

Translating Isabelle Eberhardt: A Historiographic Adventure

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Abstract

The wanderlust spirit of the Russo-Swiss Muslim convert Isabelle Eberhardt (1877-1904), who lived a nomadic lifestyle in Algeria, has always disclosed a metaphysical vision that is persistently echoed in her literary works. She opted for a linguistic immersion that left many prints on her diaries. She was systematically accused by the French colonial regime of being a turncoat, and this is precisely why publishers of that time refused to disseminate (via publications or translations) what they considered to be ‘unorthodox’ and ‘threatening’ thoughts. Fortunately, things have changed for the better since then, as many scholars/translators are now trying to decipher Eberhardt’s moral fiber. A case in point would be Steele’s (2011) English translation of Eberhardt’s “Silhouettes d’Afrique” (1898). Steele set herself the task –after a blatant shortage of scholarly contributions valuing Eberhardt’s literary creations– to play the role of an advocate who would restore the biased positions taken against the author’s motives/works on account of her pro-Arabo-Islamic and anti-colonial views. This paper argues for a better appreciation of otherness through Steele’s ‘historiographic’ rendering, which reflects Eberhardt’s position vis-à-vis some orientalist’s vision which she was not to follow; even if there appear to be parallels between both. Finally, I come to conclude that the translator’s confessions as regards her deliberate choice to confront English-speaking readers with local Arabic terms (*Burnous, tolba, Haik, mueddine*, etc.) highlight the existence of a more affable audit.

Keywords: historicization, Isabelle Eberhardt, literary translation, Mara Steele, orientalist, otherness

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Il va sans dire que c'est sous le signe de la rencontre
avec une altérité [...] et de l'écoute attentive des
différentes formes d'échanges qui peuvent en
découler... qu'il faut analyser la démarche complexe
d'Isabelle Eberhardt
(Bourcillier 2012, p. 64)ⁱ

Introduction

Isabelle Wilhelmine Marie Eberhardt was born in Meyrin (Geneva) on the 17th of February 1877 to aristocratic Russian parents. Not happy with the sedentary life she was leading, she chose (after her first trip to Algeria with her mother) to settle in the southwestern Algerian desert in 1897. There, she worked as a writer and journalist, reporting, among other things, on the alarming situation of North African people in general under French colonization. She dressed as a man, and named herself *Si Mahmoud Essadi* to overcome social obstacles imposed on women at that time. She sympathized with the colonized, learned Arabic, and converted to Islam when she was 18. Eberhardt lived as a Sufi and followed the *Qadiriyya*ⁱⁱ order till her life tragically ended at the age of 27 in a flash flood at Ain Séfra (Naâma Province, Algeria) on the 21st of October 1904.

Her prolific literary productions (more than 2000 pages), were published posthumously thanks to scholars such as Errera (1950-), an Egyptian writer who had worked on the manuscripts retrieved from Eberhardt's home after her death by General Louis Lyautey (1854-1934), and who presented a sequential order of her works. A couple of years later, a two-volume edition of her complete writings appeared in France, edited by Delacour & Huleu (1989). Additionally, three plays and a movie have already fictionalized her life, namely *L'Esclave errante* (The Wandering Slave, 1924), *Isabelle d'Afrique* (Isabelle of Africa, 1939), *Isabelle 100 visages* (Isabelle 100 faces, 2015), and *Isabelle Eberhardt* (an Australian-French drama film directed by Ian Pringle in 1991) respectively. Still, though translations as those of Kobak (1988), Hamdy & Rice (1994), Bowles (2001), Bononno (2002), and De Voogd (2003) have fostered an English version of Eberhardt's muse and concerns, these remain selective. All of the works above reflect the most important pieces of her life. I am looking at Steele's translation, in this paper, because it tackles a less famous text.

Nine years ago, Steele, a Ph.D. American scholar at the department of English, the University of Iowa who is interested in French West African studies of drum language, and aspects related to ethics, psychoanalysis, and translation studies, among others, became interested in Isabelle Eberhardt's story, resulting in the translation of her "Silhouettes d'Afrique" (1898) into English. Reading her translation made me realize how vital Eberhardt's texts are in a present-day world marked by material covetousness and fanaticism. Part of the texts' merit (the SLT and the TL one) is that they confront readers with an ambiance of inconstancy that needs to be superseded by a spiritual exploration of the self. Moreover, they act as icebreakers between the East and the

West, demonstrating how intercultural encounters are but a matter of will. A conversation with the translator (See appendix) strengthened my belief in Eberhardt's pioneering role in disseminating cultural forbearance and *Vivre ensemble* when it was not fashionable to do so. Relevant to this, Steele could capture many of the linguistic/cultural variations punctuating the SLT to unfold them on the other side of the fence eventually.

Hence, the aim of this paper is to introduce Eberhardt's genuine depictions of the Algerian landscape and its people in non-conformity with orientalist's creed, while trying to understand the connotations of her cross-dressing. It also attempts to depict her unsettled identity due to the different journeys she made between the Orient and the Occident to, finally, expound Steele's motives in translating Eberhardt and the choices she made in rendering "Silhouettes d'Afrique".

Isabelle Eberhardt: Orientalist? Feminist?

The French dramatist Brieux (1858-1932) was among Eberhardt's rare friends who proposed to sponsor her financially to help her propel her writings to a larger audience. Yet, as mentioned earlier, no publisher agreed to endorse the pro-Arab views she held. Besides, the strong words she used to portray indigenous viewpoints against the *roumi* (French/European) are still causing controversy. Bononno (2002), as translator, openly reveals the difficulties he faced in finding a publisher that would show some recognition for Eberhardt's works.

With this grant (by the National Endowment for the Arts), I will finish a project begun nearly 14 years ago. Over the years, I have had selections from my translation published in literary magazines, and many publishers have shown interest in the work, but none was willing to risk publishing it...In many ways this has been the most difficult project I have worked on, not because of the inherent difficulty of the text but because of my personal investment in trying to bring it to life and the many failures and disappointments that have entailed. While the grant is no guarantee of publication, it is a validation of my belief in the importance of Isabelle Eberhardt the writer... <https://www.arts.gov/writers-corner/bio/robert-bononno>

Bononno (2002) goes on to state that:

...her work is largely unknown in English. Eberhardt's writing has languished, virtually unknown for nearly a century...Previous editions of Eberhardt's work, especially those published in the years after her death, were heavily edited by Barrucand, who thought it prudent to excise passages critical of the French government's colonial policies as well as anything that might shock the sensibilities of his readers. In some cases, he amended or simply rewrote parts of the text. <https://www.arts.gov/writers-corner/bio/robert-bononno>

Eberhardt's works still meet with some resistance because of the voice she gave at that time to an unprivileged *Other* by faithfully recording their *malaise*, misery, and way of thinking:

Isabelle allait livrer de nombreux écrits qui témoignent d'une observation minutieuse et d'une compréhension intime du pays, écrits dans lesquels les descriptions sont alertes car

elles alternent avec des incidents, des précisions historiques, des faits toujours révélateurs de l'atmosphère du lieu, de la pensée et de la vie des hommes qui y vivaient. (Rochd, 1992, p. 108)

(Isabelle was going to deliver numerous writings that give evidence to a careful observation and an intimate understanding of the country, writings in which the descriptions are alert because they alternate with incidents, historical details and facts always revealing the atmosphere of the place, as well as the thought and life of the men who lived there.)

This was also due to her explicit denunciation of the actions undertaken by the colonial regime. Rochd explains how authors like the French writer and biographer Sauvat (2004) occulted passages from Eberhardt's *Mes journaliers du 8 juin 1902* in her *Isabelle ou le Rêve du désert* (Rochd, 2007). Sauvat deleted many of Eberhardt's controversial passages. She took the excerpt « à Alger la foule dense, forcément bruyante qui finit par ne plus savoir trouver son propre souffle d'apaisement... » (p.53) (In Algiers, the dense crowd, inevitably noisy ends up not knowing how to find its own breath of appeasement...) and omits the subsequent lines « De plus en plus, je hais féroce, aveuglement, la foule, cette ennemie née du rêve et de la pensée. C'est elle qui m'empêche de vivre à Alger, comme j'ai vécu ailleurs. » (Eberhardt 1989, p. 445) (More and more, I hate the crowd fiercely, blindly, this enemy born of dream and thought. It is she who prevents me from living in Algiers, as I lived elsewhere)

Another deleted passage is attested further when Sauvat (2004) censored « Ce qui m'écœure ici, c'est l'odieuse conduite des Européens envers les Arabes, ce peuple que j'aime et qui, *Inch'Allah* (my italics), sera mon peuple à moi. » (Stoll-Simon, p.20) (What annoys me here is the odious behaviour of the Europeans towards the Arabs, the people I love and who, God willing, will be my own people.)

Taking up on this last example, what typifies Eberhardt's texts also is the abundant use she made of Arabic terms. Even so, she stands in contradistinction with Orientalists who resorted to local linguistic 'flavors' just to mark the exotic side of their stories which conflate people and their actions into fictionalized narratives. A telling instance could be the French orientalist Malingoud's (1924) *Contes Bédouins* in which he reflects upon Arab characters' cunning and acquisitive nature. Here are some excerpts that showcase replicas very much on a par with *The Thousand and One Nights*:

« Peut-être en cette ville, y a-t-il un *chikh* qui nous donnera de quoi vivre. » (p.541) (Maybe in this city, there is an old man who will help us survive)

« Certain jour que le *Sultan*, déguisé en *derviche*, faisait, accompagné de son *vizir*, une tournée aux environs de sa ville,... » (p. 542) (Some day that the king, disguised as a fool, made a tour of his city with his minister,...)

« Il était un *émir* qui... » (p. 544) (There was a prince who...)

« un certain *Hmoud*, charlatan impudent et fécond en ruses... » (p. 544) (a named *Hmoud*, an impudent charlatan fertile in tricks...)

« Il se trouva que celui-ci était parti en *ghezou* » (p.544) (It turned out that he had gone on a conquest).

Likewise, Eberhardt used Arab words as evidenced in the original versions of her stories. Yet, these had been mainly deployed to bequeath the texts with an authentic semantic load and an original reflection of her thoughts and those of her characters, especially if we consider the number of untranslated Arabic scripts punctuating her works (Abdel Jaouad, 1993). In passages where Arabic words are transliterated, the depictions are fiction-free as opposed to Malingoud's case, or even to those of 19th-century French orientalist Fromentin's use of the sound produced by the *mueddine*. Eberhardt referred to this religious attribute in her works (with a different spelling), too, but the inherent value allocated to the actor performing the call for prayers is distinct. In his *Un été dans le Sahara*, Fromentin (1857) wrote:

En même temps un Muezzin, qu'on ne voyait pas, se mit à chanter la prière du soir, la répétant quatre fois aux quatre points de l'horizon, et sur un mode si passionné, avec de tels accents, que tout semblait se taire pour l'écouter. (p.10)

(At the same time a *mueddine*, whom one did not see, began to sing the evening prayer, repeating it four times at the four corners of the horizon, and in such a passionate manner, with such accents, that everything seemed silenced to listen to him)

Fromentin's portrayal sounds very quixotic because the author highlights the invisibility of the *Muezzin* and the impossibility of tracing his exact location. Furthermore, the depiction likens the call for prayer to a song that reaches the four points of the horizon in a passionate way, to finally get back to the notion of invisibility where everyone will respect some moments of silence and hide their words behind those of the *Muezzin*; as if we were watching a magical moment orchestrated by an invisible man.

The same appreciation of the voice of the *Muezzin* is found in Eberhardt's novella *Le Major* (1903) as reported by Ruscio (1996), a French historian who has long been interested in colonial studies. However, this is accompanied by a historiographic recording of matter-of-fact descriptions that familiarize the reader with the whole *Maghrebi* environment. This goes as follows:

Alors, du grand minaret de *Sidi Salem* et de petites terrasses des autres mosquées délabrées, la voix des *mueddine* montait, bien rauque et bien sauvage déjà, traînante. Avec cette voix de rêve, les dernières rumeurs humaines de la ville sans pavés, sans voitures, se taisaient [...]. (p.144)

(Then, from the great minaret of *Sidi Salem* and the little terraces of the other dilapidated mosques, the voice of the *mueddine* rose, very hoarse and already wild, dragging. With this dream voice, the last human rumors of the city without cobblestones, without cars, were silent [...])

Interestingly, Eberhardt's writings afford us with two important elements. The first one is that there is an avalanche of *genuine* data about the Algerian society of that time that allows a better perception and understanding of it in words like *minaret de Sidi Salem*, *mosquées délabrées*, *ville sans pavés*, and *sans voitures*. We now know that at the time Eberhardt wrote in El Oued (North-East of the Algerian Sahara) there was a minaret called *Sidi Salem* (which still exists), that the mosques were dilapidated, and that the city had no cobblestones, hence no cars. In fact, there are

first-hand depictions of the places, the people, their customs and traditions that contribute to broadening Westerners' vision and modeling their uneasiness vis-à-vis a community long seen through biased lenses. Her critics even claim that she did an ethnographic work *par excellence*. Such is the view of Henry & Martini (1999) for whom:

(...) le regard d'I. Eberhardt est un regard ethnographique et tous ses écrits révèlent un souci constant de systématisation de ses observations. Même si celles-ci sont centrées sur elle-même ou sur des personnes singulières, ce n'est pas tant la particularité des expériences qui l'intéresse que leur universalité. (p. 111)

(...The look of I. Eberhardt is an ethnographic one, and all her writings reveal a constant concern for systematizing these observations. Even if they are centered on themselves or on singular persons, it is not so much the particularity of the experiences that interests her as their universality.)

The second feature is that all of the local terms integrated into her writings did not detract from the literary significance of her texts. They rather created a hospitable linguistic atmosphere that would defy 'Babel's curse'. They also offered a smooth running and down-to-earth representation of the writer's inspirations. As Eberhardt (in Delacour & Huleu, 1989) argued:

Pour l'étranger profane, les burnous sales sur la tenue européenne en loques, les chechiya sans gland et fanées...sont la couleur locale. Pour celui qui sait, c'est là justement ce qui enlève à Alger son caractère arabe, parce que ce n'est pas conforme aux mœurs arabes. Encore, le profane trouve très africain le dédale des rues vieilles d'Alger. Médiéval, turc, maure, tout ce que l'on voudra, mais ni arabe, ni africain surtout! (pp. 444-5)

(For the profane stranger, dirty *burnouses* put on the European dress as rags, the faded *chechiyas* without tassels...are the local colors. For he who knows, this is precisely what strips Algiers from its Arab character, because it is not in conformity with Arab customs. Again, the layman finds the maze of the old streets of Algiers very African. Medieval, Turkish, Moorish, everything you want, but neither Arabic nor African mainly!)

It has been claimed (Kempf-Rochd, 2000 & Ouhibi Aitsiselmi, 2014) that Eberhardt was inspired by French Orientalists such as Fromentin (1820-1976) and Loti (1850-1923), whose writings were very much based on observation. But I argue that her vision was quite distinct from theirs. Orientalists used to look at the Orient from the perspective/fantasy of the Occident (Said, 1978). Yet, Eberhardt presented a more compelling representation of it. She tried to assimilate with the people and not the reverse. Again, she did not judge the oddities she was exposed to, but instead tried to value and better understand them in her *Sud Oranais (1903)*, *Lettres et journaliers (1900-1903)*, etc., where linguistic and cultural minutiae of the Algerian people and landscape had been meticulously drafted (See Steiciuc 2014, p.71). This is what gained her the title of a non-Orientalist writer *stricto sensu*. This argument remains debatable, though. For, her action of classifying and locating Algerian tribes in alphabetical order, for instance, enters into that of cataloging the Orient following 19th-century anthropological categorization of race and plants, which maps well with Said's vision of an imperialist Occident (Bennett, 2013).

As to her feminist penchant, she had none (at least an explicit one). This is because as a European, she could enjoy more freedom than African or Middle Eastern women could at that time. In reality, she was privileged by pursuing non-conventional female careers and was liberated from the stifling life led by what Spivak (1988) would call the *subaltern*. Paradoxically, Eberhardt often depicted all types of women in her writings (the saint, the worker, the prostitute, the peasant, etc.) towards whom she was very critical. She was more interested in discerning prostitutes' motives and justifying them than in defending working women. She scarcely wrote about women's unhappiness, and she exceptionally made the effort of physically meeting them. Claycomb (2012), an American scholar interested in Gender Studies, reports that when a potential female lover approached Eberhardt, she used to assert "I am not a woman, I'm Si Mahmoud. I like men." (p.178)

In fact, Eberhardt chose to wear male attire not because she wanted to make an avowal about feminism but for practical reasons. Her dress enabled her to live among Arab men and enjoy the same rights as theirs; even if her friends knew she was a woman! Also, while exploring the significance of the transvestite, Garber (2012) averred that: "Cross-dressing for Isabelle Eberhardt thus became... a way of *obeying* the paternal and patriarchal law, ([her father] permitted her to go into Geneva only if she dressed as a boy)..." (p.325) (Italics in the original)

The renowned French writer and journalist Auclert (1848-1914) empathized with the colonized female population in Algeria, too. But as opposed to Eberhardt, Auclert was a fervent feminist who heralded women's right for better life conditions and who believed in the bonds that need to be formed with the indigenes. Eberhardt mostly observed them from afar in an attempt to reposition "...the harem on the road" (Zayzafoon 2005, p. 33) as her personal way of freeing women without avowing any form of feminism.

Eberhardt's Territorial Affinities

People's identity and sense of belonging is likely to be shaped by the places/territories they had been in. Among the many definitions attributed to the notion of territory is that area delineated by constant 'isoglosses'. These are defined in dialectology as geographical lines marking out regions that have different linguistic traits. This fact allows a split in people's realities; insiders enjoying a geopolitical recognition and outsiders pertaining to an outer/hosting space. Stability and order are the resultant elements. Moreover, these two entities are indispensable in shaping individuals' identity and sense of belonging. The inclusion-exclusion dialectic is seen through different lenses by Deleuze & Guattari (1987) who consider *subjectivity* as a key factor in the formation of territory. This one is closely intermeshed with those of *possession* and *property*. When we possess a 'place', we choose to either protect it or expand it. This reveals our power over it. Hence, subjectivity results from what we do with a territory. This manoeuvre also reveals much of the individual's personality. It shows how the semiotics of distance is at stake when moving from one territory to another.

In the same line of thought, Eberhardt's ambiguous personality was predictably refracted in her mode of life. She was an insider for the Algerian community when she embraced Islam, put on traditional clothes, and conversed in Arabic. Yet, she was admittedly an outsider through her

libertine/non-conservative lifestyle. She worked as a docker, smoked, had sexual relationships with those who courted her, used drugs and drank alcohol. This ambivalence is in a sense a personal quest for recognition animated by a desire to find a fatherland (knowing that she is an illegitimate daughter, Bennett 2013). She used to move from Switzerland to Algeria via France. All of these spaces were valued since she was born in the first, lived in the second, and married in the third. The objective of cultural translation as a practice championing cultural differences would be to follow this movement of people through different spaces and not to cling to that of texts. Furthermore, while for some people cultural encounters may lead to anxiety, uncertainty, and fear from losing one's identity, for Eberhardt this is but a natural outcome that people have inherited since ancient times. Her openness to the world's cultural diversity allowed her to learn ten languages and protest social injustice, all at a very early age.

Translating "Silhouettes d'Afrique"

Intercultural attitudes (Byram, 1997), in the Bhabhaian sense, include curiosity and readiness to inhibit incredulity toward other cultures. It is a term that is very much on a par with translation which champions mediation between two or more unrelated languages/cultures. In what follows, I shall try to point out the different cultural assets present in Eberhardt's "Silhouettes d'Afrique" and the role of translation in legitimizing and historicizing them.

Eberhardt wrote this short story only one year after she landed with her mother in Annaba (Northeast of the Algerian coast). The work was first published by the French journal *L'Athénée* in 1898; here she recounts her adhesion to Islam under the name of *Si Mahmoud el Mouskouby* (The Muscovite). The minutiae she fosters of the mosques, trees, doors, people, etc., are all so authentic and full of devoutness and mysticism that Arabs in general and Algerians in particular could quickly identify with them. The descriptions end in nostalgic notes produced by the flute of an enamored man named *Abdesselim* who longs for his beloved whom he has not seen for a long time. The story is laden with Arabic terms that add to the precision of her feelings.

It is worth reiterating that Steele made the choice of translating Eberhardt's "Silhouettes d'Afrique" into English because "Having read a few texts of Eberhardt in English translation, [she] wished to read more, only to find that the majority of her work remained untranslated at that time (though much more has since been done)." This move was largely motivated by her studies: Steele averred: "I had been studying a great deal about the religion and cultures—particularly Islamic—of the Maghreb and West Africa." Then, "...as a woman, I had long been intrigued by female explorers and writers such as Eberhardt, who overcame many obstacles and lived a life worthy of fiction. I was 27 at the time, and Eberhardt was 27 when she died; I think this is partly why I first identified with and admired her." Therefore, Eberhardt's exploratory spirit and unexplored literature made Steele curious to 'plow' this field.

Expectantly, laboring in this direction gave some fruitful results from an intercultural perspective. This is because Steele could shun many of the prejudices scarring the Islamic faith since 9/11. Inspired by Eberhardt's 'transcendental' Sufism, in which she tried to spread her contemplations and adoration of the Creator within every line she wrote, Steele understood that "The Sufi-influenced Islam that [she] was learning about in graduate school...was far more

multivalent, diverse, and tolerant than the post-9/11 stereotypes pervasive in the United States.” Even more, she explains her choice of taking on the project “Silhouettes d’Afrique” as follows: “...primarily because...it is a very poignant story of unrequited desire that I feel serves as a subtle Sufi parable. Also, while a very short and semi-fictional story, it deploys a number of the signature tropes and linguistic/cultural practices that she has become associated with in posthumous scholarship.” To quote her introduction to the piece:

[Her] writing defies the authoritative and teleological project of Orientalism, replacing it with anti-colonialist sentiment and an insecure and troubled place of enunciation...Instead, as a multilingual, cross-dressing, Russo-Swiss Muslim convert, she offers a rich multiplicity of voices: ethnic, gendered, and linguistic...she incorporates many other transliterated Arabic words into her published writing...(Steele 2013, p. 86)

For a smooth reading of the text, Steele had to make some linguistic choices. One of these was to do away with “what [she] perceived to be an excessive, inexplicable use of the ellipsis...” The fuzziness of its rhetorical value was what motivated this “arrogant decision” as she depicts it. A less intrusive move was that of respecting a rugged foreignization strategy regarded as being “...so essential to [Eberhardt’s] project...”She “...certainly wouldn’t consider removing or replacing [Arabic terms]. If they happen to disorient, it is well-suited to the text and a meaningful experience for the reader.”

This was Steele’s ‘ethical’ position toward the use of the local terms that she would have never thought of domesticating or adapting. Thus, agreeing with Venuti (1995/1998), she worked on her TLT from the prism of the SL one and tasked herself to reduce from total subservience to the cultural traits she inherited from her own environment; much like what Eberhardt did. Interestingly, the number of transliterated Arabic words contributed to placing Eberhardt as the first European person to use the term *Maghreb* instead of the colonially-designated regional term “North Africa” hitherto. We owe her this appellation as we owe her translator the train of cultural terms and historical ‘truths’ that had been exported to the Western world after the publishing ‘embargo’ imposed on some of Eberhardt’s excerpts. Among these, I shall mention (as they appear in Steele’s translation of “Silhouettes d’Afrique”):

1. Zawiya [School in North Africa for mystical Sufi learning, often built close to a holy place such as the tomb of a Saint.] (Steele 2013, p. 88)
2. Aissaouas [Sufi fraternity known for its members’ abilities to attain states of unusually heightened ecstasy.] (Steele 2013, p. 89)
3. Talib [A student of theology]
4. Djema [Literally, “place of assembly”-usually refers to a mosque on Fridays.]
5. Mleyaferrachia [Regional types of traditional head and face coverings worn by the Muslim women of the neighborhood.] (Steele 2013, p. 90)
6. Haik [Light scarf or veil.]
7. Kanoun [Stove]
8. Gandoura [Long tunic of light material.] (Steele 2013, p. 91)
9. ...the cabéha, the Maghreb.

10. ...drapped in our burnous [Large wool cloak.] (Steele 2013, p. 93)
11. Tolba [Students of theology at the zawiya.] (Steele 2013, p. 95)
12. Senoussya [Sufi fraternity]
13. Khouan [Members of a religious fraternity.] (Steele 2013, p. 96)

This way of approaching texts allows the TL readers to be *au fait* with the existence and pronunciation of these context-sensitive words, then to get their semantic load in the TL. In a sentence like “*An’am ya oummi Fatima!*” Yes, oh mother Fatima – Never, in any circumstance of life, did one of them depart from this well-observed politeness, which excluded neither the passion of youth, nor the close friendship of their tranquil old age. (Steele 2013, p. 92)”, the translator explains to the TL readers that “mother [is] a formula of affectionate respect” which permits a better engagement in the development of the story. I would go further by claiming that some Arabic terms are very much in circulation in some areas of Algeria and not in others. Admittedly, *Khouan*, for instance, could well be misconstrued by some Algerians for whom this word may stand for ‘thief’. Consequently, this intercultural move which is usually ensured by translators might even be of help ‘at home’ for the natives of the SL. What is more, it gives us an idea about the way these cultural assets are identified in the West as it reveals the efforts made by the translator in capturing them. In the same vein, the historicizing aspect is manifested in other excerpts:

It was a time long ago, a time already distant, when I was a student at the zawiya of the kind Shaykh Abderrahamene, in Anneba, the old Maghrebian city dozing in its azure gulf... I recall these times as a dream of youth, like something sweetly melancholic that passed in a sunny morning of my life, it would have been so long ago, alas! It was also in this era of my life that Islam cast upon me its deep and powerful charm which, by the most mysterious fibers of my being, attached itself to me forever in the strange land of Dar-el-Islam. (Steele 2013, p. 88)

When casting her contemplations on the coastal city of Anneba (situated in the northeastern side of Algeria, usually spelled with ‘a’), she is recording real names and real places. The *zawiya* of *Shaykh Abderrhamene* is a religious school that existed but which is no more known by the new generation. There are other *zawiyy* (pl. *zawiya*) with which the people of Annaba are now more familiar like the *zawiya Alawiya*.

Only sometimes, this fierce door would give passage to veiled shadows appearing under the white ferrachia of the wealthy or the blue mléya of the working class women. This, only after nightfall, and very clandestinely, so that no one could give a name to these impersonal phantoms... There were four rooms within, whose doors and little windows all opened on the courtyard, in the midst of which, at the foot of the hundred-year old fig tree, was a stone well in the form of a sculpted vase.(Steele 2013, p. 90)

Two societal aspects are highlighted in this passage. The first has to do with the veiled working women who had to leave their home after dusk in order not to be stared at or even detected by men. The second is a testimony of the (even currently) existing patios in Algeria. The fig tree is a

symbol of wealth in the *Maghrebi* region. It fosters well-being and longevity; even its central position is rightly portrayed.

In the steep and poorly paved road, hardly any vehicle traffic. Only the occasional rhythmic noise of some Negress' or Jew's wooden sandals or the singing cries of traveling merchants or morning milkmen... Then, the silence would fall again, heavy and deeply lulling. In this old neighborhood, the time-clock seemed to be thirty centuries slow, arrested in the last years of the caliphates...(Steele 2013, pp. 90-1)

For Eberhardt, it seems as if time has stopped at the Caliphates' reign. If compared to European modernity, everything looks archaic and slow-moving. An interesting historical aspect lies in the hitherto coexistence between Jews and Muslims. Their wandering in the poorly paved road was, as we can notice, without any surprise for the author.

Invariably, I found Lella Fatima engaged in lighting her charcoal fire in a smoking kanoun. Crouched with her little braided fan in hand, careful and dignified, she was entirely pre-occupied by her task. Tall, slender, and shapely under her long-sleeved shirt of patterned muslin, pulled and attached in the back, her long gandoura of yellow calico tied at the waist by a red kerchief, a little tiara of velvet trimming her handsome black headscarf [...] Ceremoniously, we exchanged long salutations and the kissing of hands, with many questions regarding each others' health, our dreams, and all this during five wonderful minutes, interrupting our conversations with numerous staunch alhamdulillah's (Praise to God). Then, sitting myself on the trunk of the fig tree, next to the deep cistern, we would chat familiarly until Lella Fatima placed three minuscule cups filled with very sweet coffee on the little deep meida. In the middle, she placed an unleavened bread of her own making, and a blue pot full of strawberries candied in honey. (Steele 2013, p. 91)

At a time where it was almost heretical to address an indigenous, Eberhardt faithfully reported the good-natured encounters between a European woman and an Algerian one. There is a minute description of *Lella Fatima's* dress, food, utensils, and even details of how both women run the conversation.

Then, sometimes, Sidi Mohammed and I would go down to the djema el Bey, the mosque of Annaba, for the morning prayer, the cabéha. Grave, and majestically draped in our burnous, we went out in the street, still full of cool shadows and peaceful silence, increasingly noisy and hurried the closer we came to Armes, the center of Moorish life. We spoke learnedly, with the great reflective calm of Muslims, of ancient things, of religion and of its poetic aspect mainly, because Sidi Djeridi, like all tolba, was passionate about ancient literature and poetry. Immersed in these tranquil and inoffensive conversations, we arrived at the narrow and silent street whereupon opened the small rear door of the great djema, at the foot of the minaret, at the very moment when Hassene began to cry: "Allahu Akbar!" (God is Greater!) (Steele 2013, pp. 92-93)

This passage explains why Eberhardt was compelled to disguise herself as a man; her intermingling with men could not have been possible otherwise. The *place d'armes* (currently called *place du 19 août 1956*) still exists at the heart of the old town Annaba.

Among us—there were approximately twenty—were the mischievous and the mystics (these latter of small number, as elsewhere), the mutes and the dwarves, the voluptuous and the indolent; all entirely preoccupied with love and poetry, the only tastes intense and common to all. In small groups, according to the affinities of our souls, we climbed our poorly paved street, with the grave leisure of Muslims, talking without raising our voices, nearly without gesture, very calmly, as befits *tolba* concerned for their dignity. Discussion sometimes playful, sometimes melancholy, in these groups of poets and dreamers, where Love and Death returned frequently...discussions of the young scholars of the Middle Ages, embellished with citations from the great poet-philosophers of Islam. My two intimate friends, Abdesselim ould Esseny and Essalah ben Zerrouk Elerarby, and myself, we were closely linked, despite great differences of character, by the commonality of our thoughts, and a shared taste for silence, contemplation and indolent dreaming. Sons of illustrious Moorish families, issued from austere and rigid races, Abdesselim and Essalah were both very handsome, of that Moorish beauty at once masculine and very slender...they were very young and very enamored of freedom, while still observing family traditions of respect and submission. (Steele 2013, pp. 95-96)

This is a hymn to love and peace, I believe. The three friends, despite their gender and character divergences, share a common desire for freedom and an equal interest in poetry. The author talks about a very smooth give and take of conversation that needs neither disputes nor shouting.

That our Islam, instead of assimilating the lies and impure forgeries of the Occident, return to the purity of the first centuries of the Hedjira in its original simplicity, above all! Then, that nothing more be changed or modified across the centuries. When the Sage has achieved that which may accrue happiness to the son of Adam, he does not search, like a madman, to change his condition and he does not abandon the real for Chimera...the insatiable are the ones who starve, and the ungrateful to God are the evil ones.” Such were the discourses of Abdesselim, enthusiastic believer, beyond any superstition, and affiliated with the powerful fraternity of the Senoussya. Abdesselim was consumed with love for a beautiful Moorish woman glimpsed by chance on a terrace. He never saw her again, and employed his leisure time composing melancholy *kacides*, singing in harmonious verse of his passion and the beauty of his beloved. Of her, after numerous and ardent researches, he knew only her name, Mannoubia, and the impassioned taste of the young woman for the music—infinitely sad—of the Bedouin reed flute. Every evening, very late, Abdesselim went to sit on the steps of an old, lowlying door, always shut, that of an ancient *zawiya* abandoned for years, whose *khouan* were all dead or long ago departed... It was in his old neighborhood, which had been hers. There, to the echoes of the dead streets, in the silence of the night perfumed with vague scents, he told of his ardent dreams and his sadnesses, through the sobs and sighs of the little enchanted flute.(Steele 2013, p. 96)

What could be deduced from this excerpt is that the colonized, like any other free man, may have his own ideas. He may talk about politics and be aware of what is happening around him, as he may endure the same accelerated heartbeats generated by a charming girl next door. The mind and the heart are at interplay here, and they are the sole terrains that cannot be encaged. Note also that the translation of all the aforementioned societal values and geographical realities buttresses the recovery of a long-lost visibility.

Conclusion

The present paper aimed at recounting, through the prism of Steele's English translation, the atypical life of a "Rimbaud-type woman" (to use Abdel Jaouad's 1993 terms) who wandered in the Algerian Sahara to eventually espouse Algerians' lifestyle. It was again an attempt at disclosing her linguistic choices as well as those of her translator. Eberhardt was one of a kind; she easily forsook her European belongingness for a *Maghrebi*/mystical one by, thus, destroying the 'myth' of *alterity*. Also, this journey into the rendering of Eberhardt's "Silhouettes d'Afrique" attempted to underline translation as a posthumous historicizing tool aimed at stressing the translator's role in boosting intercultural disclosure and discussion. Eberhardt made the first step when she decided to *merge* into the Algerian culture, she did not *submerge* the local inhabitants with exotic ideas and foreign values. For her, nothing was worth combating for, except cultural diversity, forbearance, exaltation and freedom of thought or, say, freedom *tout court*. Preserving the soul of her texts was doing justice to her loyal commitment to Islam, the people, and landscapes she depicted. Steele's foreignizing translation contributed to finding Eberhardt's experience a new home in a new language and culture. The energy deployed in this vein will, I trust, positively contribute in maximizing TL readers' intercultural construal as well as avidity for cosmopolitan intellectual encounters.

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Appendix

Mara Steele in conversation with Souâd Hamerlain (26/10/2016)

After an exchange of e-mails with Mara Steele enquiring about some issues related to her translation choices, aims, difficulties, and the feedback she got from her readers, I received the following answers:

At the time—six years ago—that I decided to translate “Silhouettes d’Afrique,” I had been studying a great deal about the religion and cultures—particularly Islamic—of the Maghreb and West Africa. The Sufi-influenced Islam that I was learning about in graduate school, I quickly realized, was far more multivalent, diverse, and tolerant than the post-9/11 stereotypes pervasive in the United States. Furthermore, as a woman, I had long been intrigued by female explorers and writers such as Eberhardt, who overcame many obstacles and lived a life worthy of fiction. I was 27 at the time, and Eberhardt was 27 when she died; I think this is partly why I first identified with and admired her. In her life and work I recognized a charismatic and eccentric subject through whom I would be able to uniquely explore in greater depth the questions of colonialism/decolonization, Orientalism, and Islam that had occupied much of my graduate coursework. Having read a few texts of Eberhardt in English translation, I wished to read more, only to find that the majority of her work remained untranslated at that time (though much more has since been done). With several years of university French behind me, I ordered the complete set of her works in French and continued to read scholarly works about her. I was attracted to take on the project of “Silhouettes d’Afrique” primarily because, as I note in my preface in *Lights: The MESSA Journal* (2013), it is a very poignant story of unrequited desire that I feel serves as a subtle Sufi parable. Also, while a very short and semi-fictional story, it deploys a number of the signature tropes and linguistic/cultural practices that she has become associated with in posthumous scholarship: namely—to quote my introduction to the piece in *Lights*— [Her] writing defies the authoritative and teleological project of Orientalism, replacing it with anti-colonialist sentiment and an insecure and troubled place of enunciation. Abdel-Jouad invokes Eberhardt’s polyglottal plurivocity, her inability to settle on a unary identity or speech. Instead, as a multilingual, cross-dressing, Russo-Swiss Muslim convert, she offers a rich multiplicity of voices: ethnic, gendered, and linguistic. As the first writer in the French language to use the native term “Maghreb” in reference to the region at the time only known in Europe as North Africa, she incorporates many other transliterated Arabic words into her published writing... (Steele 2013) While translating, I often felt myself carried away by the atmosphere and language—as enchanted as a lover, perhaps. At times while I worked, I felt that Eberhardt was with me during this time, pleased

to see me bring her words to life. This admittedly imaginative yet uncanny experience was rousing, if slightly disorienting, and inspired keen loyalty and dedication to do justice to her Romantic mysticism and insight. As you'll note in my introduction to the piece, I also felt that she had been unfairly characterized as a dilettante by a number of critics and translators; I felt that she deserved my well-reasoned defense, which you are encouraged to cite. The primary ethical concern and difficulty I have with this translation is the compulsion I felt in those days to eliminate what I perceived to be an excessive, inexplicable use of the ellipsis in her original text rather than have faith that the author used these to convey a certain affective code, however obscure to me at the time. In the original (French) version of the story, these ellipsis occur frequently, both within and between paragraphs, and I failed to comprehend their rhetorical value, so I made what I feel to be the rather arrogant decision to eliminate them rather than undertaking a more careful analysis—for example asking how the figure of aposiopesis might have functioned within the story... You asked about domestication; I'm not sure how I would further domesticate a text which was written for European audiences to begin with. Her use of Arabic/local languages and terms is so essential to her project that I certainly wouldn't consider removing or replacing them. If they happen to disorient, it is well-suited to the text and a meaningful experience for the reader. Please see my text's bibliography for an edition of the volume in which the French version of this essay was published. You have full permission to reproduce any of my words, with proper context and citation, in your own scholarly work. I thank you for inviting me to collaborate on your project, and please let me know if I can be of any further help. Keep me updated on publications, as well. Sincerely yours,

Mara Steele

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Notes:

ⁱ It goes without saying that it is under the sign of meeting with otherness [...] and the attentive listening of the different forms of exchanges that can result from it ... that it is necessary to analyze the complex step of Isabelle Eberhardt (This, and all English translations are mine).

ⁱⁱ A Sufi order named after Abdul-Qadir al Gilani (1077-1166), whose disciples rely fervently on applying the fundamentals of Islam.