as illustrated in the following passage, which contrasts the ungrammatical French of Hausser the *légionnaire* to the more cultured manner of speech of the regiment's captain:

- Mon garçon, lui dit le commissaire [to Hausser], quand on a treize ans à tirer aux travaux et surtout quand on est ornementé dans votre style, on ne fait pas de politique, c'est malsain !

[...]

Hausser se dressa, goguenard:

- Ben quoi, M'sieu le commissaire? Oui, c'est vrai, c'est moi que je suis Hausser. Et pis? C'est-y qu'y en a beaucoup de comme moi? Pt'êtes ben que vous-même, que vous êtes galonné et tout, et que vous vous f...du public, à c'te heure, vous ne seriez pas fichu de faire c'que j'ai fait.<sup>223</sup>

Yet although this choir-like cohabitation is in conformity with the Bakhtinian celebration of a polyphony that rejects the authority of a single voice, Eberhardt does eventually subject these multifarious voices to a single authority: that of the God-like, omniscient narrator through whose perspective most of her narratives are told. Her privileging of this type of narration says much about her impulse to be the only master of her narrative. In a sense, it echoes the “commanding view” rhetoric shown in the first chapter to translate her will-to-dominate the Orient she describes; in both cases, the object of her description/narration is appropriated, silenced, and placed under control.

Eberhardt's will-to-control manifests itself most strikingly in her personal letters. Whether she wrote to her brother Augustin or to her husband, she liked to sermonise, reprove of such and such an initiative, and provide not only advice, but precise, detailed instructions duly enumerated in order of importance. Although her state of dependence made it difficult for her to adopt as commanding a tone with her friend Ali, she did, albeit in a more soothing manner, give him no end of instructions. Among other tasks, the Tunisian friend was in turn requested to dispatch a pair of pigeons for her old (step)father,<sup>224</sup> take care of her brother Augustin during his sojourn in Tunis,<sup>225</sup> and prepare her own settlement there.<sup>226</sup>

The following is an extract from what might be seen as a typical Eberhardtian letter:

<sup>223</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “En marge” [1904], *Ecrits sur le sable II*, 312-316,315.

<sup>224</sup> See Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes*, 98.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 139-143.

<sup>226</sup> See, in particular, *Ibid.*, 176-177 and 181.



Tu recevras avec cette lettre mes pièces et par une lettre suivante – demain soir peut-être, samedi au plus tard – un certificat d’identité délivré par le consulat impérial de Russie ici.

Quand tu auras reçu ces papiers, fais immédiatement par écrit ta demande, mais *garde-toi bien* de TOUTE DEMARCHE VERBALE. En me nommant dans ta demande, énonce mon nom comme suit :

Melle Isabelle-Marie-Wilhelmine Eberhardt, sujette russe rentière [...]

Ne mets pas *journaliste*.

Après avoir formulé ce que tu demandes, mets :

J’ai l’honneur, mon colonel, de vous présenter à l’appui de ma demande les papiers d’origine et le certificat de bonne vie et mœurs de ma fiancée [...] <sup>227</sup>

In addition to the predominance of the imperative form, the author’s will-to-domination is emphasised through the use of capital letters and italics – a feature which is also recurrent in her fictional texts. Interestingly, while acting herself as the intransigent *maîtresse d’école* she once projected to be, she strongly resented being “dictated to” in any manner. Her vexation when Rechid Bey, her one-time fiancé, asked her to let her hair grow was such that, to spare himself her anger, he henceforward felt obliged, whenever he requested something from her, to specify that he was not ordering her, but merely making a suggestion. <sup>228</sup>

#### 4.2.2.2. Eberhardt and the Other’s discourse

One point that is central both to nomadic writing and to the Bakhtinian dialogic principle is intertextuality. In engaging the author in a series of dialogues with contemporary or more ancient literary voices, intertextuality, as part of the multi-voicedness that marks the overall concept of polyphony, liberates the text from the “official” writer’s uncontested authority and offers a vision of both the text and its author not as closed entities but as dynamic structures generated in relation to other structures. <sup>229</sup> As such, intertextuality is not a mere writing technique; it is an expression of the author’s appraisal of the relations between Self and Other. To highlight the Segalenian ethics of individualism and distance, for instance, Todorov points out the fact that the author of *Essai sur l’exotisme* and *Les Immémoriaux* does not insert a single citation in these works: <sup>230</sup> the triumph of the Self is inscribed in Segalen’s very *écriture*.

<sup>227</sup> Letter sent to Slimène Ehni on May 29<sup>th</sup> 1901. See *ibid.*, 340.

<sup>228</sup> Charles-Roux, *Un Désir d’Orient*, 394.

<sup>229</sup> Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000), 20.

<sup>230</sup> Todorov, *On Human Diversity*, 334.

With regard to Eberhardt's own use of intertextuality, three major remarks emerge. Like Segalen, whose valorisation of distance and individualism she has been shown to share, she abstains from citations in her fiction; her use of intertextuality seems to be limited to her diary and letters. In addition to the already mentioned influences of Fromentin, the Goncourt brothers, and Loti, she also intensively quotes Russian authors like Dostoevsky and the poet Nadson<sup>231</sup> and the Italian writer D'Anunzio.<sup>232</sup> The texts allowed to mix with her own are, thus, all exclusively European; apart from a few Quranic verses, few, if any, Oriental intertexts are referred to, let alone quoted. At a time when the decadent West was discovering with enthusiasm Oriental *plumes* like the Persian poets Saadi, Hafiz and Omar Khayyam,<sup>233</sup> she herself seems to have remained indifferent to (and perhaps ignorant of) their art, despite the Sufi affiliation she shared with them. Indeed, her ignorance/disregard of the long and rich history of Sufi literature<sup>234</sup> seems to have been as massive as her knowledge, and eagerness to apply, the tenets of the Sufi doctrine. In thus privileging Western voices over Oriental ones, Eberhardt once again confirms her loyalty to her Western identity, her alleged immersion in Oriental culture notwithstanding.

Direct citation is, of course, far from being the only form of intertextuality; rather, it is its simplest and most explicit illustration. As defined by Bakhtin, intertextual – or to use his own word, dialogical – relationships can take various manifestations, both explicit and hidden. Bakhtin distinguishes between the mere stylisation (imitating the style) of another's discourse and what he calls “active types of discourse”, such as dialogue or polemics. Although “double-voiced” in that it is oriented both towards someone else's discourse and an extra-linguistic referent, stylisation is “unidirectional”: there is little distance, if any, between the stylising subject and the stylised author. Marked by the absence of active dialogue, this type of discourse is an appropriating gesture that silences the stylised Other and recuperates his/her words for the use of the styliser; an

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<sup>231</sup> Semyon Yakovlevich Nadson (1862-1887) was a Russian poet of Jewish ancestry. He died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-four, having published one book of dark, pessimistic poetry entitled *Pora* (It is Time) in 1885.

<sup>232</sup> Gabriele D'Anunzio (1863-1938) was an Italian journalist, writer, and soldier in the First World War. He is thought to have influenced the Fascist movement and to have been a forerunner of Mussolini.

<sup>233</sup> Victor Hugo opens his collection of poetry *Les Orientales* (1829) with a quotation from the Persian poet Saadi; the influence of Hafiz urged Goethe to write his *West-Oriental Divan* (1819-1827); and Edward Fitzgerald's translation of Khayyam's *Rubaiyat* (Quatrains) in 1859 proved to be a commercial success.

<sup>234</sup> Although Guri Barstad argues that Eberhardt chose her nickname (Mahmoud) Saadi in homage to the Persian poet (Guri Ellen Barstad, “Isabelle Eberhardt ou l'invention de soi”, *Romansk Forum* 16 (February 2002): 265-269, 267), evidence for such a thesis is to be found nowhere in the writer's texts.

appropriation which, in removing the distance between the author and the Other, in turn brings it close to the “first”, monologic type of discourse, whose referent is purely extra-discursive.<sup>235</sup>

Like stylisation, Eberhardt’s relationship to the authors she quotes is one of appropriation rather than dialogue. In the “active type of discourse”, the author is involved in a dynamic interaction with the Other; whether open or hidden – that is, whether the Other is overtly referred to or whether his/her presence is felt through an apparently referential, non-dialogical discourse – the diverging directions of the two authors result in a discursive confrontation in which the Other’s words act as a counterforce to those of the “official” author.<sup>236</sup> In contrast to such agitated *jeux de pouvoir*, in which neither author “oppressively dominates the other’s thought”,<sup>237</sup> citation is, as it were, a refusal of confrontation. Where dialogue and polemic contest the very notion of discursive authority by putting the two confronting authors’ at risk, citation bestows power on both: an obvious acknowledgement of the quoted writer’s authority, an approving quotation is also empowering for the quoting writer, whose entrenchment in a discursive tradition it confirms.<sup>238</sup>

Eberhardt’s privileging of simple quotation over more interactive dialogic forms signals not only a closed attitude towards difference but also, perhaps less obviously, a celebration of the Self similar to that shown to underwrite exoticism: in quoting only authors with whom she agrees, the writer seems to indulge in listening to her own voice, silencing dissenting inflections. Simultaneously, however, her “tame” quoting from predecessors like Loti and Fromentin confirms her veneration of authority as well as a wish to integrate, rather than subvert, the Orientalist canon. Finally, if the Orientalist authors she quotes denote her subscription to an age-old Western textual tradition, the Oriental authors she disdains to quote confirm her attachment to her European identity, her vision of authority as essentially Western, and the intervention of racial elements in shaping her ethics of distance.

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<sup>235</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 189-190.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*, 197-198.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>238</sup> The empowering potential of quotation is particularly well illustrated in the context of academia, as John Klancher notes. “Bakhtin’s Rhetoric”, *Landmark Essays on Bakhtin, Rhetoric, and Writing*, Frank Farmer ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Elbaum, 1998), 23-32, 26.

## Conclusion

Discussions of nomadism – and indeed the term itself – are central to biographies and academic works on Eberhardt. Dubbed an “esclave errante”,<sup>239</sup> a “nomade corps et âme”,<sup>240</sup> her mobile lifestyle is traditionally read not only as willed, but as an inherent part of her supposedly iconoclastic mindset. For the likes of Rice and Abdel-Jaouad, Eberhardt’s renunciation of sedentariness was also a rejection of all systems of codification, whether they be political, cultural, or aesthetic; hers, they argue, was a nomadism of thought as much as of lifestyle. The purpose of this chapter has been to challenge just such theses. Despite Eberhardt’s own eulogising of nomadism, such glorification has been analysed as a self-consoling rhetorical strategy belied both by biographical evidence, which shows that it was often with reluctance, and always forced by circumstances, that Eberhardt abandoned sedentary comfort, and by the lamenting tone in which Eberhardt sometimes wrote of her meanderings.

Deleuze and Guattari associate nomadism with metamorphosis, in opposition to the State’s instinct of conservation. While Eberhardt’s evolution from the hedonism of her adolescence to the spiritual maturity gained during her wanderings confirms such a definition, this chapter has shown that this process of “becoming” is not irreconcilable with conservatism. Swapping “looseness” for morality and atheism for a monotheist faith reads as a resolute move towards the acceptance of cultural conformity and authority; reconciled with that of God, the Russian writer also came to champion that of the colonial system, siding unapologetically with it in the confrontation which opposed them to the Bedouin tribes. In defending the colonial order at the expense of fellow nomads, Eberhardt exemplifies well what the authors of *A Thousand Plateaus* have termed the State’s “apparatus of capture”, whereby nomadic, hence subversive elements, are won over to the State’s logic and/or made to serve its interests.

Like her doubly articulated complicity with the State (signalled both through her espousal of a conservative moral outlook and her buttressing of colonial authority), Eberhardt’s intervention within its system of capture is twofold. The writer who participates in the actual abduction of unruly natives also captures the colonised Others and

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<sup>239</sup> “L’esclave errante” is the title chosen by Henry Kistemaekers for the play he directed in 1923. It offers a highly romanticised picture of Eberhardt, and was criticised by authors like René-Louis Doyon.

<sup>240</sup> Hanane Mounib, *Isabelle Eberhardt la suspecte* (Paris: Alfabarre, 2008), 80.

their Oriental space in her travel writings. In the Eberhardtian text, the North African space, like its people, is caught in a series of clichés artificially bestowed validity through a set of ethnographic strategies, including classification, generalisation, and temporalisation of space: though classed along supposedly inherent traits, the ethnic constituents of the Maghreb are reunited by their alleged “primitiveness” and their belonging to an Orient written as the spatial manifestation of a past lost to the modern West. As a reductive “vision” which denies the African/Oriental the privilege of historical progress, such a portrayal has been shown to be derogatory, despite its being often rendered in valorising and aesthetising terms.

This aesthetisation of the Other as a reincarnation of the past is at the heart of exoticism. Eberhardt’s subscription to this ideology has been shown to match her ethical and political outlook in many ways: as a nostalgic attempt to retrieve a bygone world, that is, as resistance to modernity, exoticism is the manifestation of a conservative frame of mind; as a textual practice that asserts the authority of the Western Self at the expense of a silenced Other, it participates in the colonialist project of subjecting the non-Western native; as an ethics of diversity which advocates racial and cultural distance, it is in tune with the policy of association buttressed by the writer who supported Lyautey.

The claim that Eberhardt’s writings present elements of both exoticism and ethnography is only apparently contradictory. Supposedly opposed by their being a romantic expression of the subjective Self and the product of objective investigation respectively, the two textual practices are similar not only in their commanding attitude and the epistemic violence they impose on the Other, but also in more specific features like the infantilisation and the primitivisation of the native. Exoticism and ethnography further meet in that both function as closed, well-defined, and exclusively Western textual networks that venerate tradition and obey a well-defined set of rules. It is precisely such features that Eberhardt displays in following in the footsteps of literary predecessors. Her intensive quoting from authors like Loti and Fromentin, whom she diligently sought to emulate, shows that her vision was not free of the intertextual mediation that Behdad has defined as the belated traveller’s burden.

Eberhardt’s citations themselves are revelatory of her political and ethical positioning. While signalling a conservative respect for tradition and a conventional wish to integrate

the literary canon, their being limited to Western authors points to her identification with Orientalism rather than the Orient, whose writers she indeed almost totally disregards. Simultaneously, their being a minimal form of dialogism betrays an imperviousness to dynamic textual exchange with the Other, seeking, instead, to reinforce the writer's own discursive power. Unlike active types of intertextual interaction such as polemics and dialogue, citation is an empowering gesture not only in that it appropriates the quoted author's words for the writer's own use, but also because it offers her the comfortable position of asserting her ideological stance without exposing it to the menace of a contradictory discourse. In thus silencing both intellectually and culturally different voices, Eberhardt's quotations enact a double rejection of Otherness.

## Conclusion

The Eberhardt narrative is traditionally told as a *Little Red Riding Hood* story of sorts: a nice young woman named Isabelle calls upon an old country, bringing support to her people, and ends up being swallowed by the *grand méchant loup*. Depending on versions, the *grand méchant loup* is either the colonial machine, which, taking advantage of “Isabelle’s” naïveté, appropriates her for its interests, or simply the flash flood in which she perished. Instead of this attractive but rather simple tale, this study has proposed a re-reading of Eberhardt’s evolution in the North African space as a complex adventure novel: that of a heroine who follows in the footsteps of Western pioneers like Fromentin, in an attempt to repeat the feat of achieving the literary conquest of the desert. In the course of her peregrinations, the heroine had to adapt herself to hazards or fortunes as they emerged: to pass as a man to avoid the harassment she might have otherwise encountered as a female traveller, to dress as a woman not to appear provocative at the trial of her assailant, to befriend natives and colonial authorities alike to secure access to otherwise forbidden territories, to attune herself with the ideology of one of the first newspapers to offer her the promise of a steady literary career – Barrucand’s *Al Akhbar* – and to seize the opportunity of “heroic” participation in the political, rather than literary, conquest of the Orient when such an opportunity was offered by Lyautey.

In presenting its heroine in turn as a man and as a woman, as an advocate for the natives and as an imperialist, the Eberhardt narrative fits within the Bakhtinian definition of the novel as a genre which reconciles the individual with his/her full complexity, allowing him/her to redefine himself/herself according to contingencies.<sup>1</sup> As a genre with no predefined canon, the novel is itself flexible and open to adaptability and change.<sup>2</sup> This Bakhtinian definition is redolent of the Deleuzian association of nomadism with metamorphosis and disloyalty; yet what this study has sought to demonstrate is that Eberhardt’s seemingly nomadic flitting from one gender category to another, from one side of the colonial conflict to the other betrays an inherent constancy. Throughout her North African odyssey, Eberhardt remained faithful to the memory of her mother, to the moral teachings of her (step) father, and, more importantly, to her European identity. While the

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<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, “Epic and the Novel” [1941], *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 3-40, 10.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

pronoun “we” is often employed by Eberhardt when referring to Westerners, or even, more narrowly, to direct representatives of the colonial authorities as is the case in “Amira”, the natives are, in her discourse, always “they” (or “you”, if a native is being addressed), unless what is emphasised is their religion rather than their race. Even when she does seem to gesture towards the colonised Other, she has been shown either to erase her “betrayals” of whiteness or to atone for them: the Islam to which she converted was re-written as an inherited faith, thus erasing the act of betrayal; her marriage with a native was prevented from engendering hybrid offspring that would weaken the colonising race.

Eberhardt’s case shows that living among the colonised, speaking their language, and professing their faith does not necessarily amount to adopting an anti-colonialist stance. The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries teem with Western figures, like Burton, Loti, and Lawrence, who wore the natives’ costume, showed an interest in Islam, and even wrote explicit condemnations of colonisation. Yet Burton’s prodigious knowledge of Oriental languages and his pilgrimage to Mecca, like Loti’s theatrical donning of Oriental costume, did not prevent critics from pointing to their complicity with colonialism; nor did T.E. Lawrence’s “going native” prevent him from acknowledging his own betrayal of the trust Arab Easterners had placed in him. While masquerading as Orientals, all three authors were in fact actively – and officially – serving the imperial interests of their respective European countries. Other contemporaries of Eberhardt, like Gide and Conrad, may not have been involved in the imperialist enterprise in a direct manner, but critics have been alert to the colonialist reflexes underlining their writings. Despite their decrying of the inhumane aspects of colonisation, both participated in the objectification of the colonised, presenting them as passive objects of the Western man’s erotic fantasies. And while thus “appropriating” the Easterners, they also rhetorically appropriated their land, making intensive recourse to possessives and describing the view from a commanding position.

Comparing her to such figures, this study has highlighted Eberhardt’s very similar colonialist textual practices, which have, surprisingly, gone almost totally unnoticed. In shedding light on these practices, it not only shows that Eberhardt’s contribution to the colonialist project was much more multi-faceted than her mere collaboration with General Lyautey, but also rehabilitates Eberhardt-the-writer by revealing that there is more to her texts than a “neutral” rendering of her North African journeys. Eberhardt’s is anything but an *écriture blanche*; it carries the all-too-familiar hues of the Orientalists’ Orient. In



conformity with Shirley Foster's and Sara Mills's affirmation that "the way that one perceives a landscape, despite the fact that it feels as if it is a simple, unmediated process of looking, is already mediated through discourses of aesthetics and imperialism,"<sup>3</sup> Eberhardt locates herself within the age-old Orientalist tradition by portraying an East that is primitive, childlike, sensual, and laden with the promise of riches.

Making such a statement about Eberhardt may seem to confirm Terry Eagleton's sarcastic comment about the field of postcolonial studies: "once you have observed that the other is typically portrayed as lazy, dirty, stupid, crafty, womanly, passive, rebellious, sexually rapacious, childlike, and a number of other mutually contradictory epithets, it is hard to know what to do next apart from reaching for yet another textual illustration of the fact."<sup>4</sup> Yet this thesis, I hope, has gone beyond the simple enumeration of "contradictory epithets" to attempt to provide a plausible explanation for such shifts. In the Eberhardtian text, the colonised man who passively submits to the coloniser' will is capable of displaying unflinching determination when confronting a racial peer; the natives who are feminised to emphasise their colonisability or, more simply, to fit within the Orientalist canon, come to be masculinised when the author seeks to valorise readiness to serve the colonial cause – or her own heterosexual fantasies; the natives said to be superior when incarnating values lost to the West – politeness, generosity, honour – re-become the uneducated and superstitious subalterns to enable a justification of the civilising mission. Instead of a fixed, static narrative, the Eberhardtian version of Orientalism is marked by *différance*, constantly deferring its content, while remaining loyal to her dichotomic and hierarchical vision of race and her conservative values – chiefly, patriarchy.

Eberhardt's recourse to contradictory statements is reminiscent of Bakhtin's claim that as "[i]t fights for its hegemony in literature",<sup>5</sup> the novel absorbs all sorts of contradictory literary forms, thus constructing itself as a hybrid genre. Eberhardt's own hybridity relates to her double quest for literary recognition and an empowering position within the colonial confrontation. Although the Bhabhaian analyses on the empowering potential of such practices as hybridity, invisibility, and camouflage are usually read as the strategies of

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<sup>3</sup> Shirley Foster and Sara Mills eds, *An Anthology of Women's Travel Writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Charles Forsdick, *Travel in Twentieth-Century French and Francophone Cultures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 28-29.

<sup>5</sup> Bakhtin, "Epic and the Novel", 4.

racial subalterns, this study is a reminder that Bhabha saw indeterminacy and in-betweenness as characterising the colonial situation as a whole – that is, coloniser and colonised, both of whom need to adjust themselves to contingencies as they arise. As Anne McClintock puts it in *Imperial Leather*, imperialism is a hybrid phenomenon that “[takes] haphazard shape from myriad encounters with alternative forms of authority, knowledge and power”.<sup>6</sup> The constantly revised form of hegemony either results from the unchosen influence of the Other or is opted for as a strategy of self-preservation in the face of this Other’s resistance.

In the case of Eberhardt, however, hybridity is not only an empowering strategy but also an original, indeed defining, feature. As stated at the very outset of this study, Eberhardt was many contradictory things even before she set off for to the Maghreb. As an illegitimate child, she was at once the daughter and not the daughter of her tutor, Trophimowsky, who brought her up; as the child of Russian immigrants, she simultaneously belonged and did not belong in Geneva; as a girl who received what was, in her time, considered a male education, she was, in a sense, both a male and a female child. Because of this unorthodox upbringing, hybridity was, for her, a family legacy. In other words, the very unconventional character of Eberhardt’s life is evidence of an all-too-conventional enactment of parental teachings. As such, despite the unsettling effect they produced on supposedly more orthodox minds, her eccentricities were part and parcel of the conservative mindset that has been shown to be hers.

Read in the light of today’s prevailing Deleuzian celebration of nomadism as a happy alternative to power mechanisms, portraying Eberhardt as an anti-nomad – that is, as a conservative, a colonialist, and a power-seeker – may seem denigrating. For several reasons, however, this is not the case. As was stated in its very first pages, this thesis has been undertaken with a vision which locates academic research “beyond good and evil”, to take up Nietzsche’s famous aphorism, and which has accordingly attempted a dispassionate reading of the studied writer’s texts – texts taken here to mean both her life and her writings. The very idea of power that Eberhardt has been shown to seek is read from the Nietzschean postulate of the universality of this power. Accepting the idea that the quest-for-power is a “human, all too human” instinct renders moral judgements on power irrelevant, obsolete. Instead of judging the human subject on whether or not s/he

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<sup>6</sup> Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 16.

seeks power, it is on the strategies s/he deploys that s/he will be evaluated. A cynical, amoral judgement would measure the extent to which the quest for power has proved successful; a moral reading would consider how much of his/her set of values the power-seeker has relinquished in the quest process.

The figure of Eberhardt might, perhaps, gain more in stature if read through a moral lens, after all. Measured in terms of its success, the quest of Eberhardt, whose major dream was to achieve literary fame but who died an obscure writer, might be judged a failure. Yet throughout her quest, the writer, for all her ambition, did little that did not correspond to her notions of what was right. Remaining faithful to the teachings of “Vava”, she refused to make herself the object of curious gaze, shielding her female body from the covetousness of the males of North Africa, as well as from the females who frequented Parisian salons.<sup>7</sup> Frequenting Parisian salons was in fact another card usually played by writers seeking recognition that she chose to sacrifice as it proved incompatible with her lifestyle. There remained, as is often the case with those disempowered at home, the colonised East. But although, as Memmi explains, and as developed in the first chapter, a Westerner in the colonies is necessarily a *privilégié*, Eberhardt did disdain a number of friendships that could have proved useful – like that of Captain Susbielle. Although the relationships she did build, both with Westerners and natives, *were* profitable, either providing her with literary material for her texts or allowing her to explore new territories, these were not in contradiction with her beliefs. While being a welcome opportunity for one known to have lived most modestly, her contribution to Barrucand’s *Al-Akhbar* matched her sincere sympathy for the natives, a sympathy that she had hitherto prudently abstained from expressing openly; similarly, the good press she gave Lyautey was not simply an interested gesture: it did correspond to her conception of a successful colonial enterprise.

Eberhardt wanted her project of empowerment to be fulfilled the hard way: in the middle of the desert, and with as few concessions by her ethical stance as possible. In its arduous character as in its inscription within the Western (moral and literary) tradition, her peripatetic evolution in the Maghreb, hitherto referred to as a novel, has much of the epic about it. Tradition, rather than personal interpretation or discovery is, as Bakhtin explains,

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<sup>7</sup> Eberhardt refused to act on the suggestion that she should dress as an Arab woman when introducing herself to Séverine, a famous feminist and lesbian journalist.

what governs the epic genre; one can only repeat, never invent the epic.<sup>8</sup> This is what Victor Segalen did when he arrived in Hiva Oa following in the footsteps of Paul Gauguin; this is also what Eberhardt did when, emulating Fromentin, she arrived in turn in the Tunisian Sahel, then in the Algerian Sahara. This is also what she does when, like the painter who saw in the desert an incarnation of a Biblical past, she portrays the Oriental chronotope of her adventures as a vestige from a bygone age, made of honour and nobility. Described as Biblical figures, Eberhardtian characters, including the writer herself, are, albeit contemporary with the writer, “appropriated by the past”; “they are woven [...] into the unified fabric of heroic past and tradition”.<sup>9</sup> In thus “ignor[ing] the presentness of the present”<sup>10</sup> that she was supposed to be describing, Eberhardt confirms the epic character of her adventure narrative, interconnectedness with the past being an inherent feature of the epic genre. Although Eberhardt does return to early twentieth-century reality in the writings of 1902 and 1903, in which she describes the unflattering side of the colonial occupation, the East re-becomes the site of an idealised past in her writings of 1904. And because the idealised past is the locus of the heroic,<sup>11</sup> she inscribes her, by then active, participation in the imperial mission within the realm of the high mimetic mode.

Eberhardt’s idealisation of the past inscribes her within the epic, rather than within the novelistic genre, to which it has hitherto been shown to belong. Where the novel, and, more generally, carnivalesque genres, parody elevated genres, bringing them down to the realm of laughter and of the familiar present, Eberhardt does just the opposite, re-writing the present in terms of a distant past and describing this idealised time of majestic costumes and noble attitudes as superior; and it is in earnest, not in a parodying tone, that she evokes these epic grandeurs. Indeed, laughter is alien to Eberhardt’s world; “[I]’esprit de blague et de persiflage moderne qui déforme et [...] salit”<sup>12</sup> irritates her, and she herself seldom evinced gaiety.<sup>13</sup> Because laughter is an inherent feature of the carnivalesque,<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Bakhtin, “Epic and the novel”, 16-17.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>12</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, “Tessaadit” [1915, posthumous], *Œuvres Complètes II: Ecrits sur le sable (nouvelles et roman)* (Paris: Grasset, 1990), 210-226, 215.

<sup>13</sup> In a letter to her correspondent Ali, Eberhardt describes herself as “[pas] gaie, [...] triste et souvent sombre”. Isabelle Eberhardt, *Ecrits intimes: lettres aux trois hommes les plus aimés* [1991, posthumous] (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2003), 98.

<sup>14</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* [1929], trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 126-127.

Eberhardt's quasi-imperviousness to it says much about her anti-carnavalesque frame of mind. In the carnivalesque outlook, the state of the world, liberated as it is from the weight of artificial hierarchies and boundaries, is one of joy;<sup>15</sup> in that of Eberhardt, it is one of inexorable sadness. Seeing in life nothing but “successifs anéantissements qui, insensiblement, nous conduisent au grand anéantissement définitif”,<sup>16</sup> she looked forward to death as a liberation: “quand sonnera donc enfin l'heure de la délivrance, l'heure du repos final?”<sup>17</sup>

One last indication of Eberhardt's anti-carnavalesque vision is precisely her representation of death, which is omnipresent in her writings. What the carnivalesque celebrates is always the primacy, the triumph of life; this is why carnivalesque representations of death are always accompanied by simultaneous images of rebirth and regeneration.<sup>18</sup> In the Eberhardtian representation, in contrast, death is an end in itself, and never bears the promise of renewal. Her heroines always die childless, thus leaving nobody behind to fulfil a symbolic perpetuation of their ended life. Significantly, images of birth are as rare in her texts as images of death are numerous.

Eberhardt's own death was not so barren, however. Although she died as childless as her heroines, she did bequeath a far from negligible inheritance – her manuscripts. This legacy has not always been appropriately treated. Appropriated by some,<sup>19</sup> travestied by others,<sup>20</sup> disregarded by a third group, Eberhardt's texts have seldom been subjected to proper study, that is, to a close and rigorous academic examination. And yet, this, rather than a lyrical accumulation of superlatives, would be a more adequate homage to a woman whose highest ambition was to achieve literary recognition – and it is that sort of homage that this study indirectly pays her.

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<sup>15</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 124-125.

<sup>16</sup> Isabelle Eberhardt, *Journaliers* (Paris: Joëlle Losfeld, 2002), 20.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>18</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 124-125.

<sup>19</sup> When publishing *A l'Ombre chaude de l'Islam* (1906), the first edited collection of Eberhardt's texts, Victor Barrucand presented the book as co-authored by Eberhardt and himself.

<sup>20</sup> In 1913, Paul Vigné d'Octon published the novel *Mektoub!*, claiming it was written by Eberhardt. The forgery was first unmasked by the writer Albert de Pouvourville in 1916. For more details, see Robert Randau, *Isabelle Eberhardt: notes et souvenirs* [1945] (Paris: La Boîte à Documents, 1989), 253-256.



## GLOSSARY

**Aïssaoua:** Muslim sect founded in Morocco in the fifteenth century and known for its extravagant practices which include collective trances and exorcism ceremonies.

**Ar'ar:** juniper. This plant is used as a drug in North Africa.

**Baroud:** gunpowder.

**Beylek:** Turkish word designating a title of nobility and used in the Algerian dialect to mean the state, the government.

**Bled:** country.

**Burnous:** hooded cloak-like garment worn by North Africans.

**Chaoui** (plural *Chaouis* or *Chaouiya*): member of a Berber community living in the East of Algeria.

**Chott:** kind of salt-water lake typical of the Maghreb's Southern landscapes.

**Deira:** local guard, patrol.

**Derouich(a):** dervish, holy person. Also designates a diviner.

**Djebel:** mountain.

**Djellaba:** long, loose robe with sleeves worn in North Africa.

**Djinn:** In Islamic mythology, a spirit which can be either good or evil and take different shapes, including that of a human.

**Fana** (literally, annihilation): in the Sufi doctrine, indicates a state in which the believer is supposed to have achieved fusion with God through self-renunciation.

**Fatiha** (literally, the Opener): the first chapter in the Quran.

**Fellah:** farmer, peasant.

**Hadith:** saying of the Prophet Muhammad.

**Haqiqa** (literally, truth): one of the four stages in the Sufi quest for God.

**Jemaa:** public place where community affairs are discussed.

**Kabyle:** native of Kabylia, a mountainous, Berber-speaking region located in North Algeria, about a hundred miles East of the capital Algiers.

**Kéfer(a):** Muslims' word for "non-believer".

***Khoudja***: Turkish word which designates a civil servant who serves both as a secretary and interpreter.

***Ksar*** (plural: *ksour*): castle; fortified Saharan village.

***Lella***: lady, title given to female *marabouts* in North Africa.

***Maa'rifa***: the last stage in the Sufi quest for God.

***Maghreb, Moghreb*** (literally; sunset): refers simultaneously to the Maghreb and to Morocco. Also refers to the fast-breaking hour, during the Ramadan.

***Marabout (e)***: holy person.

***Mektoub*** (literally, that which is written): fate

***M'lahfa***: veil

***M'laya***: veil

***Mokhazani***: member of *El Makhzen*, a paramilitary body composed of natives, whose role is to maintain order.

***Mozabite***: member of a Berber-speaking community who live in the M'zab, in the North of the Algerian Sahara.

***M'tourni***: pidgin word for "convert".

***Muezzin***: In Islam, man who recites the call to prayer.

***M'zani*** (plural: *M'zanat*): religious renegade.

***Nafs*** (literally, self): in Sufism, refers to the lower self, that is, man's unelevated instincts.

***Naïb***: delegate, representative, vice-leader.

***Nousrani*** (plural: *Naçara*): Christian

***Qadiriya***: one of the most prominent and most widespread Sufi communities. It was founded in Baghdad in the twelfth century.

***Qubba*** (literally, dome): refers to a monument erected in memory of a dead saint.

***Raouraoua***: inhabitants of Oued Rir', in the North-Eastern Algerian Sahara.

***Rhaïta***: a kind of flute, popular in the music of the Algerian South.

***Rizq***: sustenance.

***Roumi***: Algerian word that refers to the French, and to Christian foreigners more generally.



**Shari'a:** set of religious and moral laws in Islam. Also designates one of the four stages in the Sufi quest for God.

**Sitt:** lady (term used in the Middle East).

**Spahi:** Algerian member of the cavalry in French service.

**Sufism:** mystical branch of Islam. Sufis aim at getting close to God, chiefly through purification of the inner Self.

**Sunni:** relating to Sunnism, the largest and most orthodox branch of Islam.

**Sura, surah:** chapter of the Quran.

**Taleb:** student, educated Muslim.

**Targui** (plural: Tuareg): member of a nomadic, Berber-speaking people who live in the Saharan part of North Africa.

**Tariqa** (literally, path or way): the first stage in the Sufi quest for God. Also designates a Sufi order, more generally.

**Tawaakul:** way of understanding the Islamic instruction of trusting in God as a duty of passivity; of leaving everything to Him.

**Tawakkul:** refers to the belief that trust in God's help and guidance should be accompanied by action, not passivity.

**Tawhid** (literally, unification): Sufi principle according to which the uniqueness of God unites all His creatures.

**Tijaniya:** a Sufi order founded in Algeria at the end of the eighteenth century.

**U'rs** (literally, party or celebration): designates the feasts held by the Sufis in honour of the community founder.

**Zaouiya, zaouiia:** refers to the headquarters of a Sufi order, run by the descendants of a local saint. It also functions as a school that dispenses the community's religious teachings.

**Zianiya:** Sufi order founded in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and centred on the *zaouiia* of Kenadsa, on the Algerian-Moroccan frontier.

**Zouaoui:** word commonly used to refer to Kabyles in the Algerian West.

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