

1-1-2011

Imperial Performativity: the Life, Transgressions, and Writings of Isabelle Eberhardt under the Lens of Queer Theory

Kelsey DeForest
Hollins University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.hollins.edu/researchawards>

 Part of the [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#), [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons](#), and the [Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

DeForest, Kelsey, "Imperial Performativity: the Life, Transgressions, and Writings of Isabelle Eberhardt under the Lens of Queer Theory" (2011). *Undergraduate Research Awards*. Paper 6.
<http://digitalcommons.hollins.edu/researchawards/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship and Creative Works at Hollins Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Research Awards by an authorized administrator of Hollins Digital Commons. For more information, please contact vandalesa@hollins.edu.

2011 Wyndham Robertson Library Undergraduate Research Awards

Essay by Kelsey DeForest

"Imperial Performativity: The life, transgressions, and writings of Isabelle Eberhardt under the lens of queer theory"

When I began writing "Imperial Performativity," I was not comfortable sharing my paper with someone else's voice. My paper for Gender and Imperialism was supposed to be led by Isabelle Eberhardt's diary, and finding a balance of our voices was a constant struggle as I researched and wrote my paper. From Eberhardt's diary, I discovered secondary sources that had selections from Eberhardt's other diaries and writings. As I delved deeper into her writings and histories of her life, I began to make connections with the queer theory I was reading in *Survey of Feminist Thought*. I synthesized this theory, particularly that of gender performativity, with Eberhardt's writings. I emerged with the theory of imperial performativity, which became the basis of my argument.

Evaluating sources was a key part of my research process. I used secondary source biographies to help interpret Eberhardt's diaries and other primary writings. I then used the primary sources to assess the accuracy and bias of my secondary sources. I brought in sources to place Eberhardt in the larger context of imperial ideology, using information about the pied-noir society to get a feel for the imperial culture of French Algeria. When including feminist theory, I went back to the source—Judith Butler. By constantly building my sources from Eberhardt's diaries, I was able to keep a clear focus on using the best and most relevant research in my paper.

I faced steep challenges while developing and writing "Imperial Performativity." My first and largest obstacle, as mentioned earlier, was giving Eberhardt a voice in my paper. With every draft, I worked to increase her presence in the paper. The notion of imperial performativity was also a point of difficulty. It is a theory that I developed out of my own synthesis of imperial politics and gender performance. The idea arose unexpectedly from my immersion in Eberhardt's writings and queer theory, which I was studying for another course. Professor Nuñez was supportive of my plan to explore new territory, and I ended up overhauling my paper between the first and second drafts. Melding theory with primary sources was a new process for me, and it would not have been possible without the broad range of Eberhardt's writings I pulled together.

By writing "Imperial Performativity," I grew as a writer and a researcher. I had never worked with so many primary sources from a single individual. Finding additional writings by Eberhardt in secondary sources like Annette Kobak's *Isabelle* was vital to my success. My advice for other undergraduate researchers would be to fully immerse yourself in your research, particularly your primary sources. I would have never developed the idea of imperial performativity if I had not been living and breathing Isabelle Eberhardt's life and words. The idea arose in an idle moment, unprovoked and unexpected. I would also advise other students not to be afraid of bringing primary sources to the forefront of your papers. Share the page with them and their voices will add life to your work.

Imperial Performativity

The life, transgressions, and writings of
Isabelle Eberhardt under the lens of queer theory

Kelsey DeForest

12/15/2010

“Gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence.” —Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*¹

“How it rankles the common man to see anyone—and a woman at that—depart from the norm and be herself.” —Isabelle Eberhardt, *The Passionate Nomad: The Diary of Isabelle Eberhardt*²

Isabelle Eberhardt (1877-1904) refused to be a normal woman, a normal European, or a normal colonizer.³ She was simply herself. Eberhardt lived on the margins of society. She wrote, “I have always been a spectator, an outsider among men.”⁴ She blurred barriers her entire life, particularly in areas of race and gender, and she was viewed as a threat because of it. Eberhardt defied the rigid *pied-noir* society of Italian, Maltese, Spanish and French expatriates who immigrated to Algeria and formed their own unique culture and social hierarchy.⁵ They were a “bunkered gentility, becoming a class separate both from the native people...and from the French in the mother country.”⁶ Instead, she identified with Arab nomads in the Sahara. She wrote that she had “no country besides Islam.”⁷ Eberhardt cross-dressed as a man, a practice she began as a child and continued until she died. Once she began to travel in Algeria, she cross-dressed as an Arab man. She behaved the way that made her the most comfortable, but her behavior acted as a constant reminder to the imperial authorities of how she was threatening to its hegemony. She showed how messy imperialism becomes on the personal level by blurring every part of her identity. Eberhardt was unique in her time because she documented her views

¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 24.

² Isabelle Eberhardt, *The Passionate Nomad: The Diary of Isabelle Eberhardt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 85.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, 74.

⁵ David Prochaska, *Making Algeria French: Colonialism in Bône, 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 152-153.

⁶ Annette Kobak, *Isabelle: The Life of Isabelle Eberhardt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1988), 53.

⁷ Eberhardt, 2.

of the empire in her diary which spans 1900 to 1903 and was published in English in 1987.⁸ For Eberhardt, “The only thing that makes sense is the written word.”⁹

By analyzing Isabelle Eberhardt’s life, transgressions, and writings through the lens of queer theory, the existence, shape, and structure of an imperial performance can be determined. European actors within the imperial structure, colonists, administrators, missionaries, travelers, like Eberhardt, and the like, were expected to conform to a certain set of normative behaviors that maintained European hegemony. As an ideology rooted in ethnic hierarchies, racist ideologies, gendered expectations, and sexist constraints, the performance of imperialism was directly linked to the performance of gender and the performance of race. When these sexual and ethnic performances were disrupted by alternative manifestations of gender and race, which evolved within the gaps of the ideology, the performance of imperialism was also disrupted.

The presentation of these alternative identities, such as Eberhardt’s, disrupted the rigid boundaries of imperial hegemony and threatened the continued existence of the European colonies. While such individual behavior may seem negligible on the grand scale of empire, the systematic inconsistencies in the performance of imperialism resulted in an overall sense of colonial anxiety. Imperial actors were constantly fearful of losing their positions of power and their privileges as colonizers, which often led them to act rashly and extremely. And, while Eberhardt’s case may seem particularly extreme, due to her transgressions against both gender and racial norms, she is an ideal candidate for the exploration of the scope and power of imperial performativity. She believed that the “happiness of the sort coveted by all of frantic humanity...will never be [hers],” allowing her to act without fear of societal repercussions.¹⁰ She

⁸ Eberhardt.

⁹ Ibid, 16.

¹⁰ Ibid, 2.

already believed that societal benefits could never come to her. Her case tells us a lot about imperialism; how it played out in the realities of people's lives and how it became blurred and de-centered as time went on.

Analysis of the gender performance theory of Judith Butler, a queer theorist, is necessary to understand the concept of imperial performativity and to apply it to Eberhardt's experience. Butler, in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, argues that gender is a performance that can be undermined by performances that fail to conform to societal norms.¹¹ These presentations can be men and women who manifest characteristics commonly attributed to the other gender, alternative sexual orientations, and cross-dressers to name a few examples. In its normative state, society can only comprehend genders which fall within the male-female binary that is built on characteristics and roles assigned to each gender. This binary is perpetuated by the repeated performance of male and female by societal actors to the point that it seems natural and omnipresent. Individuals can only be understood by society if they represent one of these identities, causing alternative identities to be stigmatized and ostracized. Butler writes that the "regulatory practices of gender formation and division constitute identity."¹² The definitions of gender are shaped by how they limit and what they exclude. When identities go beyond the regulations of society, they bring to light the limitations and regulations of the binary.¹³ Butler proposes "subversive repetitions" of these alternative identities as an ideal means to unsettle gender norms.¹⁴ These alternative identities are called queer identities and the subversive repetition of them is often called queering.

¹¹ Butler, 17.

¹² Ibid, 16.

¹³ Ibid, 17.

¹⁴ Ibid, 32.

Butler writes, “Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions—and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction ‘compels’ our belief in its necessity and naturalness.”¹⁵ This quote can easily be applied to the concept of imperialism and a new theory of imperial performativity. Imperialism, like gender, was rooted in polarity—that between the colonizer and the colonized, the civilized and the savage, and the European and the native. These poles were articulated through ideological values wrapped up in their labels, yet were wholly the production of the imperial cultures that developed in 19th century Europe. Because of the deep importance of imperialism to the economic and political success of European nations, divergence from the performance of imperialism was severely punished. Racial superiority and the civilizing mission were portrayed as natural, holy, and pre-discursive, just as gender is portrayed to have arisen naturally and always existed. Imperial ideology has even been described as a “self-reinforcing and self-perpetuating view of colonial society,” very similarly to the performatively-passed down system of gender.¹⁶ As an ideal, imperialism opened up possibilities for identities within the conflicts and ambiguities of its prescriptive ideology. Those who slipped into these gaps and did not accurately portray an educated, moral, strong conqueror were seen at best as lesser and at worst as dissident. Eberhardt was decidedly viewed at the worst end of the spectrum.

Some brief biographical background is necessary before applying imperial performativity to Eberhardt’s life. Born to Russian expatriates on February 17, 1877, she grew up in Geneva. Her mother, Nathalie de Moërder, a Russian Jew, was married to a Russian general, but was

¹⁵ Ibid, 140.

¹⁶ Prochaska, 155.

discontent in the bourgeoisie lifestyle. De Moërder's discontent manifested itself in an affair with her children's tutor, Alexander Trophimoswky. Eberhardt, a product of their affair, was born illegitimately, following the death of De Moërder's Russian husband.¹⁷ Born in Switzerland, Eberhardt was neither Russian, nor Armenian, nor Swiss and born to upper class elites yet living in poverty, her identity was shaped in confusion. Adding to the hodgepodge of Eberhardt's identity was the influence of Trophimowsky, an Armenian ex-pope who touted intellectual atheism. Trophimowsky forbade formal schooling of the children, teaching them polyglotism (Eberhardt was fluent in six languages), philosophy, and the sciences at home.¹⁸ He raised the children to hate the middle class and Christianity and was often cruel to the children.¹⁹

It was Trophimowsky who introduced Eberhardt to cross-dressing. "Trophimowsky kept her hair cropped short, dressed her like a boy and brought her up like a boy..."²⁰ Her body stayed boyish, possibly due to anorexia, and as she matured her cross-dressing developed into a compulsion.²¹ "...Her lifelong love of travesty, of dressing up, was in part a defense, or calculated effect, as well as an inherent craving to escape from herself—her sex."²² Escape, whether it was from femininity, her family, or civilization, became a frequent goal for Eberhardt. Her home life was plagued by physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, and each of the siblings escaped from Trophimowsky as soon as they could.²³

¹⁷ Lesley Blanch, "Isabelle Eberhardt: Portrait of a Legend," in *The Wilder Shores of Love*, 283-325 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954), 287.

¹⁸ Blanch, 288.

¹⁹ Julia Clancy-Smith, "The "Passionate Nomad" Reconsidered: A European Woman in L'Algérie Française," in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, edited by Nuper Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, 61-78 (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 63.

²⁰ Kobak, 16.

²¹ Ibid, 38.

²² Blanch, 291.

²³ Kobak, 19-20.

Eberhardt and her mother fled Trophimowsky in May of 1897, leaving for Algeria. The pair joined many other non-French Europeans who immigrated to Algeria during French colonial rule. David Prochaska writes, “A fusion of the European ethnic groups...resulted in a new race.”²⁴ This race was the *pied-noir* society that grew to outnumber the French administrators in Algeria.²⁵ The *pied-noir* community was very socially insecure because of their ambiguous position as a third group outside the binary of the French and the Arabs.²⁶ Just as transgressive individuals created identities in the gaps and conflicts of the imperial ideology, the *pied-noir* society evolved in between the *metropole* and the natives. Their insecurity is clearly visible in the conflicting, yet all negative, opinions of the *pied-noirs*. They were...

looked down upon by their alleged social betters who could or did stay home,...faulted for exploiting the Algerians rather than joining with them to form a broad-based popular movement by left commentators, and despised by the Algerians themselves for lording it over them on the basis of neither wealth nor education but only race and ethnicity.²⁷

Their insecurity led them to be more committed to the colonial hierarchy and behavioral norms than those French in the *metropole*.²⁸

Eberhardt and her mother settled in Bône, choosing to live in the Arab quarter of town, which initially set the pair apart from the *pied-noir* society.²⁹ Eberhardt was clearly displeased with the *pied-noirs*, as she wrote, “As for French civilisation...it has certainly gone downhill

²⁴ Prochaska, 206.

²⁵ Ibid, 137.

²⁶ Kobak, 53.

²⁷ Prochaska, 154.

²⁸ Kobak, 53.

²⁹ Clancy-Smith, 61.

here.”³⁰ Taught by Trophimowsky, both women were fluent in Arabic and quickly converted to Islam. They sought absorption into the Muslim community.³¹ Eberhardt wrote of a “desire for moral perfection, the longing for a reputation based on noble merit, and a thirst for great and magnificent deeds,” and she saw Islam as the path to achieving these goals.³² Not long after arriving in Algeria, de Moërder passed away of a heart attack and was buried in a local Muslim cemetery.³³

Following a respite in Europe to organize her affairs, Eberhardt was finally free to live her life as she wished. This is when her journals begin. She embarked on a journey across the “intoxicating expanse of desert” in North Africa.³⁴ She tried to deny herself pleasures and many necessities, writing, “However difficult, I must live out my theory of limiting one’s needs.”³⁵ As she explored the Sahara, she embraced the poverty and rootlessness of nomadism. She also embraced the native men. She wrote in a letter to a former lover, “It is quite possible that I would let myself be taken by anyone—particularly anyone dark-skinned—clever enough to catch me.”³⁶ Despite having multiple Arab lovers, she fell in love with an Arab man named Sliméne who was a naturalized Frenchman.³⁷ For Eberhardt, he was the best of both worlds. He was part of the Empire, which gave Eberhardt a new sense of legitimacy, and part of the Other, which excited her. He validated her existence within the French colony in a way she had not realized she was seeking, while still holding the allure of the exotic. She wrote to Augustin, her brother,

³⁰ Eberhardt, 32.

³¹ Blanch, 294.

³² Eberhardt, 8.

³³ Blanch, 294.

³⁴ Eberhardt, 1.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 14.

³⁶ Kobak, 72.

³⁷ Blanch, 299.

soon after she met Sliméne, “Sliméne is the ideal husband for me, weary and sickened as I’ve been by the desolate solitude in which I’ve always found myself...”³⁸

She joined the Kadrya brotherhood, which was a highly mystical branch of Sufism.³⁹ On January 29, 1901, a rival religious sect attempted to assassinate Eberhardt. Her would-be assassin, Abdallah, testified that “Mademoiselle Eberhardt, who wore masculine dress, which is contrary to our customs” was “creating disorder in the Muslim religion.”⁴⁰ For Eberhardt, Abdallah’s testimony told her how much further she had to go before she would be fully accepted by the Muslim community. For the colonial administration, this was the breaking point of Eberhardt’s disruptions. The assassin was sentenced to 20 years of hard labor and Eberhardt was expelled from Algeria.⁴¹ She was devastated by her exile from what she saw as her homeland. She was forced back into poverty in Europe, and attempted suicide multiple times.⁴² She lived unhappily with her brother, Augustin, and his wife in Marseilles. She wrote of the couple, “They do not respect the sacred things I hold so dear, for they are blind and bourgeois... and mired in the base obsessions of their greedy brutish lives.”⁴³

After more than nine months of desperation and morbidity, on October 17, 1901, Eberhardt married Sliméne. She became a French citizen by uniting with the Other. While in pursuit of the ambiguities resulting from imperialism, this incident is particularly intriguing. Her attraction to Sliméne lies in the fact that his identity was blurred as well. He was Arab, yet also French. He was Muslim, yet also part of the colonial forces. She saw part of her own identity confusion in him. Uniting with Sliméne also acted to further blur Eberhardt’s identity, while

³⁸ Kobak, 136.

³⁹ Ibid, 137.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 173.

⁴¹ Blanch, 300-301.

⁴² Ibid, 303.

⁴³ Eberhardt, 78.

simultaneously validating how Muslim and French she was. Eberhardt wrote shortly after their wedding, “Our dream of going home from exile has come true at last; we are back on the soil where the sun is always young...”⁴⁴ She continued to live as a nomad, seeing Sliméne only sporadically.⁴⁵

In 1902, Eberhardt befriended General Lyautey, the commander of the subdivision of ‘Ain Sfra.⁴⁶ She had found a kindred spirit. Lyautey said of Eberhardt, “She was truly herself, a rebel.”⁴⁷ He was equally attracted to Islam and prone to bouts of morbid despair.⁴⁸ Lyautey was a proponent of conquering without assimilation. Like Eberhardt, he wanted to keep the Orient oriental. Eberhardt began to work for Lyautey, and the French administration, as a diplomat to Sufi brotherhoods.⁴⁹ While she had spent her whole African journey rejecting French civilization, finding another transgressive, in-between imperial actor swayed her to the French efforts. Although she tried to deny it in her pursuit of nomadism, she truly wanted companionship from individuals similar to herself.

Her acceptance by the imperial administration was short-lived because Eberhardt died in 1904 at the age of 27.⁵⁰ Her death was simply a continuation of the oddities of her life. She died in a flash flood in the Sahara desert. She spent her last strength helping Sliméne escape from their mud shack, and was lost when the structure dissolved around her.⁵¹ Lyautey ensured that she was buried in a Muslim cemetery, though he buried her under a woman’s name.⁵² Lyautey

⁴⁴ Ibid, 87.

⁴⁵ Blanch, 305.

⁴⁶ Kingsmill Hart, 98.

⁴⁷ Blanch, 318.

⁴⁸ Kobak, 209.

⁴⁹ Clancy-Smith, 71.

⁵⁰ Blanch, 286.

⁵¹ Norman Douglas, "Intellectual Nomadism." *The North American Review* 193, no. 665 (April 1911): 532-538, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25106908> (accessed Sept. 16, 2010), 537.

⁵² Clancy-Smith, 71.

would only validate one part of her confused identity, the part he could sympathize with. He understood her attraction to Islam, but her gender confusion was beyond him. Sliméne left before her funeral. It is believed that he had already taken another lover.⁵³ Eberhardt wrote towards the end of her life, “The human body is nothing, the human soul is all.”⁵⁴

Eberhardt clearly desired to disappear into Muslim society. She wrote that Arab clothing “made me feel at ease.”⁵⁵ While Eberhardt would dress as a European, when politically necessary for her safety, she preferred Arab garb.⁵⁶ She wrote, on her first day back in Algeria following her mother’s death, “My hat bothered me, though, for it set me apart from Muslims” and she promptly returned to her room to change into a fez.⁵⁷ Her refusal to dress as a European was a visible reminder of her rejection of her European identity. Alternatively, she wrote, “To dress as an Arab man is politically unwise, to dress as a French woman, economically impossible,” which suggests another reason for her cross-dressing that was perhaps more practical than subversive.⁵⁸

Her cultural cross-dressing was matched by her devotion to Islam. She aimed to have “a heart both proud and unswerving in its commitment to Islam.”⁵⁹ She claimed to experience “intoxication” when surrounded by Islam.⁶⁰ Her integration into the mystical brotherhood was additionally disconcerting to colonial administrators because it made her seem influential among the Muslim population. She wrote, “...There is no greater spiritual beauty than fanaticism...”⁶¹

⁵³ Kobak, 225 and 235.

⁵⁴ Eberhardt, 45.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 64.

⁵⁶ Marjorie Garber, “The Chic of Araby: Transvestism and the Erotics of Cultural Appropriation” in *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 327.

⁵⁷ Eberhardt, 14.

⁵⁸ Garber, 327.

⁵⁹ Eberhardt, 1.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 19.

⁶¹ Ibid, 46.

She hoped to one day become a marabout, or a Muslim holy woman and spiritual leader.⁶² Not only had she converted to Islam, but she continued to delve deeper into the practice—validating the religion as having immense spiritual value. She described Arab life and Islam as having a “strange appeal...for me.”⁶³ Despite her devoutness, “She was an alcoholic...That was the only thing out of key with her profound religious acceptance of Moslem faith.”⁶⁴ Her humanity compromised her idealized Muslim identity. Just as imperial actors could not match up to the imperial ideal, Eberhardt could not live up to her own ideal. Her ultimate hope for her Arabic life was that it would “...complete my education as a man of action, the Spartan education I need.”⁶⁵

Her gender identification also contributed to perceptions that she was abnormal and immoral. Eberhardt identified and dressed as a man, whom she called Si Mahmoud.⁶⁶ Although this practice began in her childhood, its continuation in the colony was disruptive to prude societal tastes amongst the *pied-noirs*. Additionally, “Isabelle retained a trace of European naivety in failing to realize that the Arabs acceptance of her disguise often reflected their face-saving tact, rather than the success of her camouflage.”⁶⁷ Her tendency to take multiple Arab lovers did not help with her societal acceptability.⁶⁸ Her male identity and sexual promiscuity were socially unacceptable to Europeans and Arabs alike. Kobak writes that within the imperial structure “sexuality, that wild card and last private sanctuary, became even more highly charged than usual.”⁶⁹ While the Arabs accepted her as a lost soul whom Allah would guide, European

⁶² Ibid, 66.

⁶³ Ibid, 20.

⁶⁴ Blanch, 293.

⁶⁵ Eberhardt, 10.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 44.

⁶⁷ Kovak, 88-89.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 293.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 130.

society viewed her as a threat to their status as the superior people in Algeria.⁷⁰ The *pied-noir* society would have certainly cast Eberhardt out if she had ever shown interest in joining their ranks, but her view of colonists inhibited her from socializing with Europeans.

Her intense distaste for other Europeans and the ideology of imperialism were most in defiance of the accepted performance of the imperial identity. Eberhardt wrote, “Whatever their unenlightened way of life, the lowliest of Bedouins are far superior to those idiotic Europeans making such a nuisance of themselves.”⁷¹ She refused to accept the Europeans as morally obligated to colonize and civilize. It raised the question: if one European could think colonization and imperialism were bad ideas, couldn’t more feel the same way? By aligning against the imperial administration, she failed to perform the most important part of imperial performativity—supporting the hegemony and the structure of imperialism. Yet she also would pretend to support the French when it was necessary for political purposes. During the trial of her would-be assassin, she wrote, “I have never participated in...any anti-French activities...I have always spoken favorably of France to the natives, for I consider it my adoptive country.”⁷² Her political stances, which should have reflected her Arab and Muslim identifications, seemed fluid based on her needs, drawing into question their validity to begin with.

Despite her distaste for imperialism, Eberhardt was also a product of it. She described the “riff-raff French civilisation” as the “whore and whoremaster,” but she could never fully escape from its influences.⁷³ Many of the racial ideologies of imperialism can be spotted in her writing. Eberhardt described Arab men as “biblical,” “primitive,” and “savage.”⁷⁴ In a critique of

⁷⁰ Blanch, 313.

⁷¹ Eberhardt, 99.

⁷² Ibid, 62.

⁷³ Ibid, 91.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 28, 23, 79.

imperialism, she writes, “Oh, how evil civilisation is! Why was it ever brought over here?”⁷⁵ She perpetuated imperial ideologies when she viewed Arabs as uncivilized. That lack of civilization was the quality that she admired most in Arabs, but it also played into racist perceptions of European superiority. She despised civilization, writing “The Age of the Void” in 1899, which explored the emptiness of modern life. She wrote in that article, “Civilization has promised man freedom at the cost of everything dear to him...”⁷⁶ Early into her travels in Africa, she wrote in a letter, “I certainly love this barbaric country.”⁷⁷ Even within Eberhardt’s sexual desires, imperialism made things messy and ambiguous. She loved her husband for his naivety. She believed that she was an older soul than him. To live with him, she wrote, “I would have to find someone in Algiers to teach Sliméne all the things he does not know, which is a tall order, and that would take a lot of worries off my hands...”⁷⁸ She could not separate from her sense of European superiority.

Eberhardt reflected the patriarchal undertones of the imperial message. Imperialism needed women in their traditional roles in the home, as caretakers, and as teachers to leave men available to fulfill the more public and political elements of colonization. She despised this traditional femininity as weak and boring. Eberhardt wrote, “...I can honestly say that I have never, not even for a moment, entertained the notion of doing what so many hundreds of thousands of women do. That is out of the question, period.”⁷⁹ Once again, things get messy, as Eberhardt did not attempt to redefine femininity; she simply aligned herself against it, reaffirming its naturalness. Though such a liberated woman would be assumed to be a feminist, she was openly misogynistic. She wrote, “The problem with Ténès is its herd of neurotic,

⁷⁵ Ibid, 93.

⁷⁶ Kobak, 102-103.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 65.

⁷⁸ Eberhardt, 88.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 71.

orgiastic, mean and futile females.”⁸⁰ This reflected her view of all women, not just those of Ténès. While Eberhardt disrupted many imperial norms, the idea of the lack of civilization among the Arabs, integral to the performance of imperialism, and the definition of traditional femininity, necessary to support the colonial project, were ones she could not shake.

The dissident identities and performances, seen clearly in Eberhardt’s life in Algeria, were powerful during the Age of Imperialism. Imperialism, like all performances, aimed for an ideal, and no one met all the standards of imperial ideology. Eberhardt simply met fewer than most colonists. Annette Kobak describes these ideals,

Most of the colonists...were living the half-truth that they were the country’s benefactors; most of the native Algerians of all races were living the half-truth that they were submissive...Something of a voluntary apartheid had grown up to protect the uneasy, and essentially false, status quo...Fear of breaking down their ‘differentness,’ on which their power depended...also played a role.⁸¹

Colonists who did not view natives as lesser, did not subscribe to high moral character, or who did not fit expectations of civilization were seen as transgressive and dangerous. They were able to bring to light the fragility and hypocrisy of the imperial structure. Butler writes, “It is the instabilities...that mark one domain in which...the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law.”⁸² Simply by disrupting the status quo, they acted to unsettle the hegemony. These presentations could also inspire other colonists to break from the strict ideologies of imperialism and explore the blurring and fluidity of their cross-cultural exchanges. Butler writes, “Deconstructing the presumed opposition enables us to acknowledge the constructedness of meaning and identity and

⁸⁰ Ibid, 98.

⁸¹ Kobak, 130.

⁸² Judith Butler, “Introduction,” in *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of sex*, 1-23 (New York: Routledge, 1993), 2.

thus begin to imagine alternative ways of thinking and of living.”⁸³ The blurring and fluidity of categories and identities were particularly visible within personal behavior.

Eberhardt’s personal behavior acted as a clear disruption to imperial norms. She refused to stay in her place as a European woman. She disrupted imperialism’s foundation by defying racial and gender norms and by criticizing the imperial structure. She was ostracized for stepping out of the constraints of normalcy. Ursula Kingsmill Hart writes, “She was living her life, though she was letting down the European image.”⁸⁴ Early in her time in Algeria, numerous press campaigns developed against her—claiming she was a prophetess and that she was spreading propaganda.⁸⁵ The French military believed that she was a missionary and targeted her because of it. She wrote in a reflection on a meeting with French military officials, “The officer... asked me point blank whether I was an English Methodist by any chance.”⁸⁶ Throughout her time in Algeria, she was under subtle military surveillance.⁸⁷ Though the French administration could not expel her for being odd, as soon as they had the excuse of her attempted assassination, they kicked her out of Algeria.

Kingsmill Hart continues, “She had become an embarrassment to them because she was so openly and ardently Muslim and because she made no effort to hide her contempt for the colonials.”⁸⁸ George Orwell, in “Shooting an Elephant,” which discusses English imperialism in Burma, discusses the imperial objective to avoid embarrassment. Though he explores a different imperialism, his theories are applicable in other colonial situations. Orwell writes, “...Every

⁸³ Butler 1990, 51.

⁸⁴ Kingsmill Hart, 81.

⁸⁵ Clancy-Smith, 70.

⁸⁶ Eberhardt, 58.

⁸⁷ Kobak, 191.

⁸⁸ Kingsmill Hart, 93.

white man's life in the East...was one long struggle not to be laughed at."⁸⁹ Eberhardt's eccentricities put the French administration in a position to be laughed at, due to her wild garb, scandalous affairs, and abuse of alcohol and drugs, triggering their colonial anxieties, and resulting in her persecution.

Although Eberhardt blurred the boundaries of societies and queered the European performance of imperialism, she resisted the further blurring of societal divisions. She did not see the possibility for an Algerian society that was not organized based on the civilized-uncivilized, European-native binary. She did not call for a dismantling of the binary and the creation of free cultural exchange. Eberhardt wanted Europeans to lay down their civilized identities and adopt the traits of Arabs and Muslims. In this way, she is not a queer theorist or a queer activist. The disruptive nature of her blurred identity can be analyzed as politically effective through queer analysis, but Eberhardt never conceptualized the political power of the further blurring of identities, nor saw the power of extending the disruptions beyond her personal lifestyle.

Imperial performativity, rooted in gender and racial performances, supported the hegemony of the Europeans in their colonies. Imperialism was simply an ideal that no one could meet because it required conformity to such a wide range of characteristics and roles. Nevertheless, societies, such as the *pied-noir* society, rigidly enforced the perpetuation of the norms that constructed imperial performativity. Orwell describes this rigidity when he writes, "...When the white man turns tyrant it is his own freedom he destroys."⁹⁰ Orwell unknowingly

⁸⁹ George Orwell, "Shooting an Elephant," in *Burmese Days*, 3-12 (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc. 1934), 8.

⁹⁰ Orwell, 8.

pointed out how imperial performativity is a system of oppression that confines the behavior of European actors.

Eberhardt presented an alternative to this oppression through her “adamant refusal to conform to the norm of behavior in a colonial society.”⁹¹ By refusing to play out colonial norms, she disrupted the performance of imperialism. By refusing to play out the imperial identity, Eberhardt exposed the fragility and imperfections of imperial thought and hegemony. She queered the European identity by cross-dressing as an Arab man and refusing to subscribe to the belief of European superiority.

Despite her outcast status, she was still a product of imperialism, and her writings reflected imperial influences. She perpetuated the idea that Arabs were uncivilized and the traditional definition of femininity. Within her identities, she failed to live up to her own ideals, blurring her identities. This blurriness was attractive to her and led her to make allies with Sliméne and Lyautey. Her politics fell short of outright queer theory because she insisted on maintaining the binary system of European-native and civilized-uncivilized and because she never extended her ideas of blurring identity beyond the outright denouncement of European qualities to the mixing of characteristics from both ends of the binary. Despite her flaws, Eberhardt was a key player in undermining the ideological authority of French Algeria. She showed just how messy imperialism became and presents a key case for the concept of imperial performativity. She was a novelty, an underdog, and a pariah, but she exposed the flaws of imperialism more than a half century before Algeria would win independence.

⁹¹ Kingsmill Hart, xiii.

Works Cited

Primary Source:

Eberhardt , Isabelle. *The Passionate Nomad: The Diary of Isabelle Eberhardt*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1987.

Secondary Sources:

Blanch, Lesley "Isabelle Eberhardt: Portrait of a Legend." In *The Wilder Shores of Love*, 283-325. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Butler, Judith. "Introduction." In *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex*. New York: Routledge, 1993. 1-23.

Clancy-Smith , Julia. "The "Passionate Nomad" Reconsidered: A European Woman in L'Algérie Française." In *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, edited by Nuper Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, 61-78. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992.

Douglas, Norman. "Intellectual Nomadism." *The North American Review* 193, no. 665 (April 1911): 532-538, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25106908> (accessed Sept. 16, 2010).

Garber, Marjorie. "The Chic of Araby: Transvestism and the Erotics of Cultural Appropriation" in *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, 304-352. New York: Routledge, 1997).

Kingsmill Hart, Ursula. *Two Ladies of Colonial Algeria: The Lives and Times of Aurelie Picard and Isabelle Eberhardt*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1987.

Kobak, Annette. *Isabelle: The Life of Isabelle Eberhardt*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1988.

Orwell, George. "Shooting an Elephant" in *Burmese Days*, 3-12. Orlando: Harcourt, Inc. 1934.

Prochaska, David. *Making Algeria French: Colonialism in Bône, 1870-1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.