Isabelle Eberhardt: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Nomad

Ego in exilio genitus, in exilio natus sum [I was conceived in exile and born in exile]
—Petrarch

The horseman dressed in gandouras and white burnous, in a large veiled turban, wearing at his neck the black beads of Kadiya, his right hand bound with a red handkerchief to better grip the reins, this would be Mahmoud Saâdi, adopted son of the great white Sheik ...
—Isabelle Eberhardt, 1900, Algerian Sahara, self-portrait

Even before her strange death at twenty-seven in a flash flood in Aïn Séfra, an oasis in the Algerian Sahara, Isabelle Eberhardt (1877–1904) was a legend. This Rimbaud-type woman repudiated Europe and its civilization, converted to Islam, dressed as a man, assumed a male identity, and roamed the Sahara, untrammeled by the constraints of her youth and sex.1 This self-willed nomad also had unbounded literary ambitions. In the course of her brief existence, she wrote more than two thousand pages of notes, articles, and fiction, travelling tirelessly in the nomadic fashion, on foot, on horseback, alone, and with caravans. Her “vagabondage” (one of the many reference terms to her “errance” and nomadic way of life) was concomitant with her vocation

1. Isabelle-Wilhelmine-Marie Eberhardt was born in Geneva on 17 February 1877, under the ominous signs of illegitimacy and statelessness, to Mme Nathalie de Moerder, née Eberhardt, widow of Senator Pavel Karlovitch de Moerder, and an unknown father. In Un Désir d’Orient (Paris: Grasset, 1988), Edmonde Charles-Roux, hereafter Roux, Isabelle’s most recent and authoritative biographer, corroborates the widely accepted thesis that Alexander Trophimowsky, Mme de Moerder’s lover and the tutor of her children, was Isabelle’s father. The truth may have been buried with Mme de Moerder herself. Pierre Arnoult claims in his book Rimbaud (Paris: Albin Michel, 1943) that Isabelle is Rimbaud’s illegitimate daughter. He bases his thesis on physical resemblance and a common destiny. In France and in the Maghreb, Isabelle continues to be canonized unabashedly: “la bonne nomade/l’ardente nomade/l’androgyne du désert/l’Héloïse du désert, Notre Dame du Sahara, the Passionate Nomad, Isabelle/l’Algérien,” etc.

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as a writer. Isabelle considered and practiced writing as a form of nomadism, a journey into language. In order to become a nomadic writer she had to lead, as she repeatedly declared in her Journaliers (1923, 1987, 1988), “two lives, one that is full of adventure and belongs to the Desert, and one, calm and restful, devoted to thought and far from all that might interfere with it.”

If Isabelle’s life is hailed by many as exemplary—Isabelle, the woman and the artist, embodies the quintessential rebel figure,—her precociously promising but unfinished work has not received the critical attention it merits. The fact that little has been written about her creative work is mainly due to the dubious authenticity of Dans l’Ombre chaude de l’Islam, an anthology of short stories collected, polished, finished, and sometimes rewritten, by her friend and mentor Victor Barrucand, and of which Barrucand claimed—adding insult to injury—coauthorship. Besides the question of “legitimacy,” Isabelle’s text still wanders between several nationalities: is it Russian, Swiss, French or Maghrebian, or all at once? Little did Isabelle know when she reflected in her Journaliers that: “No work of literature is ever finished” (14) that her own “oeuvre” would remain unfinished; little did she suspect that her work, like herself, would posthumously be doomed to suffer the heimatlose, the statusless, plight.

“ILLEGITIMATE,” “WOMAN,” AND “HEIMATLOSE”

Isabelle realized early in her life that true freedom could only be attained outside the purported hell of her milieu, that is, outside her

4. Recent research, especially that of Marie-Odile Delacour and René Heuleu (“Écrits sur le sable,” op. cit.), has revealed that Barrucand’s “editorializing” was less substantial than presumed.
culture, religion, and language. Her illegitimacy condemned her, from birth, to an endless and illusory quest for a father, and to a life of exile and nomadism in search of a fatherland.⁵

She had to flee the trappings of a stifling bourgeois life and the domestic entrapments of gender in order to seek sustenance for her art. Isabelle the writer, whose mother tongue was Russian, opted for French, a language she would transform to accommodate her adopted Maghrebian identity. As reflected in her correspondence, diary, and fiction, exile was for Isabelle an experience of becoming, a praxis that necessitated ever more evasions.

At the root of Isabelle's exile and subsequent nomadism was an unhappy consciousness. Because she was an illegitimate child, a woman brought up in a country and a century that denied women their elementary rights, and one who lived for the better part of her life as a stateless refugee or Heimatlose (Isabelle never felt comfortable with the precarious and demeaning status of Heimatlose, especially in Geneva, where every Russian émigré was regarded with suspicion), Isabelle had more than one axe to grind against the society that rejected her. The root of this rejection, however, predates Isabelle's birth and lies in her native Russia where, on account of her illegitimacy, her family was considered non grata. Isabelle came to incarnate the family's guilt—a form of psychological exile—and the consummation of their irrevocable separation from the fatherland.⁶

Paradoxically, Isabelle, like every exile, longed for a community, a country, and a people she could call her own. In her life and writing, the inaccessible Russian fatherland is projected onto the Maghreb, first through flights of imagination, but later, once she is there, through its transformations into the theater of her nomadic wanderings and musings, and, as she desired, her last abode. In her Journaliers, Isabelle refers to the Maghreb as her "home," and "the country of [her] choice," (86).

5. Isabelle embroidered endlessly and fantastically the myth of her unknown father. She confessed to her Tunisian friend, Ali Abdel Wahab, that Trophimowsky was her father, only to recant this version in favor of a more fantastic one: "I was the wretched outcome of a rape committed by my mother's doctor, now deceased" in "Isabelle Eberhardt: Amazone ou paumeé?" op. cit., (Letter of 1 January 1898), my translation. In a letter to the editor of La Petite Gironde, she gives yet another version: "My father was a Russian subject of the Moslem faith, and my mother was a Russian catholic." The Oblivion Seekers, 85.

6. Isabelle's mother was also born out of wedlock, born Nathalie Eberhardt, illegitimate daughter of Nicolas Korff and Fraulein Eberhardt, whose name she was given.
From her childhood fantasy, the Maghreb grew to be a consummation. By her teens she was *en connaissance de cause*, so to speak, with the Maghreb before she ever set foot there. In retrospect, her early fictional creations appear as a grand rehearsal for the real act to follow.

In one such adolescent and premonitory creation, significantly titled “Visions du Moghreb,” a short story published under the male pseudonym of Nicolas Podolinsky in *Nouvelle Revue Moderne*, we find the early signs of Isabelle’s strategy, namely the subversion of linguistic, sexual, and cultural hegemonies, her future artistic and literary preoccupations. Significantly, Isabelle refers to North Africa by its Arabic name, phoneticized here in the Algerian dialect, “Moghreb.” We find as well the configuration of her fictional world and leitmotifs. In this story, the fictionalized *taleb* (a divinity student) is the prototype of a series of portraits that the artist, once in the Maghreb, will depict again upon close observation. Although drawing on secondhand material relayed to her by her brother Augustin, his colegionnaire Edouard Vivicorsi, and her penfriend Eugène Letord, Isabelle creates a strikingly vivid and realistic image of the Maghreb and its people. Her sympathy goes, as a matter of natural course, to a kindred spirit: the colonized and the underdog. For a writer acquainted with the Maghreb only through correspondence and books, she displays remarkable insight and knowledge. Furthermore, the young *taleb* of the story, this seeker of arcane, Sufi knowledge, and a staunch anticolonialist, is a striking prototype of Isabelle’s projected future identity.

**THE YEAR OF THE HEJRA**

It was only a matter of time before Isabelle gave a concrete shape to her “Visions du Moghreb.” In May 1897, corresponding to 1275 in the *hejra* calendar, Isabelle and her mother sailed to Algeria, to Bône/Annaba, where they embraced Islam. For mother and daughter, this journey to the Maghreb was tantamount to a *hejra*. The Arabic word *hejra*, (also spelled *hegira* and *hijrah*), refers to the flight of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Yathrib, which counts as the beginning of

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7. The fact that she published this story in this journal, in 1896, is quite an anomaly: especially since she refers to North Africa by its Arabic name, phoneticized in the Algerian dialect, Moghreb; and also considering that this journal advocated the French civilizing mission in Algeria with jingoistic enthusiasm.
the Muslim era: 20 June, 622 A.D. Both literally and figuratively, Isabelle’s emigration and conversion constitute a hejra.8

The Islamic tradition consecrates hejra as a radical departure from the beliefs of the past, a total submission ("Islam" in Arabic means submission to God) to the new faith and its prescriptions. For Isabelle, this hejra signified the beginning of a new calendar and a new life, the end of her exile as a Russian émigrée, of her humiliation as a Heimatlose, and, more importantly, of her seeming failure as an artist in Geneva and the West—all obstacles to her intellectual and spiritual growth. In Isabelle’s manichean vision of the world, this journey/hejra was a flight from a hostile West to more hospitable and congenial African shores, a kind of spiritual hejra, as she noted in her Journaliers, from the “land of exile [Geneva] so very far away from the other sacred place devoted to eternal repose and everlasting silence” (6).

For her and many of her fictional alter egos, especially her Russian characters, exile, symbolic of the alienating past, gives way to nomadism, an emblem of the future and of emancipation: “Tereneti Antonoff [father of the protagonist in her story “L’Anarchiste”], persecuted in Russia for his libertarian convictions, and about to be exiled, had escaped to Algeria, searching for a new land and a country of his choice where, under a clement sky, men would be less crusted over with routine.” (Au Pays des sables, 175).

The bliss of the encounter with her newfound fatherland was marred by the sudden death of Fatma-Manoubia, her mother, who was buried in the maritime cemetery in Annaba, according to Muslim rites. This traumatic event was soon followed, upon her return to Geneva, by the suicide of her brother Vladimir, and the demise of “Vava” Trophimowsky. Isabelle was never to receive her mother’s legacies.9

At the age of twenty-one, Isabelle, alone, destitute and solitary, resembled one of those “Ouled Bab-Allah” [in Arabic: the sons of Allah’s gate, that is, vagabonds, wayfarers] she wrote so much about,

8. In her text “Silhouettes d’Afrique,” Isabelle, who introduces herself as Mahmoud el Mouskoubi [the Muskovite], equates hejra, which she phoneticizes in the Algerian dialect, Hedjira, with the glorious days of Islam before the advent of Western civilization: “May our Islam, instead of assimilating the lies and impure posture of the West, return to its purity of the first centuries of the Hedjira, especially in its original simplicity,” Ecrits sur le sable 2, op. cit., 66.

9. In a letter to her friend Al Abdel Wahab, she explains that “In Russia, being able to inherit, especially overseas, takes years and years . . . And my mother left no cash” “Isabelle Eberhardt: Amazone ou paumée,” op. cit., 4. My translation.
who roamed aimlessly and lived from hand to mouth, unburdened by past, family, or possessions, and who stood on the margins of society—outsiders, pariahs, and outcasts—as symbols of fierce independence and absolute freedom: "When he [the wayfarer] comes to a farm or a hut, he stops and pounds the earth with his long staff of wild olive wood. His raucous voice breaks the silence of the countryside as he asks for Allah’s bread. And he is right, the sad-faced wanderer. The sacred bread he demands, without begging for it, is his by right, and the giving of it is only a feeble compensation, a recognizing of the injustice that is in the world" (The Oblivion Seekers, 20).

Although Isabelle never dwelled on exile or the past, she was nonetheless obsessed by what she had not known: the nostalgia of Algeria before colonization, the purity of a land which in her fantasy resembled the Russia before her birth. For Isabelle, the South and the Sahara, particularly the Souf region and the little oasis of El Oued, as the only spots that remained uncontaminated by the “French civilizing mission,” represented the inner geography of her lost fatherland, her kingdom of innocence. The spiritual configuration of this newfound land was essentially Islamic. In Dar-el-Islam, Isabelle found a spiritual community and an ultimate refuge from her past.

By reterritorializing herself and her Russian characters in the Maghreb, Isabelle sought to link, both in her life and fiction, the two poles of her Orient: Russia and the Maghreb. This dual ancestry is exemplified by her alter ego Mahmoud el Mouskoubi [the Moscovite] who, as illustrated in “Silhouettes d’Afrique,” has found in “Dar el-Islam the fatherland which [she] so desperately desired” as a replacement for the “Slav country which [she] was never to see” (Ecrits sur le Sable 2, 58). In this regard, Isabelle’s search for the lost fatherland was a form of repatriation. Hers was a yearning for the Orient of her ancestors. Like Mahoud el-Mouskoubi, Orschanow, the protagonist of her novel Trimardeur, is haunted by his dual heritage: “Ever since he sat daydreaming on the quay of La Joliette, watching the Saint-Augustin leave for Oran, he had been haunted by the idea of Africa, and above all of Muslim Africa. He thought of all his own atavistic links to Islam through his maternal side, Tartar and nomadic.”10 Her Oriental hankering was also exacerbated by the xenophobia of the Swiss who

10. Trimardeur [Vagabond], 87–88. Orschanow’s life and itinerary closely mirror Isabelle’s. Isabelle claims she is a Russian Muslim through her paternal side, see also note 5.
never missed a chance, as Isabelle often remarked in her correspondence and diaries, to remind Russian émigrés that they were Orientals.

In her unabashed attempt to bridge the gap between the Russian and the Arab, one clearly recognizes some degree of projection on Isabelle's part. In her novel *Trimardeur*, the Arab and the Russian, the Fellah and the Mujik, seem to be brothers made of the same clay, strikingly similar in attitudes and destiny: "Like the Russian people, the Arab races survived by the force of an almost unchangeable inertia. Like them, they suffered in silence, bringing the same resignation, the same submission, the same tacit reproval of injustice to any dealings they had with the authorities. . . . In addition, like the ordinary Slavs, they were sociable and egalitarian, and showed no disdain for the poor. The rich and the lettered would sit side by side with the most wretched, in the great brotherhood of Islam" [138]. Furthermore, a sense of fatality or *Mektoub*, a recurrent term in her writings, pervades every aspect of her life and characters, so much so that she sees in every displaced person, especially Russians, a potential Muslim.

With equal unabashedness, Isabelle strove to transform the despised status of *Heimatlose*, which was at the root of the matrix of exile and nomadism, into a triumph over bourgeois self-complacency: "Not for me," she wrote in her *Journaliers*, "those who feel smug, happy with themselves and their lot, content with the state of their heart. Not for me those boastful bourgeois who are deaf, dumb, and blind, and never admit a mistake" [9]. Instead, she longed to experience "the strangely sad and voluptuous well-being of the *Heimatlose*" [154].

Thus, the initial stigma of *Heimatlose* would later be embraced by Isabelle as a form of redemption and martyrdom. The final sentence in her novel *Trimardeur* reads like an ode to the romantic *Heimatlose*’s lifestyle, a legitimizing gesture: "He [Dmitri Orshanow] had come back to the Legion with only one desire: to stay forever, and one day to sleep in the corner reserved for the *Heimatlose* in the cemetery in Saïda" [160].

In this projected fatherland Isabelle passionately sought, as she confided in her *Journaliers*, to fulfill her literary as well as her spiritual aspirations, for her secret ambitions were to become a writer and *marabout*: "Two things are holding my attention at the moment: first my need for progress in the intellectual domain. . . . The other question on my mind is of a very different order, one I would not dare come out with, except when talking to Slimène [her Algerian husband], for
he will be the only one to understand and go along with it; and that is the question of becoming a maraboute [a saint] (66).

But above all, Isabelle saw herself, as she confided in her Journaliers, as a struggling artist in the "burnous," so to speak, of the nomad, untrammeled by routine and material possessions: "A symbol of what my life is now all about, and probably always will be, is that sign saying 'Room for rent' by the window of the seedy room I am living in, with a camp bed in it, some papers and, my handful of books" (9). Like any artist who chose the nomadic life, Isabelle was compelled—she referred to this compulsion as an act of fate, Mektoub—to reproduce her "vagabondage" and restlessness in her own writing, to the point that nomadism may have become the sole focus of her writing: "A subject," she mused in her Pencilled Notes, "to which intellectuals never give a thought is the right to be vagrant, the freedom to wander. Yet vagrancy is deliverance, and life on the open road is the essence of freedom" (The Oblivion Seekers, 68).

Isabelle's writing dramatizes the fugitive and Heimatlose element in her life. She sought to become, like Stephen Hero, the "artificer of [her] own style of life." Isabelle escaped into her new male and Arab identity so as to let live and flourish, in perfect androgyny, the artist in her/him. Isabelle/Mahmoud will henceforth embody the mendicant Sufi as an artist: "Go, Mahmoud, and do great, magnificent deeds. . . . Be a hero . . . ." (Journaliers, 8). The realization of the dual self—Isabelle/Mahmoud, the artist/the nomad, the illegitimate/the maraboute—will develop into a polysemic archetype.

**ISABELLE/MAHMOUD: THE ARTIST AS A NOMAD**

Isabelle was indeed one of the very European writers who knew the Maghreb from the inside. According to Victor Barrucand, her Algerian editor and mentor, Isabelle was not only an extraordinary character, but a bold and courageous one who wrote about the humanity of the native and who espoused the Algerian's cause when it was not fashionable to do so: "There are," noted Barrucand in his 'Introduction' to Pages d'Islam, "many Algerias to be observed. Where Louis Bertrand, for example, only met Latins and émigrés from Valencia, Isabelle wanted to see only natives" (12).

She was one of the very few Europeans who did not succumb to the romantic Oriental-Bedouin fever so endemic in her time. Although as a child she fell under the spell of the Russian feminist, writer, journalist, and traveller, Lydia Pachkov, whose fabulous travel-accounts from the Middle East appeared regularly in the fashionable Parisian magazine, Tour du Monde, Isabelle’s vision and experience of the Arab and Islamic world were at the antipodes of Pachkov’s. For Isabelle the Maghreb was more than a theater of adventures, it was a permanent abode. Furthermore, even though she was a lifelong admirer of the sumptuous imagery of Pierre Loti, Isabelle’s writing is, in a sense, the antithesis of Loti’s. Isabelle’s Orient is, in many respects, unromantic; she wrote almost exclusively about the degrading and dehumanizing effects of French colonial rule on the native population. In this regard alone, Isabelle’s “écriture” is remarkably proto-postmodern and postcolonial: her treatment of Maghrebian reality is perceived by many readers in the Maghreb as an early attempt at what Meddeb calls “the rectification of the Orientalist consensus,” something he too illustrates in his novel Talisman.14

That she was a Heimatlose, no doubt, sharpened her sense of humanity, and may explain the empathy she showed for the disinherited, whom a half-century later Frantz Fanon would call The Wretched of the Earth. The Maghreb depicted by Isabelle, at the height of the Algerianist school, represented by Louis Bertand and his “littérature de cartes postales,” was neither exotic nor sentimental; it was steeped in people’s lives, especially the ordinary among them.

Because she gave a voice to those who deliberately were left out of

13. Isabelle’s collected work proves beyond the shadow of a doubt that she was indeed the first champion of decolonization, and belies the often unsubstantiated but typically reductive view, held for example by Rana Kabbani, that the “voyage East for Isabelle was primarily a gateway to sex . . . the East as a coffer of erotic delights and unlimited freedoms . . . and that Isabelle, like countless other Europeans, had come to the Orient on the flying-carpet of Orientalism.” In “Introduction” to The Passionate Nomad: The Diary of Isabelle Eberhardt, op. cit., v–xii.

14. This is not to say that Isabelle was not sometimes “blind”—after all, she was a woman of her time and culture, and was, therefore, prey to a kind of Orientalizing romanticism, especially with respect to the nomads and the desert. Nor was she immune from racial and cultural stereotypes, namely about the Arab woman, her anti-type. Some of her attitudes about blacks, if taken out of context, are outright racist: “The disturbing and repulsive impression that Negroes produce on me comes almost singularly from the strange mobility of their faces with furtive eyes, with their features forever twitching with tics and grins. It is an invincible impression of nonanimal kinship that I feel childishly, at first sight, toward my brothers the blacks” Ecrits sur le sable 1 op. cit., 247.
literature and history, Isabelle has been hailed posthumously as an advocate of decolonization. Her sympathetic attitudes towards the natives rank her as one of the early critics of the colonial enterprise and its avowed civilizing mission. In this regard, Isabelle's work may have inaugurated the theme of decolonization in the Maghreb, for it expounded a sociology of colonialism and oppression whose critics and theorists would later include, among Francophone writers, the Martinican Frantz Fanon and the Tunisian Albert Memmi.

Her original social and psychological findings and observations articulate complex problematics that have continued to haunt Maghrébians for generations, namely the aftershocks of colonial rule on the native population: "In ten, twenty years' time," she wondered in her *Journaliers* "will today's young Algerians resemble their fathers and be as steeped as they are in the solemn serenity of their Islamic faith?" (22). In this regard, she was the first Francophone writer to delve into the complex problematic of the cultural alienation of the colonized, particularly of the tiny category of natives who benefited from the colonial system, known in French as the *évolués*. Isabelle spoke eloquently in her unfinished novel *Rakhil*, in the few pages salvaged from the flood, about the plight of North-African migrant workers in Marseilles, an important and current issue both in the Maghreb and France. Likewise, in *Trimardeur* she evokes problems pertaining to the living conditions, reception, and treatment of those migrant workers, problems which prefigure by over a half a century those raised by *Beur* writers, the children of second- and third-generation North-African immigrants in France.

**THE FICTIONAL TYPE AS ISABELLE'S ALTER-EGO**

Like the nomad who is doomed to repeat his migration and displacement, Isabelle repeats *ad infinitum* the same portrait of the *Heimatlose*, as if to convince herself of her own relevance and of the

15. For many Maghrébians, particularly Algerians, Isabelle looms in retrospect as an unswerving and staunch anticolonialist, and a defender of Arabic Islamic values and traditions at the height of the colonial undertaking. Today she is regarded by many as one of the precursors, if not the first, of Maghrebian Francophone writers. See particularly, Mohammed-Salah Dembri's "Isabelle Eberhardt est-elle Algérienne?" *Algérie Actualité*, 25 October 1970, and the more recent article by Djouher Mousseoui, "Signes et société," *El Moudjahid*, 10 July 1985.
worthiness of her quest. Her life is mirrored by the many facets of her fictional characters.

Isabelle's fiction is a world of extremes and excesses of all sorts. It revolves around a series of binary oppositions: Europe/Orient, exile/nomad, city/countryside, sacred (the Mosque)/profane (the whorehouse), etc. It is predominantly peopled with male characters and shows a special affection for nomads, Bedouins, legionnaires, Spahis, and other social outcasts—who are portrayed sympathetically, like herself, as innocent victims of Fate's misfortunes. If European women are notably absent in Isabelle's fiction, the only Arab women she writes about are Bédouines, and they are either prostitutes or maraboutes.16

A rebel, Isabelle was contemptuous of the submissiveness of women, and only befriended and wrote about those who refused the tutelage of males. In this regard, she saw in the Arab woman, not her alter-ego but her antitype: "Yes, indeed," she wrote to her Slimane, "I am your wife before God and Islam. But I am not a vulgar Fatma or an ordinary Aïcha. I am also your brother Mahmoud, the servant of God and Djilani first, rather than the servant of her husband that every Arab woman is, according to the chera (body of Islamic law)," [Lettres intimes, 336–37].

Her female characters, often portrayed as victims of frustrated love, and of social and moral constraints and misunderstandings, ultimately escape their unfulfilled life and seek oblivion in alcohol, drugs, prostitution or, in the case of maraboutes, mysticism. As viewed by the fiercely independent Isabelle, these forms of escape and rebellion are preferable to a life of mediocrity and enslavement: "Like all the women of her region, Achoura considered the sale of her body the only escape from want that was available to a woman. She had no desire to be cloistered again by marriage, nor was she ashamed to be what she was. To her, prostitution seemed legitimate, and did not interfere with her love for her favorite [Si Mohammed el Arbi]. Indeed, it never occurred to her to associate in her mind the indescribable bliss they knew

16. According to Cecily Mackworth, "Arab mythology contains a long tradition of female marabouts, several of whom had scour ed the desert disguised as men. Lelle Aouda ben Sidi Mohammed was one of the most famous examples, and centuries later men spoke of the beauty and learning of the great chieftainess, her debauched early life, and her pious end as a cave-dwelling hermit" The Destiny of Isabelle Eberhardt (New York: The Ecco Press, 1975), 116. In some instances, Mackworth notes, especially among the Northern tribes such as the Ouled-Nail tribe, female maraboutism is the ultimate repentance for a life of prostitution [Mackworth, 61].
together with what she called, using the cynical *sabir* word, "*commerce*," ([The Oblivion Seekers, 33]).

A typical protagonist is often a single man or woman confronting incredible social, political, and moral odds that occur as a result of an innate desire to be other than the original self. A typical itinerary of her characters is from North (Europe) to South (Africa), that of the city-dweller who leaves behind the comfort of Europe for the rugged life of the desert, who moves from materialism to spiritualism. Her female characters reverse this itinerary: they effect a passage from the desert to the city, from nomadism to a form of sedentary marginality, and from innocence to experience, to escape patriarchal hegemony. The men usually become vagabonds and beggars, and the women adopt the role of prostitute at the service of the garrison in the local "Village Nègre." For both men and women escape becomes a necessary condition for attaining the kingdom, although in Isabelle's case as with the nomad's and his/her various fictional avatars, always in *potentia*.

Her male characters, especially the Europeans, evolve through somewhat predictable stages. First, as with Isabelle herself, they undergo a profound transformation upon encountering the South. Often this transformation, which occurs gradually, like an initiation, starts with a revelation, the realization of a vocation, and the fulfillment of a destiny. Next, the protagonist is overwhelmed by the landscape, by a way of life; he is unburdened by social convention. Charmed by the land and the simplicity of the people and their customs, he slips into a solitary contemplation which distances him from his European colleagues. Linguistic communion then allows him to bond with the people: "He [Jacques, the protagonist in "Le Major"] studied conscientiously the raucous and melodious language, whose accent he liked immediately, and grasped its harmony with the fiery horizons and the petrified earth" (190–191). Love, the encounter with the other, is a matter of natural course. Invariably, as for Isabelle, her characters fall in love with a native: Isabelle/Slimane, Jacques/Yasmina (in *Yasmina*), Jacques/Embarka in *Le Major*, Andréï in *L'Anarchiste*, etc. The bonding is completed when the European character converts to Islam.

Isabelle's fictional project, as outlined in her pioneering story "*Visions du Moghreb,*" is to improve on and multiply, in innumerable versions and variations, the *taleb* prototype in order to people her landscape with kindred spirits. More than with any other character, Isabelle shows particular congeniality with the *M'tourni* (from the French *tournier*, the one who turns away from his religion and converts
to a new one; a pejorative term used in the colonial period to refer to Muslims who convert to Christianity). Her most poignant fiction is titled only *M'tourni* [The Convert]; it is the quintessential Isabelle Eberhardt story, and in many respects reflects her own life. In *M'tourni*, Roberto Fraugi leaves his native Santa Reparata for Algiers and then the Sahara, where he settles permanently, converts to Islam, assumes a new identity, marries a native girl, and never looks back on his past or questions his destiny/Mektoub: “Roberto Fraugi was now Mohammed Kasdallah. . . . For it had been written that the cottage and the field he had dreamed of owning were to be granted him, only they were not to be in Santa Reparata. He would find them under another sky and on a different soil, in the Hodna country among Moslems, and surrounded by the vast sad horizon of the waste land” (*The Oblivion Seekers*, 42–43). For Roberto Fraugi/Mohammed Kasdallah and Isabelle Eberhardt/Mahmoud Essadi, “a feeling of ancient Islam, tranquil and mysterious,” (*Journaliers*, 20), and the unbounded Sahara were the ultimate escape from North to South.

**LIFE AS A PSEUDONYM**

For escape, in Isabelle’s sense, one might programmatically understand the body: her nomadism was the expression of her relentless effort to escape the limitations of her gender and the shame of her name. Her maternal name, Eberhardt, when her brothers and sisters went by the patronymic De Moerder, reminded her constantly of the absence of a father. Isabelle realized from early childhood that the “name of the mother” was a mere fig-leaf, a figment of the imagination, to cover the shame of her birth. This onomastic travesty bore the stigma of her “excommunication” from the De Moerder clan, and marked irrevocably her exile from the “name of the father” and from the ancestral fatherland.17

Having been deprived of a legitimate name, Isabelle sought to have all names—she would nomadize between an assortment of exotic

17. The preoccupation with onomastics is a fecund problematic in postcolonial Maghrebian literature in French that can be summarized by one of Khatibi’s titles, *La Blessure du nom propre* (Paris: Denoël, 10/18, 1974). This topic was already discussed in his novel, *La Mémoire tatouée* (Paris: Denoël, 1971); to indicate his cultural alienation, Kateb Yacine uses his patronym (Kateb) as a first name (Yacine); Meddeb sees his name as a “stigma of colonial intervention,” *Talismano* (Paris: Christian Bourgeois, 1979), 218.
names, male and female, Russian, French, and Arabic: Myriem, Marie, Meriem, Nadia, Nicolas Podolinsky, Mahmoud, Si Mahmoud Saâdi, etc. In Algeria she passed for a Tunisian student, and in Tunisia for a Turk, in order to account for her accent. She would also nomadize between male and female identities to the anguished amazement of her relatives and friends: "... Remember," Isabelle urged her brother Augustin in one of her many letters, "that Edouard [Vivicorsi, Augustin's colegionnaire and Isabelle's correspondent] must never know that [Nicholas] Podolinsky and I are one and the same person" (Roux, 189–90).

For the young Isabelle, a male pseudonym was more than a prank or a sexual fantasy, it was a practical disguise, especially when she wrote about such "unfeminine" material as colonialism. One may wonder if the editors of La Nouvelle Revue Moderne would have published "Visions du Moghreb" if they had known it was penned by a female adolescent. For the aspiring artist, to use a pseudonym also meant identification with her literary idol: Pierre Loti. Like Pierre Loti, who was a great influence on her early hankering for the Orient, Isabelle had an irresistible attraction for masquerade and disguise. Julien Viaud had escaped into another self as Pierre Loti. And like Pierre Loti/Julien Viaud, Isabelle Eberhardt/Mahmoud Saâdi sought out literature as a space of onomastic, ethnic, sexual, and linguistic heterogeneity. Significantly, her pseudonyms are either Arab or Russian, underscoring thus her claim to a double oriental heritage.

THE PRISONHOUSE OF GENDER

From her early Geneva days, Isabelle refused to be confined and condemned by her gender to the slavery of a domestic life. She found in disguise a means of escaping her "role," that is, domestic entrapment, the predicament of the overwhelming majority of women in her generation: "I have given up," she wrote in her Journaliers, "the hope of ever having a corner on earth to call my own, a home, a family, peace or prosperity. I have donned the cloak of the restless wanderer, one that

18. Jean Déjeux considers Isabelle one of the authentic Algerians who wholeheartedly opted for an Arab, Muslim Algeria along with the painter Etienne Dinet and the poet Jean Sénac (whose pseudonym is Yahia el-Ouahraní), Littérature algérienne contemporaine (Paris: PUF "Que sais-je?" No. 1604, 107).
can be a burden too at times. I have written off the thought of ever coming home to a happy family for rest and safety” (4).

Isabelle, who felt that her body and gender were the primary forms of her exile, opted for a radical “deterritorialization” of herself by assuming a variety of male names and identities. In a letter to the Editor of *La Petite Gironde*, she traces back this cross-gender impulse to her childhood: “I was brought up as though I had been a boy. This explains the fact that for many years I have worn, and still wear, men’s clothing” (*The Oblivion Seekers*, 85).19 Later, in the Maghreb, she will opt for the cross-gender “burnous,” a formless garment which resembles a woman’s robe and a man’s mantle.

Although rarely oblivious or unaware of her feminine identity, Isabelle, who was constantly in search of a surrogate father, identified completely with men, especially with her beloved brother Augustin. In order to “pass” as a man, she displayed strong will and motivation and took many risks. By the time she reached Algeria, she cross-dressed with baffling ease, unaffected by her ambiguous status in the public world, whether she were among nomads, women, or colonial officials.20 By rejecting the symbolism of her female clothing, Isabelle transgressed and broke more than a dress code; she put into question not only gender roles and functions but also their political and ideological implications.

In socially and sexually segregated societies, such as the French colonial and Islamic ones, transvestism and the subsequent changes of name functioned for Isabelle as social and economic equalizers. Unable, for instance, to travel fourth-class as a woman, and with no money for a more expensive fare, Isabelle had to disguise herself as a deckhand and assume a masculine identity: “Once on the Berry [a ship plying between Bône and Marseilles] I sat up front,” she recalled in her *Journaliers*, “disguised as Pierre Mouchet in my wretched sailor’s outfit, and felt as sad as an emigrant being banished from his native soil”

19. Isabelle’s letter to the Editor of *La Petite Gironde*, in *The Oblivion Seekers*, op. cit., 85.
20. In an appendix to *Dans l’ombre chaude de l’Islam*, her friend Victor Barrucand recalls a highly publicized instance of the natural quality of Isabelle’s transvestism: “When Monsieur Loubet, President of France, came to Algiers, Isabelle Eberhardt was among those invited to the press banquet. As was her custom, she wore the attire of a Moslem man, being entirely covered in white wool, with no silk embroidery, no other spot of color save the brown camel’s hair cords twisted tightly around her white Sahara-style turban” *The Oblivion Seekers*, op. cit., 84.
The disguise reveals all the more poignantly Isabelle's psychic turmoil. In the metaphor of the "emigrant being banished from his native soil," we see at work Isabelle's compulsion to master her heimatlose trauma.

In order to break free from the role that society and convention imposed on her gender, Isabelle opted, as she confided in her Journaliers, for a "borrowed mask," that of the "cynical, the debauched and dissipated... the drunkard, the depraved and the brawler" (2). These are not only masculine but urban and aggressive roles that stand in counterdistinction to the peaceful life of the would-be nomad and the mystic, a life she referred to as her "beloved personality." This "mask" was merely a transitional, "borrowed" accoutrement to her "European" personality that she would readily forsake, in her adopted land, for her mystical personality. She longed, whenever she was in her European exile, "to don again, as early as possible, the beloved personality which is, in reality, the true life, to return there, in Africa, and to lead that life again" (2). On every flight to the Maghreb, she assumed her new identity ritualistically: "My hat bothered me, though, for it set me apart from Muslims," Isabelle wrote in her Journaliers upon her arrival to Algiers. "I went back to don my fez, and went out again with Ahmed..." (19).

Isabelle never missed an occasion, in her diaries and correspondence, to castigate the Dr. Grenier-type, "who seems to think that 'the habit makes the monk,' and that sporting a burnous or a woman's ferrachia makes one a Muslim?" ("Isabelle Eberhardt: Amazone ou paumée," 27). Isabelle may also have chosen to dress as an Arab man to subvert yet another form of cultural hegemony, namely the one that mandated that the natives "assimilate" and conform to the European dress code. Isabelle advocates, instead, reverse assimilation, namely that the Europeans, rather than the natives, adjust to the customs and traditions of the land. In her fiction, dressing up as the other becomes a matter of natural course. Her characters, like herself, "go native" out of sincere conviction, as a symbol of their new identity and life. To his fellow-villagers, Roberto Fraugi's adopting the local dress was a rite of passage in the process of his communal belonging: "His European clothing became ragged, and one day Seddik persuaded him to put on native dress. At first he felt as though he were in disguise. Then he found it practical, and grew used to it" (The Oblivion Seekers, 41).
Significantly, not only did Isabelle dress as a man, but as an Arab. In the context of French colonial North Africa, her cross-gender/racial transvestism was of special interest both to the Arabs and to the French. Although the indigenous people were aware of Isabelle’s identity, they affected, out of a traditional sense of courtesy and honor, to believe the reality of Si Mahmoud, the travelling Tunisian student and seeker of Sufi knowledge. It is perhaps the Arabs’ indifference to her disguise, as opposed to the declared hostility of the French colonial settlers, that endeared them to her. But dressing as an Arab, especially an Algerian Arab, was not without risk, especially when Isabelle ventured into Moroccan territory not yet “pacified” by the French. In a short passage significantly titled “Transformation,” Isabelle underscores the political import of her clothing, especially in the charged context of Maghrebian internecine tribal rivalries: “Si Mahmoud, my child,” she was told by the marabout of Kenadsa “if you want to leave the zaouia or holy shrine . . . you must change your costume. . . . The Algerian one you are wearing will surely cause trouble as you would be openly called m’zani [renegade].” For the Moroccans, especially the maraboutic people of Kenadsa, Algerian Muslims have sold out to the French and have thus become m’zanat or renegades. “And, thus, tonight, in order to go out, I transformed myself into a Moroccan man, shedding off the heavy costume of Algerian cavalrymen” [Ecrits sur le sable, 249].

Ironically, disguise is also entrapment, for sometimes the realities of Mahmoud and Isabelle are mutually exclusive. If for Isabelle, her assumed male identity and disguise served, in a man’s world, as a natural protection, they were also an impediment which set her apart from the company of fellow women, on more than one occasion, especially that of Lella Zeyneb, the marabout’s mother, whose authority and influence, although never seen, were felt everywhere in Kenadsa and beyond. In her “Notes de routes,” we see Isabelle’s longing to meet this mysterious and inaccessible woman impeded by the reality of Si Mahmoud, a male who is forbidden by strict codes of behavior to appear before a woman: “What is she like, this great Muslim lady whom I cannot approach since I am Sidi Mahmoud, and the people continue to treat me as such?” [Ecrits sur le sable, 255]

To the French, however, especially the settlers, Isabelle was a turncoat, a social pariah and “Arab lover.” Her wandering in the Sahara was not to the liking of the Colonial Administration and she was under
close surveillance: “Once again,” she wrote in her *Journaliers*, “I had to establish that I was no English miss in Arab disguise, but a Russian writer” (59).²¹

In addition to her often noted eccentricity, Isabelle is also portrayed as a neurotic and unstable woman who, in the words of Capitaine Cauvet, one of the many intelligence officers charged with her surveillance, “professes fairly progressive ideas involved in the current feminist and socialist movement. I am more inclined to think,” Cauvet added in his report to his superiors, “that she came to El Oued principally to satisfy, without inhibitions, in a country little visited by Europeans, her vicious penchants and her weakness for the natives” (*Ecrits intimes*, 262–63).

If gender-crossing, as discussed above, raises the psychologically crucial questions of male identity and authority, race-crossing, known in literature and psychology as the phenomenon of “going native,” evokes issues of religion, race, nationality, and colonialism. Isabelle’s seemingly contradictory aspiration to be both a man (the will to conquer) and an Arab (the conquered) was symbolic and emblematic of the sado-masochistic relationship that bound, in the colonial situation, colonizer (dominant) and colonized (dominated). As an Arab male, Isabelle was both victim and victimizer; she partook of the Arab’s patriarchal arrogance and ascendancy over women—her contempt for Arab women verges on homophobia—but also of his humiliation at the hands of the colonizers.

To be a female transvestite, a rare oddity at the time, was thus dismissed as a form of sexual deviance, but to be an Arab at that, in a racially, religiously, and culturally charged environment such as French Colonial North Africa, was more than enough to arouse concerns and suspicions: “We can understand your wearing men’s clothes,” Isabelle is often asked by the colonial officers, “but why wouldn’t you dress up as a European man?” To those who question her transvestism, including Slimane her husband, she invariably and ambiguously answers: “It is impossible for me to do otherwise” (*Ecrits intimes*, 311).

One need only review her own statements and feelings about her disguise, a recurrent and obsessive question in her *Journaliers* and her “intimate” correspondence, to see that her disguise was chiefly a psy-

²¹ Many Arabs suspected she was in the employ of the French Colonial Administration; also, many French settlers regarded her as a spy in the employ of a rival colonial power. Neither allegation has, so far, been substantiated.
chological and symbolic ritual, rather than, as suggested by many of her detractors, a practical ruse.

A NICHE IN BABEL

One's ultimate exile is to feel a stranger within one's language. For Isabelle French was, to use Tahar Ben Jelloun's felicitous metaphor, "The House of the Others," a place where she never felt quite comfortable. This refuge was practical and temporary. In retrospect, Isabelle may have prefigured by at least half a century postcolonial Maghrebian literature in French, especially with regard to the status of the writer who uses a foreign medium. Isabelle would transform her alienation from the mother tongue into a literary vocation, yet another form of escape, another space of freedom that she yearned to conquer. For Isabelle the exile, language belonged, first and foremost, to its user and had therefore little to do with nationality or ethnicity. These sentiments would be echoed several generations later by a host of Maghrebian writers, namely Abdelwahab Meddeb, Abdellatif Laâbi, and Abdelkebir Khatibi, who conceive of language as a transnational phenomenon which plays only a secondary role as a criterion of literary belonging.

Although she grew up speaking and reading Russian, a language which she knew intimately, French was the "public" language, which she used for communication outside the Villa Neuve, a lingua franca, the language of the world. The interplay between "private" and "public" usages of language and, later, when she became a Muslim and fluent in Arabic, the interplay between the sacred and the profane, permeate Isabelle's writing, especially her letters to her Tunisian friend Ali Abdel Wahab:

Mais la vraie amitié, c'est vraiment une chose participant de la mysterieuse essentia eterna de nos âmes. Depuis quelque temps,

24. In the context of French Algeria, the French language was considered by the average man, according to the Algerian poet Bachir Hadj-Ali, as a "langue d'ici-bas" [a language of this world], as opposed to Arabic, which became a "langue de mérite spirituel" [a language of spiritual merit]. Cited by Mostefa Lacheraf, L'Algérie, nation et société (Alger: S.N.E.D., 1978), 324.
But true friendship is really the work of souls, something partaking of the mysterious essentia eterna of our souls. For a while now, in the growing melancholy of my life, I have begun to entertain several ideas which, God willing, will henceforth be with me till the day I die] (“Isabelle Eberhardt: Amazone ou paumée?”, 53).

In the above example, Isabelle uses Arabic concepts and script that are untranslatable into the other language. By refusing to translate, which is, in and of itself, an act of resistance that excludes the colonizer, she signifies all the more her belonging to this new culture and language, and her rootedness in her newfound land.

Like generations of Francophone writers, Isabelle wrote French from the outside, a practice that is not without its advantages. This external rapport with French gave her the freedom to engage in verbal inventions and audacious imagery, so as to make this lingua franca accommodate an Arab, Berber, and African ontology alien to it. Her writing teems with understatements, linguistic puns, and palimpsestic potentials. In her story “Yasmina,” the courtship between Jacques and Yasmina is a perfect example of language and code mixing:

"Il [Jacques] lui demanda à boire, par signes ... Ouch nouat! Qu’est-ce? ... Jacques n’était plus un Roumi, un Kéfer. ... Elle lui avait bien dit que l’on devait la marier à un cahouadji de la ville. ... Tu t’appelleras Mabrouk, cela nous portera bonheur. ... Il lui disait que sa vieille mère était bien malade, là-bas, fil Fransa ... Mektoub, disait-elle ... Ne pleure pas; Ya Mabrouk, c’est écrit ... En ville, Jacques s’acharnait à l’étude de l’arabe algérien. Son ardeur faisait sourire ses camarades qui disaient, non sans ironie: ‘Il doit y avoir une bicotte là-dessous’” (99–105). [He [Jacques] asked her for a drink [of water] in sign language ... Ouch-noua! What is it? ... Jacques was no longer a Roumi [foreigner, European] a Kefer [an infidel] ... She told him that they would marry her to a cahouadji [a café owner] ... Your name will be Mabrouk [the one who brings good fortune], this will bring us good luck ... he told her that his old mother was sick fil Fransa [in France] ... Mektoub [it’s fate] ... Don’t cry; ya Mabrouk [you, Mabrouk], it is written. ... Once in town Jacques would immerse himself totally in the study of Algerian Arabic. His zeal did not go un-
noticed by his colleagues who would say smilingly, and with a touch of irony: "there must be a bicotte [native gal] behind all this".

This amorous discourse in the bilingual mode articulates at least three rhetorical devices: code-mixing, pidginization, and relexification. Code-mixing occurs when two languages are used simultaneously, as in "Ouch-noua? Qu'est-ce?" In this particular instance, the need for instantaneous translation is predicated by Jacques's initial ignorance of Arabic. As the story progresses and as Jacques's Arabic improves, we see fewer literal translations. Code-mixing is also used by Isabelle as a source of punning, as in "Mabrouk, cela nous portera bonheur," and "Mektoub . . . c'est écrit." With Isabelle, the European is always put at a linguistic disadvantage. It is Jacques who has to relexify his vocabulary in order to communicate with the native, as in "Fil Fransa." Both Jacques and Yasmina resort to Sabir, a form of pidginization known also as Franco-arabe: "Msiou" [monsieur], "commerce" [commerce], "cahoua" [coffee], hence "cahouadji" [cafe owner]. Such terms as "bicot," "bicotte," refer to the colonial racist lexicon. "Il y a une bicotte là-dessous," is a pun on the familiar expression: "Il y a anguille sous roche" [There is more in it than meets the eye].

As clearly demonstrated in the above example, this seemingly linguistic sundering is more than textual nomadism among the various codes, it is also an enrichment of an otherwise ordinary prose. This desire to enhance her prose paralinguistically is expressed, especially in her *Journaliers*, through pictorial and calligraphic illustrations. The following example is a page from Isabelle's *Journaliers* reproduced by René-Louis Doyen in his "Introduction" to Isabelle's *Au Pays des sables*. The dynamic play of the French and Arabic handwriting is further enhanced by two sketches of Zaouias, or religious shrines. This jux-

25. Isabelle's own amorous discourse, especially in her letters to Slimane, is often articulated under the sign of bilingualism. The following is a fragment of a letter addressed to Slimane in which French and Arabic scripts are used symbiotically:

As we shall see further, Isabelle often enhances her bilingual scriptural practice with sketches.
tapposition, on the same page, of word and image, makes Isabelle a precursor of aesthetic concretism, a practice that will become one of the trademarks of postmodern Maghrebian literature in French.  

Isabelle used French as yet another disguise, a Harlequin costume, a trope through which she manipulated social, linguistic, and gender codes. As she subverted other forms of hegemony, Isabelle also sought to undermine the dominant French language by exiling it outside its ontology and traditions. Instead of its homogeneity, she set out to find and create an interlingual, international, and intercultural literary

26. Postindependence writers such as Khatibi, Meddeb, and Nabile Farès, to cite but a few, have exploited the artistic potential of the graph, and have, as Isabelle did first, resurrected a time-honored Islamic scriptural practice. The following example from Meddeb’s Phantasia (Paris: Sindbad, 1986) highlights the importance of an origin­ary graphic trace:
oeuvre. But how to break free from the monopoly of French, or for that matter from any “monolangue”? Again, Isabelle finds an answer in polyglotism, a form of linguistic nomadism, a trope through which she will attempt to express her polyphonic, plurivocal, and polysemic quest.

In this regard, Isabelle’s writing, whether it be her letters, her diary, or fiction, is shaped by the tension, rhythm, and genius of more than one particular language: it is crisscrossed by currents of spoken and literate Arabic, Berber, Turkish, Greek, Latin, German, Russian, and Italian. Her letters, especially to her brother Augustin, are linguistic puzzles of schizophrenic proportions. In a typical letter to Augustin, she begins in French: “Souviens-toi aussi” [Remember also] “Quoi qu’il arrive après” [Whatever may happen after]; then Latin “fac et spera...”; and Greek “[the old times and don’t you ever sin”]; and on to Russian, “Da, pomni milyi, pomnie to i nadeısa!” [Yes, remember this, my darling, remember and be patient!] (Roux, 191).

Isabelle could not have found a better polyglot space than in the Maghreb, her Babel. This concatenation of tongues and voices is one of the main constituents of her fictional universe. Like Jacques, the Heimatlos, one of her fictional alter egos, she sought to dwell in languages, her polylinguistic matrix: “He [Jacques, the Vagabond] listened vaguely to the chaotic Babel of conversation going on around him, deep voices joking in different languages, arguments inside the frail tents buffeted by the wind. His place was here now. He would curl up here, make a niche for himself among these companions, each of whom had his own secret past” (Trimardeur, 134). The Maghreb as a polylinguistic space, as posited and described by Isabelle, prefigures the discourse of multiplicity that Abdelkebir Khatibi calls “pensee en langues” in Maghreb Pluriel. Khatibi argues that the Maghreb has always...
been a plurilingual space whose minimalist expression is bilin­
guism.  

By intertwining oral and written literary materials and incorporat­
ing indigenous ethnographical and anthropological elements into her
fiction, Isabelle deterritorialized, in the sense made familiar by De­
leuze and Guattari, the content of her writing completely and rad­i­
cally. She was the first to experiment and use polyglotism as a device to
undermine the hegemony of "monolangue," one of the principal pillars
of the colonial order. She was the first to present the Maghrebian ethos
from the inside, using consistently the Arabic name "Maghreb" when
the current and official term was North Africa, and first also to intro­
duce indigenous words into the French language, beginning thus a long
process of disenfranchisement of the dominant language. Words like
toub [mud], mleya [woman's headress], caid [local chief], gourbi [mud
house], diss [herb], roumi [Roman, European], guerba [goat skin], etc.,
which express the Maghrebian reality, are not relegated to exotic in­
dices; they are inserted unapologetically as constitutive elements of
her writing.  

Isabelle was the first, as Edmonde Charles-Roux notes in her biog­
raphy, to make literary use of the native's language, thus problematiz­
ing and relativizing the dominance of the conqueror's idiom: "Her
treatment of Algerian reality did not acknowledge that there could be
a dominant culture on Algerian soil, and that, for her part, she sit­
uated herself instinctively half-way between French culture and Ara­
bic-Maghrebian culture. She was the only one to occupy this place. A
Russian, she was the first Maghrebian writer of French expression"
(Roux, 437).

Ironically, it is precisely to the extent that she is an untenable
"entre deux," being neither French nor Arabic, both woman and man,
aristocrat and vagabond, bacchante and mystic, that Isabelle is a verita­
ble nomad. In her linguistic "corps à corps" with French to make it
express a Maghrebian ontology, in her deterritorialization of her char-

28. One may regard this practice as Orientalist, but as we have argued above, Isa­
belle's Orientalism is anti-Orientalist, for it serves as a corrective to the French
hegemonic discourse: although she was grounded in her European culture and ideology,
Isabelle was, in her use of language, unique in her ability to go beyond them.
acters and subject-matter and in her use of the theme of wandering and nomadism, Isabelle was an ancestor to at least three generations of Maghrebian Francophone writers. This literary genealogy may be construed, albeit posthumously, as the culmination of her search for identity and identification.

29. The practice of nomadic writing as a new creative space in literature, as advocated by such postindependence Maghrebian writers as Meddeb, Farès, and Khatibi, has been emblematic of the quest for identity and origin. It is also synonymous with the search for and recovery of a graphic trace as a new mode of aesthetic expression and a form of liberation from the language and culture of the Other. To proclaim oneself a nomadic writer today is to refuse to be confined to a fixed role or function. One need only review the lexicon by which Maghrebian writers refer to themselves to understand the extent of their nomadism: Kateb sees himself as écrivain errant; Meddeb as sédentaire faussaire; Boudjedra as scribe; Khatibi as scripteur; Ben Jelloun as écrivain public; Khair-Eddine as an autodidacte.