

## Isabelle, a Man from Algeria: A Response to Verna A. Foster\*

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*I advise you to take your own life [...] to prevent  
biographers from taking it in theirs.*

Letter from Henry Adams to Henry James<sup>1</sup>

Verna A. Foster's choice of Wertebaker's *New Anatomies* to study the aesthetic and ethical implications of historical drama is apt: her reading dissects the play's structure and economy and scrutinizes the drama's embodiment of a historical figure, Isabelle Eberhardt. Foster applies Freddie Rokem's idea that historical drama has a peculiar "double or even triple time register [...]: the time of the events and the time the play was written and in some cases also [...] the later time when it was performed" (Foster 109; Rokem 19). The social and political understandings associated with these different layers may cause cognitive dissonance, confusion or misapprehension on the part of audiences.

In *New Anatomies*, Foster identifies a documentary source time (turn of the century Algeria under French colonial rule), an authorial production time (the late 1970s era of feminism reflected by Wertebaker's interest in Eberhardt's "cross-dressing and its relation to the formation of sexual, gendered, and also religious and national identity" [109])—and finally, a reception time ("at the beginning of the twenty-first century" when audiences have a "quite different perspective on and fascination with relations between Westerners and Arabs"

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\*Reference: Verna A. Foster, "Reinventing Isabelle Eberhardt: Rereading Timberlake Wertebaker's *New Anatomies*," *Connotations* 17.1 (2007/2008): 109-28.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debfoster01701.htm>>.

[109]), “a post-9/11 world” (113). *New Anatomies* with its feminist concerns may seem somewhat ‘outmoded’ to contemporary audiences, Foster notes, but her larger point is that history plays, as a genre, are “particularly vulnerable” to changing contexts of reception (114). When, in addition, the play’s historical moment is embodied in an individual figure, the playwright’s selection of “formative experiences in her protagonist’s life” (115) involve aesthetic choices that have ethical implications which concern both the reception of the work and “the dramatist’s respect for the documentary record” (116). Foster argues that Wertenbaker “distorts Eberhardt’s life in a way that her audience will not be able to evaluate, as they might in the case of a well-known historical figure” (123), the irony being that Wertenbaker’s play is “a critique of just such forms of exploitative reconstruction” (123). In this response, we will broaden the context of the discussion of the aesthetic and ethical uses of documentary sources in art works about biographical figures, while keeping the focus on Eberhardt. We will examine how her particular life story raises issues around life/art relationships, performance theory, and the use of poetic license in historical documentation.

In “Reinventing Isabelle Eberhardt,” Foster raises issues as specific to historical drama that are largely generalizable to history and (auto-) biography in the postcolonial era. What happens on stage with its attendant aesthetic and ethical dimensions is emblematic of how we live our ‘unstaged’ lives. Performativity is a thread that runs through our contemporary understandings of history, politics, language and subjectivity.<sup>2</sup> Foster is wary of the free hand Wertenbaker exercised in shaping Eberhardt’s life—a free hand Wertenbaker herself recognizes: “When I am asked where my plays come from, I am always stuck for an answer. There are so many sources, a mishmash of autobiography, obsession, chance encounters, reading and conversations” (vii). Wertenbaker “was intrigued by the mental liberation in the simple physical act of cross-dressing”—a theory looked at below—and became fascinated by Eberhardt (vii). Equally fascinating is how those who write about Eberhardt end up linking their own autobiographies

with hers—by appropriation, documentation, identification, critique, apology, parody, and reinvention. In stumbling upon the fault lines running through the landscapes of gender formation, artistic inspiration, religious faith and cultural difference, Eberhardt manages to draw others after her onto this unstable terrain.

As a scholar of postcolonial comparative literature focusing on North Africa, I come to the aesthetic and ethical questions raised by Foster about *New Anatomies* through a focus on Eberhardt's life and work. The more one reads what she wrote (in journals, private letters, fictional works and public statements) and what was written about her (in military dossiers, the popular press, biographies, memoirs, and fictional reenactments of her life story), the more problematic the historical record becomes. As the great historian Edward Hallet Carr describes historiography: "No document can tell us more than what the author of the document thought—what he thought had happened, what he thought ought to happen or would happen, or perhaps only what he wanted others to think he thought, or even only what he himself thought he thought" (16).

The documentary record in Eberhardt's case is ambiguous. Wertebaker's handling of Eberhardt's historicity is on target for the purposes of her own play about the link between Eberhardt's cross-dressing and her mental liberation. Wertebaker, working largely from Eberhardt's journals, makes obvious alterations to the facts of Eberhardt's life: her favorite brother Augustin becomes Antoine, who runs away to join the French foreign legion without telling her, washes out, then marries H el ene Long (whom Isabelle nicknamed 'Jenny the working girl' after a popular song); Antoine like Augustin betrays their extravagant dreams: "Augustin was no longer the Byronic brother of her adolescence, the dandy whose female conquests had dazzled her" (*Nomade j' tais* 97). Her beloved mother Nathalie (her 'white spirit' or 'white dove') becomes Wertebaker's distracted, ineffectual but well-meaning Anna who eloped with the anarchist Trofimovitch (Trophimovsky in reality) and communicates via ellipses, while Isabelle's

thoroughly conventional, bourgeois older sister, Natalie, feels she had to become the mother for her younger siblings:

**Natalie** How can you call this pigsty a home?

**Anna** Darling, a young lady's vocabulary shouldn't include ... Your family ...

**Natalie** Family. (Looks around at them). In a family you have first a mother who looks after her children, protects them, teaches them ...

**Anna** Didn't I? You knew several poems of Byron as a child.

**Nathalie** A mother who teaches her children how to behave and looks after the house, cooks meals, doesn't let her children eat out of a slop bucket—

**Anna** Trofimovitch says meals are a bourgeois form of ... But don't we have ...

**Natalie** When I cook them. (12)

The characters are parodies but the tenor of Eberhardt's perspectives is captured; the "vivid modulations" of her protagonist's storytelling foregrounds performance. The Isabelle of *New Anatomies* embodies the linguistic virtuosity, unpredictable behavior, acerbic wit and naiveté that characterized Eberhardt as well as the perennial 'outsider' perspective, being a Russian in Switzerland and a European in North Africa. Wertenbaker's own multilingual, outsider status as a child from an eccentric family might explain her fascination with Eberhardt: "[T]he details of Wertenbaker's personal biography are contradictorily documented, a situation Wertenbaker seems in no hurry to clarify and which allows her a fluidity of allegiance across identity categories, that of nationality in particular" (Freeman).

Foster's discomfort about reception is two-fold. Firstly, audiences watching historical dramas about well-known figures "will engage in some form of comparison between the dramatic figure and the historical figure as he or she is otherwise," but with a "less familiar figure like Isabelle Eberhardt, [...] the dramatic character is likely the only one many audience members will know" (121). I would argue the documentary record for Eberhardt is such a confusing palimpsest that most works about her leave audiences grappling with contradictions. Secondly, Foster feels that Wertenbaker's script opens the door to

ethnocentric responses, folding national identity into gender identity: “The Brechtian-Churchillian dramaturgy of *New Anatomies*—its episodic structure, interspersal of turn-of-the-century music hall songs, and cross-casting”—does not off-set ethnic erasure. “All of the speaking parts are played by five actresses. Except for the actress playing Isabelle and her Arab self, Si Mahmoud, each actress plays a Western woman, an Arab man, and a Western man” (115). Lack of Arab perspectives in the play (especially Slimène Ehnni’s) can turn these secondary figures into “conventional stereotypes” (119).

In a recent piece about staging *New Anatomies*, Elizabeth Schwan-Rosenwald, artistic director for the 20% Theater Company of Chicago, comments:

So, as a Caucasian woman, how do I take a room full of women and help them present the embodiments of Arab and 19th century European men? [...] Timberlake [...] didn’t write the show so that the audience would lose sight of the fact that Caucasian women were portraying Arab men. Rather, I believe she wrote it as an exploration of an actress’s ability to tell a story with her body.

Embodiment here is not just about Eberhardt but also about performance of social roles. While Eberhardt may not be a well-known figure such as Luther, the contradictions of her personality encourage audiences to go beyond the particular casting of the play.

Theatre critic Mary Shen Barnige targets the play’s double nature:

Attempts to package Isabelle Eberhardt as a proto-feminist martyr have usually met with failure [...]. Wertenbaker’s portrait of Eberhardt confronts us with a scruffy ganymede who curses, spits, smokes kif [...]. Under Elizabeth Schwan-Rosenwald’s direction, the five women who play all the characters, male and female, retain their own voices and mannerisms, drawing our attention to their text’s intellectual dimensions. [...] The popularity of *New Anatomies* can be partly attributed to its opportunities for young actresses, but the enigma of Eberhardt herself is what continues to intrigue us. [S]he remains her own person, first and last, and her journey through this temporal world forever unfulfilled.

The director of a 2007 Missouri production told a reviewer: “I am one of those Americans who have been absolutely furious since the inva-

sion of Iraq, and though this play takes place at the turn of the 20th century, we seem to have learned very little in a hundred years from the mistakes of earlier ‘empire-makers’” (Gibbons). Wertebaker’s play, though it skirts along the edge of parody, escapes the pitfalls of the triple time register by addressing overlapping systems of oppression which resonate when the play is well-directed.

This resonance among gender, colonial and intellectual oppression happens in scenes, among Westerners, where cross-dressing and ethnocentric behavior are the subject, such as the imagined scene in Algiers where Isabelle, Natalie, Antoine and Jenny are living at close quarters. A pregnant Jenny squabbles with Isabelle who wants Antoine to “gallop over the desert” (18):

**Antoine** You’re worse than Arabs, you two, fighting about nothing.

**Isabelle** Is that what they teach you in the barracks?

**Jenny** He’s not in the barracks any more. He has a very good job.

**Isabelle** Sitting on your bum, staring at numbers.

**Jenny** And he’ll be promoted soon.

**Isabelle** To longer numbers. (21)

Antoine now complains that the desert is “not how we dreamt of it. It’s dangerous, uncomfortable, and most of it isn’t even sand” (21). Next, Natalie, who returns from the market, her arms full of materials and clothes, remarks how wonderfully “stupid these people are. They give you things for nothing”; Isabelle counters: “The word is generosity, gifts of hospitality” (23). Natalie gloats over her sartorial haul: “[I]t’s worth a fortune, that embroidery, that detail. They’re terribly clever for savages. [...] We’ll be the first shop in Switzerland to sell these oriental things. They’re all the rage in Paris” (23). Here, Wertebaker acts out a gloss on the idea that “the simple physical act of cross-dressing” leads to “mental liberation.” Isabelle is kept busy pointing out that the cloak Natalie has is “not for a woman,” the veil Jenny wraps around her face— “[Antoine], I’m in your harem. You’re the sheikh. Oh, come to me”—is “not a woman’s veil. Women in the desert don’t wear veils, only the Tuareg men do” (23). Finally, the

only cross-dressing Jenny and Natalie are offended by is when Isabelle helps the maid, Yasmina, into a French military captain's jacket: "it's ... blasphemy" (25).

A parallel cross-dressing scene at an avant-garde 'feminist' salon in Paris is hosted by Lydia: "Here we are, five women and four of us are dressed as men" (39). The only feminine attendee is Verda Miles, a British male impersonator who resembles vaudeville singer Vesta Tilley, whose "audiences adored [...] the rollicking and mocking edge she brought to her character studies of well dressed young swells, policemen, soldiers and sailors" ("Vesta Tilley"). This salon pastiche mimics the documentary record: Lydia is modeled after Eberhardt's would-be mentor Lydia Pashkov, who advised her to meet Sévérine, journalist for *La Fronde*—"Tell her you just arrived from the Sahara where you traveled dressed as a man," and to try to take Paris by storm: "If I were you, I'd go everywhere dressed as an Arab. That's the kind of thing that would floor them" (qtd. in *Nomade j'étais* 205, 207). Wertenbaker's Eugénie resembles Eugénie Buffet, a pied noir chanteuse from Tlemcen, Algeria, whose career Sévérine launched; she loves things native:

**Verda** [...] (to Isabelle) What a charming costume you have.

**Eugénie** The flowing simplicity of the African garb, so free, so ... Athenian.

**Verda** I'd like to copy it. You see. I have an idea for a new song, it would be an oriental melody, exotic, and with that costume ...

**Isabelle** It's not a costume, it's my clothes.

**Verda** Of course, that's what I meant. Do you know any oriental songs?

**Eugénie** Those oriental melodies—so biblical. (37)

While Wertenbaker's dialogue may seem farfetched, colonialist writers and artists regularly erased/replaced North Africans through anachronistic comparisons. Even Eugène Delacroix made this kind of intellectual blunder when he visited "the land of lions and leather" with the Mornay mission to the Sultan of Morocco in 1832:

It takes all the curiosity I've got to run the gauntlet of this mob. The picturesque is here in abundance. At every step one sees ready-made pictu-

res, which would bring fame and fortune to twenty generations of painters. You'd think yourself in Rome or Athens, minus the Attic atmosphere; the cloaks and togas and a thousand details are quite typical of antiquity. A rascal who'll mend the vamp of your shoe for a few coppers has the dress and bearing of Brutus or Cato of Utica. (192)

Historical drama today, especially when verging on the parodic as *New Anatomies* does, may encourage rather than discourage scrutiny of its reliability. As Elin Diamond observes, performance, in and of itself, destabilizes because every performance is both “a doing and a thing done”: “Every performance [...] embeds features of previous performances: gender conventions, racial histories, aesthetic traditions—political and cultural pressures that are consciously and unconsciously acknowledged” (1). If, as Diamond puts it, “there is no unmediated real” (1), then not only is Rokem's reference “to the historical past as ‘a chaotic and *frequently unmediated* reality’” worth scrutinizing (Foster 119; Rokem 10; my emphasis), but also Foster's gloss on Rokem's reference as well: “But there is no such thing as unmediated historical reality (*except for those who live through it*)” (Foster 119; my emphasis). On different levels, both Rokem and Foster suggest that we can access reality in an unmediated fashion. I would argue that not even first-hand experience escapes from the second-hand nature of our being in the world, our entrapment by mimesis.

As her diary reveals, Eberhardt delighted in mimesis but believed in the existence of truth as well: on the one hand, she had a number of pen names and enjoyed the astonishment her cross-dressing as a young Arab male student aroused in interlocutors when they discovered she was a European woman, but on the other hand, she took quite seriously “the question of becoming a *maraboute* [saint]” (66). As she explains: “God is Beauty. The word itself contains everything: Virtue, Truth, Honesty, Mercy. Inspired by such faith, a man is strong ... His strength may even seem to be supernatural. He becomes what they call a Marabout” (71-72). Wertenbaker's cross-dressing Isabelle is Western woman, Arab man, Western man, and transvestite, inhabiting the space of “‘category crisis,’ disrupting and calling attention to



cultural, social, or aesthetic dissonances" (Garber 16). Colonial official Robert Randau records meeting her through Slimène Ehni:

His companion, elegant and diminutive, a horseman wearing a *haïck* tunic, a fine burnous of immaculate white, and shod in a spahi's [red leather boots], had strikingly lustrous eyes of black, a pale face, protruding cheekbones and red hair: [...] "Let me introduce Si Mahmoud Saadi" [...] "that is his name de guerre; in reality, this is Mme Ehni, my wife." (my translation)<sup>3</sup>

Randau, open-minded about Eberhardt's eccentricity, was an exception to the colonial rule, as was Captain Cauvet, head of the Arab Bureau (El Oued), who reported: "Aside from some eccentricities of behavior and dress [...] there was nothing in her speech or her actions that struck me as not being 'perfectly correct'"<sup>4</sup>; Battalion Chief Pugeat (Touggourt) reported that officers considered her to be "more of a nutcase than a dangerous person"<sup>5</sup>; the Russian Consul saw a person whose "presence could only lead to difficult incidents" (Kobak 129-30). Eberhardt makes separating 'reality' from performance difficult.<sup>6</sup>

Like *New Anatomies*, many of the early biographical works about Eberhardt begin at the end, with her demise in a flashflood at Ain Sefra. Having died young, she did not have much of a chance to shape her own legend, and others constructed her biography as a gloss on her obituary. General Lyautey reminisces: "We understood each other well, this poor Mahmoud and I ... I loved that prodigious artist's temperament, and also all that was in her that made functionaries, corporals, and mandarins of all shades flinch. Poor Mahmoud!" (180); and Victor Barrucand editorializes: "There was among us, a young Russian woman, just arrived from the still quite dangerous South Oranais, a woman who has fascinated all of Algeria by her adventures and by her tragic death" (1). As a drunken Isabelle says, at the play's beginning, to Séverine, who has followed her to the desert: "Trailed: the story, I know. Stealing it" (5).

Wertenbaker's toying with the documentary record is part of a long line of biographical alterations both purposeful and unconscious. The 1923 play by Henry Kistemaekers, "L'Esclave errante," concerns a French "amazone," Nicole Darboy, who "revolts against her condition

as a woman" (Beauplan). Rejecting her father's unethical capitalism but inheriting his fortune, Nicole puts her faithful suitor on hold, travels to the Sahara where, as "Si Ali, a horseman attached to the goum (indigenous army group) made up from the Hamyani tribe" (Kistemaeckers 17), she hangs out in "one of those African dives—at once a Moorish café, a kif-smoking den, and a canteen with dancing girls" (13)—and sympathizes with French prostitutes and local dancing girls who are harassed by a drunken bunch of Europeans in the French Foreign Legion. Well-known biographies of Eberhardt resemble their writers: Lesley Blanch's *The Wilder Shores of Love* (1954) formats her biography as a romance, and expatriate Paul Bowles's biographical "Preface" to his translation, *The Oblivion Seekers*, focuses on Eberhardt as an outsider and eccentric. Marie-Odile Delacour and Jean-Réné Huleu began their lifelong love affair with Eberhardt's work—and each other—by following Eberhardt's footsteps and writing a biographical novel, *Sables*, before editing Eberhardt's collected works and her selected letters. Edmonde Charles-Roux's two-volume biography of Eberhardt, a tour de force, is told in the context of literary and social associations that are as much Charles-Roux's as Eberhardt's—for example, Eberhardt's relationship to Lyautey is seen through the prism of Charles-Roux's own life experience and loyalties, her grandfather having championed Lyautey (Benamara 231). Foster's article itself depends largely on sources available in English that reflect a feminist approach (Rice, Kobak, Clancy-Smith) and, given her interest in Women's Studies, this shouldn't be surprising. Algerian scholar Khelifa Benamara's excellent *Isabelle Eberhardt et L'Algérie* relies on texts in French. Postcolonial scholar/journalist Rana Kabbani, daughter of a Syrian diplomat, describes Eberhardt, in her 1987 "Introduction" to Nina de Voogd's translation of Eberhardt's diaries into English, as having "the makings of a hardened addict" (vi), an "impractical and somewhat hysterical nature" (vii), being "[u]nable to learn from experience" (vii), "an apologist for French rule" (viii), and a "mouthpiece for patriarchy" (ix) who "felt only dislike and hostility" for women (ix). Kabbani's harsh reaction to

Eberhardt's diaries perhaps reflects her own life experience of feeling forced by circumstance and racism to choose between assimilation and confrontation in East-West relations. These biographies, focused on who Eberhardt was or was not, produce narratives shaped by the writers' relationship to their subject.

Recent works deal with the technologies of telling life story. In performance artist Leslie Thornton's video, *There Was an Unseen Cloud Moving* (1988), Eberhardt is played by four actresses; the fragmentary nature of the biographical archive is underscored by repetitive scenes, contradictory registers, conflicting interviews and texts that refuse to coalesce into one coherent narrative (cf. Zummer). "Isabelle's story," Mary Ann Doane notes, "is coincident with the emergence of technologies of representation (photography, phonography, cinema)"; and, according to Doane, Thornton investigates the "competing and contradictory nature of the traces/documents/artifacts which are usually activated to produce a coherent narrative in the writing or filming of biography" ("Brief Overview"). Jessica Thebus's "Performing Eberhardt" presents us with a solo performer who stands before a table on which five masks on sticks are placed: one is Eberhardt's face from a photograph of her in a sailor suit. Picking up a larger version of the same, the performer hangs it on the wall and looks at it:

I have no story just as I have no life. My story is pulverized every day, by the immediacy of life. So that I can no longer see clearly what is usually called one's life. Only the thought of death puts me back together again. (126)

She then takes up a pointer, becoming a self-assured academic. As she lectures, she picks up the masks on sticks and holds them before her face. Holding up a crude papier-mâché mask of a European woman, blue eyes and yellow fabric hair, she notes that Eberhardt "endured [...] an unsettled, eccentric upbringing"; switching to a "European man" mask, she adds that after her mother died, Eberhardt "began her desert wanderings"; switching to an "Arab Man" mask, she surmises that Eberhardt's "strange way of life disturbed the French government"; and switching to an "Arab Woman" mask finishes by

speculating Eberhardt was ravaged by the “combined effects of alcohol, disease, drugs, starvation and poverty.” As this papier-mâché round table continues, we realize we are hearing the real words of real critics—Lesley Blanch, Paul Bowles, Hédi Abdel-Jaouad, and Rana Kabbani. Their Eberhardts are clearly not of a piece: none of them is lying, yet none of them is telling the truth.

In *Seekers of Oblivion* (2004), Tunisian film maker Raja Amari juxtaposes timeless seascapes and desert landscapes with contemporary shots of the cities where either Eberhardt or her contemporary biographers lived; Amari also juxtaposes contemplative, first-person voice-overs of Eberhardt’s journal entries with interviews with people fascinated by Eberhardt’s biography or impacted by her legend. The film opens with Eberhardt’s journal:

—I am alone facing the wide expanse of grey murmuring sea  
 —I am alone as I’ve always been everywhere (ship rail)  
 As I will always be throughout the entrancing and deceiving universe  
 —Alone with behind me an entire world of vanished hopes, of fading illusions, of memories retreating every day more to the point of becoming almost unreal. [sea merges into desert]  
 —I am alone, and I dream  
 ... until the bell of eternal sleep tolls from the grave.

Next, we hear two voices, a woman’s—“To me she is like a shooting star,” and a man’s: “Her work never disappeared”—while seeing images of photos of Eberhardt, her manuscripts, and police dossiers, before seeing the interviewees, Marie-Odile Delacour and Jean-René Huleu. Other interviewees include Faiza Abdulwahab whose great uncle, Ali Abdulwahab, knew Eberhardt, members of the ‘Isabelle Eberhardt Fellowship’ in El Oued, and inhabitants of Ain Sefra where Eberhardt died. The Eberhardt of 1904 is juxtaposed to the Eberhardt of 2004.

Finally, *Isabelle l’Algérien* [Isabelle, a man of Algeria], written by Algerian Leïla Sebbar and illustrated by Sébastien Pignon, uses free indirect discourse to present the perspectives of people who encountered Eberhardt during her seven years in Africa—Lyautey, Arab

Bureau officials, Arab dignitaries, colonial writers, but also women (French philanthropist Lella Benaben, and Algerian marabout Lalla Zeyneb from El Hamel), and most of all humble people who crossed her path: legionnaires, convicts, nomads, prostitutes, workers, peasants, children, indigenous soldiers and rebels, and finally, Slimène Ehnni. Based on Eberhardt's stories and journals, and on biographies and memoirs, Sebbar's portrait of Eberhardt is a mosaic of perspectives with Eberhardt being the absent center. "Good Old Mahmoud" opens the collection: "The water, no longer stopped by the high bank, overflows and inundates the lower part of town with its torrent. [...] He is saved from the waters. She dies" (7; my translation). The collection ends, as Foster might have chosen, with Slimène Ehnni's perspective on Isabelle, the beloved, or 'Ziza':

She witnesses what shouldn't be seen, she says what shouldn't be said. A free spirit. They say that Lyautey manipulated her. It's not true. Slimène knows that. He believes what she tells him. Faithful and loyal, that's his wife. His one and only, and he asks himself if she loves him as on the first nights in El Oued.

She dies at Ain Sefra.

He is saved. He is alive. Ziza is dead. He wishes he were dead. (80-81; my translation)

Eberhardt, caught so perfectly in the pen and ink outlines by Pignon, is 'Isabelle, a man of Algeria,' Mahmoud Saadi who dressed and wrote in the masculine, a destabilized and destabilizing figure, hidden yet completely visible in her burnous. Perhaps, in its ethics and aesthetics, this fictional portrait comes closest to capturing the twentyfirst-century biographical truth Foster suggests we miss in *New Anatomies*.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Adams 494.

<sup>2</sup>In his introduction to *Mimesis and Alterity*, "A Report to the Academy," anthropologist Michael Taussig summarized the constructed nature of our being this way: "Now the strange thing about this silly if not desperate place between the real and the really made-up is that it appears to be where most of us spend most of our time as epistemically correct, socially-created, and occasionally creative beings. We dissimulate. We act and have to act as if mischief were not afoot in the kingdom of the real and that all around the ground lay firm. That is what the public secret, the facticity of the social fact, being a social being, is all about. No matter how sophisticated we may be as to the constructed and arbitrary character of our practices, including our practices of representation, our practice of practices is one of actively forgetting such mischief each time we open our mouths to ask for something or to make a statement" (xvii-xviii). Taussig sees our inevitable divorce from the "kingdom of the real" as the comedy of the human condition, whereas the seventeenth-century philosopher of language, Giambattista Vico, saw it as the root of our alienation and our inspiration: "[T]he sources of all poetic locution" are rooted in two [facts of life]: the "poverty of language and need to explain and be understood" (*New Science* 22). Ernst von Glasersfeld points out that Vico, whose slogan was "the human mind can only know what the human mind has made," touched off a debate in the scholarly journal *Giornale de Letterati d'Italia* by statements in his treatise on the construction of knowledge, such as: "Man, having within himself an imagined World of lines and numbers, operates in it with abstractions, just as God, in the universe, did with reality" (qtd. in "An Exposition of Constructivism").

<sup>3</sup>"Son compagnon, élégant et mince, cavalier en tunique de haïck, en burnous fin d'une blancheur immaculée, chaussé de *mestr* de spahi, avait des yeux noirs et d'un éclat singulier, le visage blême, les pommettes saillantes et le poil roux. [...] 'Je vous présente Si Mahmoud Saâdi' [...] 'c'est là son nom de guerre; en réalité il s'agit de Mme Ehnni, ma femme'" (64).

<sup>4</sup>"A part l'excentricité de ses manières et de son costume [...] il ne m'a rien été rapporté de ses discours et de ses actions qui ne fût parfaitement correct" (qtd. in Eberhardt, *Ecrits Intimes* 262-63; my translation and emphasis).

<sup>5</sup>"[J'ai entendu parler d'elle depuis plusieurs années par des officiers] qui la considèrent plutôt comme une déséquilibrée que comme un personnage dangereux" (qtd. in Eberhardt, *Ecrits Intimes* 265-66; my translation).

<sup>6</sup>Eberhardt gave a number of different reasons to explain her cross-dressing: "I went exploring by myself. My hat bothered me, though, for it set me apart from Muslims. I went back to don my fez ..." (*The Passionate Nomad*, Algiers, the 22nd [July 1900]); "The investigating magistrates have [...] not known what to make of my going about dressed as an Arab, sometimes as a man, and at other times as a woman, depending on the occasion, and on the requirements of my essentially nomadic life" (Letter to *La Dépêche algérienne*, June 4, 1901); "It did not occur to

[Captain Cauvet] that my preferring a burnous to a skirt, and dunes to the homestead could present any danger to the public welfare in the district annex" (Letter to *La Dépêche algérienne*, June 7, 1901); "For greater convenience and also as a matter of esthetics, I grew used to wearing Arab clothing" (To the Editor of *La Petite Gironde*, Apr. 23, 1903); "Those who are not in the Sahara for their own pleasure do not understand why anyone might come here, especially out of season ... and then I make the mistake of dressing like everyone else in the region" (Isabelle Eberhardt, *Lettres et journaliers* 56-57).

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