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## The Potential of Travel as Nomadic Practice. The Situated and Embodied Female Subject in Ulla Bjerne’s Novel *to dare being...*

### Abstract

This article focuses on the novel *att våga vara... [to dare being...]* (1948) based on the life of the explorer Isabelle Eberhardt (1877–1904), by the Swedish author Ulla Bjerne (1890–1969). Annotations in her diary as well as Eberhardt’s diary and biography, are in addition taken into account, read as examples of female situated embodiment and part of a feminist nomadic practice, as elaborated by Rosi Bradidotti, in Bjerne’s aim to give representation to a new type of woman. It entails resistance to hegemonic, fixed and exclusionary views on feminine subjectivity, the affirmation of movement and the process of becoming, and the construction of new conceptions and images of women. The central hypothesis in the article is that travelling in *att våga vara...* has a potential to nomadize the female subject both literally and figuratively, in the quest to give representation to a situated, embodied female subjectivity, in both body and word.

Keywords: female nomad, feminism, subjectivity, embodiment, travel

### The Female Vagabond and Nomad

Bjerne published 27 books between 1916 and 1963, mostly novels, but also poetry and autobiographical works. Her first novel, *Mitt andra jag [My Other Self]*, introduced the female vagabond to Swedish literature.<sup>1</sup> She describes using herself as “experimental object” in the aim to give literary representation to a new type of woman, “to expand the knowledge of the human. The woman”, in her diary. A considerable undertaking that Bjerne supposed that a more talented woman may have to continue, but has to be by someone like her – Bjerne concludes re-

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<sup>1</sup> K. Järnvad, *Den klivna kvinnligheten. “Öfvergångskvinnan” som litterär gestalt i svenska samtidsromaner 1890–1920*, Eslöv 2008, p. 219.

gretfully that she is yet to encounter such a woman, with the exception for Sidi Mahmoud: “A sister soul”.<sup>2</sup>

The name Sidi Mahmoud is a version of the male alias used by the Russian-Swiss explorer and nomad Isabelle Eberhardt during her life and travels in North Africa between 1900 and 1904. The novel *att våga vara...* closely follows the biography of Eberhardt, consequently and only called Sidi Mahmoud throughout. With the novel, Bjerne wanted to “shove out that interesting female figure among the contemporary, banal types of women”.<sup>3</sup>

Ulla Bjerne described herself as a vagabond, displaced and rootless from an early age.<sup>4</sup> She lived and travelled in Europe between 1911 and 1922, before marrying and settling in Finland, however continuing to travel all her life, in Europe as well as North Africa. In her twenties she had changed her name from Gully Ohlsson to Ulla Bjerne, cut her hair short and dressed in a pantskirt, vest and jacket, fashioning herself as a New Woman. As such she stood model to, later to be esteemed Swedish artists such as Nils Dardel, Einar Jolin and Isaac Grünewald.

Travel is constant in Bjerne’s authorship. During the time of writing *att våga vara...* she undertook an evaluation of her authorship so far, recorded in her diary under the heading “The important”. She notices a “prominent trace” throughout her work, beginning with *Mitt andra jag* and its conclusion: “to wander, at all times be seeing the road disappear behind oneself is the only possibility”.<sup>5</sup> Bjerne’s autobiographical trilogy, similarly ends in the affirmation of constant movement. The last part, *Botad oskuld [Innocence Remedied]* (1961), unfolds in France 1914. Bjerne is leaving the country and her life as a writer is about to begin. The finishing sentences echoes the opening of Eberhardt’s diary from 1900, both depicting a young woman in a state of loss and solitude, but not desolation, looking out over the expanse of misty waters, towards an unknown future, literally and figuratively on her way.<sup>6</sup>

I am not happy. But why should I be happy? Is it not enough that I aware of how crass and deceptive life is, still love it as highly as I do. Success or failure? What is that to the feeling of living fully and completely, and despite inner misery and inability still forge ahead? Constantly on the way.<sup>7</sup>

The woman vagabond is in this article analyzed as a feminist nomadic practice as elaborated by Rosi Braidotti, focusing on *to dare being...* as the example alongside other work in Bjerne’s authorship, such as *Don Juan in Tarbush [Don Juan in Tarbush]* (1935) and her last book, the travelogue *Sardiska stigar [Sardin-*

<sup>2</sup> U. Bjerne, “Diaries” (Vol. 41; 1944–1963), February 12, 1956.

<sup>3</sup> U. Bjerne, “Diaries” (Vol. 41), March 2, 1947.

<sup>4</sup> U. Bjerne, “Diaries” (Vol. 40; 1907, 1913, 1915–1944), March 15, 1937.

<sup>5</sup> U. Bjerne, “Diaries” (Vol. 41), March 2, 1947.

<sup>6</sup> I. Eberhardt, *Writings from the Sand. Vol. I, Collected Works of Isabelle Eberhardt*, Lincoln–London 2012, p. 355–358.

<sup>7</sup> U. Bjerne, *Botad oskuld*, Stockholm 1961, p. 301. “Lycklig är jag inte. Men varför ska jag vara lycklig? Är det inte nog att jag medveten om livets krasshet och svek fortfarande älskar det så högt som jag gör. Lyckas eller misslyckas? Vad betyder det inför känslan att leva fullt och helt, och trots inre misär och otillräcklighet ändå sträva framåt. Ständigt vara på väg”.

ian Pathways] (1963), not otherwise mentioned in the analysis, but that similarly trace a woman's negotiations to be able to "be" and the potentiality of the perceived radically different "other" place. The analysis investigates strategies used by Bjerne in the aim to give representation to an alternative female subjectivity, founded in real life experience of women such as her own and Isabelle Eberhardt's, where travel holds a potential for liberation from confinement, nomadizing the subject into a state of transit and transition.

In extension, Bjerne could be placed in line with, and as a possible forerunner to, a succession of Swedish female writers during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that similarly use their situated embodiment and the potential of travel, in order to represent an alternative female subjectivity, for example in the work of Kerstin Thorvall (1925–2010) and Birgitta Stenberg (1932–2014).

According to Rosi Braidotti, nomadic consciousness is not defined by travelling in the literal sense, but by a critical consciousness and resistance to socially encoded ways of thinking and being.<sup>8</sup> The point of this article however, is the significance of place and travel, freeing the female subject from a fixed status quo and the potential of movement and process of becoming.<sup>9</sup> Founded in a critique of the false universalism of subjectivity the aim is the construction of new conceptions and images of woman.<sup>10</sup> With reference to Luce Irigaray, Braidotti points to the importance of finding a transmissible form for the female voice. It denotes a redefinition of subjectivity taking its physical roots into account and to speak like a woman in order to empower women and activate changes in their socio-symbolic conditions.<sup>11</sup> Bjerne's literary project can thus be described as the attempt to give literary representation to a new type of woman, to empower women and to bring about change, and is in this sense political. While holding on to the empirical foundation of female subjectivity and the practice of sexual difference feminism, Bjerne nomadizes the subject and redefines femininity as a receipt for transformation, movement and becoming.<sup>12</sup> Biographical elements supplies the foundation and travelling both literally and figuratively sets the female in motion.

## Divisions and Transgressions

The critique of the false universalism of subjectivism depart from notions of difference that constructed the modern subject, alongside patriarchy, colonialism and heteronormativity.<sup>13</sup> The norm is ascribed to the white male and differences are distributed negatively across a series of marginalized others.<sup>14</sup> Woman becomes

<sup>8</sup> R. Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects. Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, New York 2011, p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114–115.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24–25.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114–115.

<sup>13</sup> S.J. Kim, *Empathy and 1970s Novels by Third World Women [in:] New Directions in Travel Writing Studies*, eds. Julia Kuehn, P. Smethurst, London 2015, p. 163.

<sup>14</sup> R. Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory. The Portable Rosi Braidotti*, New York 2011, p. 28.

the downgraded other, mirror to the dominating subject, forming its masculinity in a universalistic attitude.

Travel arguably holds in *att våga vara...* a potential for liberation from differences organizing women and men on different levels, as indicated below, nomadizing the subject into a state of transit and transition.

<i>Subjectivity as</i>	<i>Women as</i>
universal notion of the subject	the specific other than the subject
coinciding with consciousness	coinciding with devalorized difference (different from)
self-regulating	uncontrolled
rational agency	irrational
entitled to rationality	in excess of rationality
capable of transcendence	confined to immanence
denying corporeal origins or objectifying objectifying the body	= a corporeality that is both exploited and reduced to silence

Simone de Beauvoir's critique of the universalism of the subject, positions woman as the cultural other and "*unrepresented*". To poststructuralist Luce Irigaray however, woman is "*unrepresentable* within this scheme of representation", as Braidotti points out.<sup>15</sup> Bjerne's aim can in this sense be regarded as the struggle to give representation to the hitherto unrepresentable.<sup>16</sup> It is an ongoing, indefinite process, made possible in pieces, through gaps, suggestion and imagery.

In *Isabelle Eberhardt and North Africa. A Carnavalesque Mirage* (2015), Lynda Chouiten is critical of the general tendency to envision Eberhardt as the epitome of resistance to racism and colonial injustice. She points to how Morocco and Algeria in Eberhardt's work functions as heterotopia and a place to negotiate her status, the use of traditional Orientalizing technics such as eroticizing, infantilizing, literary exoticism, prejudice and reduction. Eberhardt is also appropriating the other according to the logic of difference, as a mirror for the self and object for desire.<sup>17</sup>

All of this can be said also about Bjerne's *att våga vara...* I will however argue the importance of taking the analysis a step further, critically examining contradictions and transgressions. The dismissal of all oppression is commendable, but the discarding of historical texts because of racist tendencies, risk reducing critical discourse and understanding, and the reproducing, perhaps even production, of simple binary categories in line with a logic of differences, in the simple opposition of good or evil, perpetrator or not.

<sup>15</sup> R. Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects...*, p. 150–152.

<sup>16</sup> U. Bjerne, "Diaries", October 14, 1925. She comments on the enormous effort in trying to capture the "unknowable" within herself and the need to make up a new language to be able to express what she wants. The old forms do not suit her and the new needs has to have form.

<sup>17</sup> L. Chouiten, *Isabelle Eberhardt and North Africa. Nomadism as a Carnevalesque Mirage*, Lanham 2014 Ebook Central Academic Complete International Edition (access: 15.07.2020), p. 25.

I argue that there is no simple reversal of roles in the novel, where the white woman takes on a range wide range of traits of white “male” superiority. In Bjerne’s interpretation, Sidi Mahmoud also sides with the “other” to assert a critique of the universal subject constructed through exclusion of women and the ethnic or racialized other, characterized by radical and devalued difference.<sup>18</sup> Siding with the “other” devaluated differences can be reclaimed, and the colonial, male subject criticized, the argument expanded into a cultural critique of the Western, industrialized, modern civilization.

The aim is however not to argue that Bjerne (or in her view Eberhard) are in fact unprejudiced. I am not disagreeing with Choiten but would like to point to limitations with regards to Eberhardt’s and Bjerne’s situated embodiment. The main aim is to focus on strategies employed in the novel to create critical consciousness about socially encoded ways of thinking and being, and to envision alternatives. The perceived radically different cultural circumstances, allows for questioning, critique and transformation of Western cultural practices and limitations. This is mirrored in relationships between women, Algerians, and Europeans as well as between male colonial in the novel, negotiating the logics of identification.

Braidotti describes nomadic practice as an affirmation of the process of transformation, in which writing is included. To write is to become, to enter spaces in between, in transit.<sup>19</sup> “Becomings are creative work-in-progress processes”.<sup>20</sup> I would describe Bjerne’s use of movement and her project of writing as an ongoing process of transformation, suggested also in the novel’s title, its lowercase and avoidance of a full stop...

to dare being...

Bjerne obviously identified with Isabelle Eberhardt and projected onto Eberhardt’s life something of her own driving forces as a person and writer, and modeled them into the novel about Sidi Mahmoud. In the preface Bjerne refers to finding Mahmoud’s posthumously published diaries in a bookshop in Alger in the 1920s.<sup>21</sup> Eberhardt made a living as a journalist and published short stories, from an early age, during her lifetime. After her death in 1904, several manuscripts were recovered, among them the diaries from 1900–1903, published as *Mes journaux; précédés de la Vie tragique de la bonne nomade par René-Louis Doyon* (1923), along with a manuscript to a novel, in this context significantly entitled *Trimardeur* [Vagabond] published in 1922.

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<sup>18</sup> R. Braidotti, *Metamorphoses. Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*, Cambridge 2002, p. 174.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>21</sup> U. Bjerne, *att våga vara...*, Helsingfors 1948, p. 5, and U. Bjerne, “Diaries”, November 7, 1930. It is probably a concession to fiction as Bjerne seems to be reading Eberhardt’s diary for the first time in November 1930, registers finding in her a “twin soul” in spite of all differences.

Biographical accounts bear witness to Eberhardt's ambition to place herself in transitional positions, in-between east and west, man and woman, aristocrat and worker, Christian and Muslim. Born to an aristocratic Russian mother exiled in Switzerland, Eberhardt's genealogy was unclear also because no father was registered. It was him being the family's Armenian tutor, through whose influence Eberhardt asserted her closeness to Arabic culture and religion, including him teaching her classic Arabic.

The consequent use of the name Sidi Mahmoud in the novel, places the protagonist somewhere in-between male Arab/female European, although Mahmoud is always referred to as "she". Following Eberhardt's biography, the protagonist Sidi Mahmoud also performs as a man, dressed in traditional clothing, to ensure greater freedom of movement. Clearly modeled on Eberhardt's also practiced by her tutor/father (which Bjerne at a time also confessed to), Sidi Mahmoud is opposed to "stupid regulations", thinking people should instead try and "work out something that makes us all freer". "Or do they love their enclosures? (...) We always try to oppress each other. Why not leben und leben lassen?". Mahmoud resists given categorizations, seeks greater freedom – to dare being – and considers herself "free of racial prejudice".<sup>22</sup>

The novel *att våga vara...* fictionalizes very little with regards to the outer trajectory of Eberhardt's life and follows the known chronological course of events, except for the storytelling that commences in 1904, inside the walled desert monastery of Kenadsa, followed by a flashback which lasts up to the last chapter. If the Arabic culture of the Maghreb for the Westerner is the radically different place, carrying a potential for alternative performances, the desert and the walled monastery within, appear the symbolic epitomes. Protected by the walls of the monastery, by the Muslim cultivation and wisdom, Sidi Mahmoud is politely and gracefully treated as the young Tunisian scholar she presents herself to be.<sup>23</sup>

Sidi Mahmoud is depicted through an external narrator with knowledge of the thoughts and feelings of people close to her, such as her friend Boncourt (modeled on Victor Barrucand in real life) and the former lover Regnault (Eugène Letord). The army doctor Dardier (Léon Taste) is the narrator in one of the chapters consisting of his diary annotations. Eberhardt practiced Islam and became a member of a religious brotherhood. In 1901 there was an attempt on her life by a member of another, rivaling brotherhood. Eberhardt was injured and subsequently treated by Taste at a military camp in El Oued, and develop a friendship during long conversations.

These events are recounted in *att våga vara...* and Dardier discloses his fascination and growing affection for Sidi Mahmoud, describing her as a "beautiful boy's soul in a woman's body".<sup>24</sup> The conception is in line with the early sexology's idea of sexual inversion and as Bjerne's diary reveals, passed on to her

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 92–93. In *Vem och vad* [a kind of *Who is who*] 1926 Bjerne stated "anarchist" as her political affiliation.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 20. The Arab Maghreb meaning Northwest Africa including countries such as Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia and a large part of the Sahara Desert.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

by Andreas Bjerre, a forensic psychologist and her lover, in characterization of herself:

“A boy’s soul in a woman’s body” he called me today –  
 He is right! Such an unhappy product of nature – can only expect suffering –  
 But I am not false – no – but I cannot get rid of that critical “other self” – therefore becoming half through and through –  
 What a wonderful feeling to give yourself completely to a person – to love him – to sacrifice yourself to him and the children – But it is not possible – “The boys soul” does not allow it – it requires more than that –  
 I am an unhappy creature – half and half in thousands – all individually striving to completeness –  
 There is only one thing: to be alone!<sup>25</sup>

How can an alternative (female) subjectivity be imagined outside the polar differences between man and woman? Is there an escape from the applied male scientific categorization?

In real life, Isabelle Eberhardt married Slimène in 1901, an Algerian military, a spahi, in service in the French colonial army. Lynda Chouiten points to a reversal of gender identity where Eberhardt’s husband is ascribed the ideal qualities of the Victorian wife.<sup>26</sup> The relationship with Ehnni is also part of the narration in *att våga vara...* using his real name. He is given the role of mirror to Mahmoud, and even if his actions sometimes are rendered, Ehnni is not given a voice of his own. Sidi Mahmoud is on the other hand characterized by independence through her work and travels, as well as sexually, while her husband is more static and dependent. As a woman Mahmoud thus make claims on “male” rationality and independence through racial superiority, also through the staging of herself as a man in traditional garb. But it is not only a question of a complete and simple reversion of roles. Mahmoud also uses the relationship with Ehnni to support her critique and question the supremacy of the supposed universal subject and the preeminence of rationality, self-regulation, repudiation of subjectivity’s corporeal origin, and “the other” as devalued and specifically different.

Dardier’s infatuation with Sidi Mahmoud is not reciprocated. She prefers the erotic compatibility with her Algerian husband, rejecting the crude tendencies detected in Dardier’s attitude.

This man, who purely physically did not exert any attraction in the least on her, had during their conversations revealed a rather brutal and violent erotic disposition, sometimes refined all the way to the pathological, something incidentally not displeasing to her. He

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<sup>25</sup> U. Bjerre, ”Dagbok” (Vol. 40), 25 april 1917. ”En pojksjäl i en kvinnokropp” kallade han mig i dag – Han har rätt! En sådan olycklig produkt av naturen – har endast att vänta lidande – Men inte är jag falsk – nej – men jag kan inte göra mig kvitt den där kritiska ”mitt andra jag” – därför blir jag halvheter allt igenom – Vilken ljuvlig känsla att kunna ge sig helt åt en människa – att älska honom – att offra sig för honom och barnen – Men det går inte – ”Pojksjälen” tillåter det inte – den fordrar mera än så – Jag är en olycklig varelse – med tusende halvheter – som alla sträva på sitt håll mot helhet – Det finns bara ett: att vara ensam!”

<sup>26</sup> L. Chouiten, op. cit., p. 21.



must however have understood that, after everything she had told him about herself, that the erotic feeling of affinity was of great importance to her.<sup>27</sup>

The main representative of colonial power at the military camp in El Oued, the French commander and colonel is threatened by what can be described as the ambivalence of the liminal colonial conditions and the fear of loss of boundaries.<sup>28</sup> He is responding with a preoccupation with hierarchical distinctions and categorizations regarding sex, ethnicity and race. It is unthinkable to the colonel that a French woman would get the idea to “bustle about” like Sidi Mahmoud in the desert from 17 years of age. Such a thought can only arise “in a Slavic brain”. Dardier’s ironical comment also refer to gender categories: “I had on the tip of my tongue that he better than anybody else should be able to understand such a desire. Had he not himself for the latter thirty years bustled about in the desert? But Sidi Mahmoud was plainly a woman. And that decided the matter in his eyes”.<sup>29</sup>

The colonel is consequently particularly against the marriage between Mahmoud and Ehnni. Faced with the latter, Ehnni’s perceived lack of control and effeminate and childish behavior, the boundaries between the colonel’s and the other are challenged. He desperately needs the support of Dardier, the other representative of Western masculinity, for reinforcement.

– He arrived early this morning – he should have left this morning – and what do you think the man does? He begs me for a couple of days suspension and cries, cries like a fountain ... A man that cries! Can you ever image something so ridiculous, yes, hideous, he added in a tone of indescribable pity.

(...)

– He is of course an Arab and childish, I said to facilitate the continuation.

– Arab or not. It has no importance. He is a grown man, he remarked contemptuously. (...) I could see the whole scene in front of me. The crying spahi and then this old boy with his drawn up, bushy eyebrows, rugged on the outside but inwardly extremely embarrassed and confused.<sup>30</sup>

The encounters between the colonel and Ehnni, Dardier and Mahmoud, stir up feelings that lead to transgressions or potential transgressions. In the eyes of

<sup>27</sup> U. Bjerne, *att våga vara...*, p. 212. “Denna man, som rent fysiskt inte utövat den minsta attraktion på henne, hade under deras samtal avslöjat en ganska brutal och våldsam erotisk läggning, ibland raffinerad ända till det patologiska, något som förresten inte misshagat henne. Han måste likväl ha förstått, efter allt hon berättat för honom om sig själv, att den erotiska samhörighetskänslan var av stor betydelse för henne.”

<sup>28</sup> A. McClintoc, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, New York 1995, p. 174–75, ACLS Humanities eBook (access: 15.07.2020), p. 26.

<sup>29</sup> U. Bjerne, *att våga vara...*, p. 78. “Jag hade på tungan att han bättre än någon annan borde förstå en sådan drift. Flängde han inte själv sedan trettio år omkring i öknen? Med Sidi Mahmoud var förstås kvinna. Och det avgjorde saken i hans ögon.”

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88–89. “– Han kom hit tidigt i morse – han skulle ha rest i morgon – och vad tror ni karlen gör? Han tigger mig om några dars uppskov och gråter, gråter som en fontän (...). En karl som gråter! Kan ni tänka er något så löjligt, ja, ohyggligt, tillade han i ett tonfall av obeskrivlig ömkan. (...) – Han är förstås arab och barnslig, sade jag för att underlätta fortsättningen. – Arab eller inte. Det har ingen betydelse. Han är ju en fullvuxen karl, utlät han sig föraktfullt. (...) Jag kunde se hela scenen framför mig. Den gråtande spahin och så den här gamla gossen med uppdragna, buskiga ögonbryn, bask till det yttre men invändigt oerhört förlägen och förvirrad.”



the doctor, Mahmoud is an enigma, her “changing being, too inaccessible and intangible to be able to adapt to a set psychological formula”. “The constant oscillations from child and boy to woman, suggests at times a third sex, with a foundation consisting of femininity”.<sup>31</sup> Dardier’s feelings for this androgynous person dislodges his valued equilibrium.<sup>32</sup> It affects the foundations on which his view of the world, others and himself, according to a logic of differences.

The colonel in turn, struggles to dissociate himself from Ehnni. He despises what is perceived to be masculine weakness, struggling to suppress his emotional response and his own with a devalorized “other”. Dardier understands the tacit rules: “One misplaced word and it would be the end of the colonel’s and my friendship”.<sup>33</sup> The supposed radical difference of culture and the liminal condition of the Westerner situated in North Africa, thus entails diversity of perspective, ambiguity and contradictions, and the possibility of transgressions.

The colonel’s approach stands out as comical through irony and paradox due to lack of self-awareness and critical understanding. He married during leave twenty years ago and has a wife and daughters in Paris but prefers to live apart from them in North Africa, in spite of the apparently low evaluation of the continent and its people. The colonel’s relation to the servant Muhammed precedes the one with his wife and is preferred by the colonel who “treats him like an old intimate to whom nothing superfluous needs to be uttered; at the same time, it is implicit how splendidly one makes do without women”. “It has come to mind, when I regard those two, that it cannot be to the colonel’s wife’s entire satisfaction that Mohammed always accompanies her husband when he is home on leave”, Dardier muses.<sup>34</sup>

The other, personified by Ehnni and Muhammed, is reduced to silence and neither Sidi Mahmoud nor *to dare being...* are free of “racial prejudice”.<sup>35</sup> But they give voice to a critique of socially encoded ways of thinking and acting. Notions of development, anticipation, dream, fantasy and the construction of the future that travelling generally is connected to, seem to point to the genre of utopian fiction.<sup>36</sup> The actual situating in perceived reality and actual place, as well as the reference to experience, the real life of Isabelle Eberhardt, however underpins the narrative as an argument with the aim to make political impact. The novel is not just utopian, and a fantasy. It refers to real life and actions, thus making claim to have something to say about reality, possibly contribute to change.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 110–111.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 115–116.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 75. “[Översten] behandlar honom som en gammal förtrogen till vilken intet överflödigt behöver yttras; samtidigt som det är underförstått hur förträffligt man reder sig utan fruntimmer. Jag har fått för mig, då jag betraktat dessa två, att överstinnan inte kan vara enbart nöjd med att Mohammed alltid är med, då maken kommer hem på permission.”

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 92–93.

<sup>36</sup> B. Ashcroft, *Travel and Utopia* [in:] *New Directions in Travel Writing Studies*, eds. J. Kuehn, P. Smethurst, London 2015, p. 249–259.

## Freedom and the Law

According to Lynda Chouiten, Isabelle Eberhardt's relationship with the people and culture of North Africa, was ambivalent, and the accounts romanticized and aestheticized as well as derogatory. Eberhardt in real life, condemned colonial exploitation of North Africa but was employed as intelligence commissioner by Hubert Lyautey (1854–1934), the French governments official in Morocco.<sup>37</sup> Chouiten label her social criticism as reactionary in its opposition to modern progress.<sup>38</sup>

Symbolic and discursive violence are of obvious importance to how different groups of people become vulnerable to persecution, pathologizing and violence, and limit their ability to appear in public, as Judith Butler points out.<sup>39</sup> But Butler also emphasizes the importance of the materially, politically, economically and socially situated body, exposed to injury, violence and death.<sup>40</sup> This precariousness is dependent on social and economic conditions, and is not an identity.<sup>41</sup> Sidi Mahmoud as modeled on the real life Isabelle Eberhardt, is obviously privileged in many ways compared to Ehnni and Muhammed, but her situated embodiment does not privilege her materially, politically, economically and socially in the same way as the colonial officers. In some ways she is underprivileged to them all, in spite of race or ethnicity, as a in spite of her pursuit to transgress limiting boundaries..

In *att våga vara...* Sidi Mahmoud is regarded "a maniac, abnormal" and a threat to colonial power. Her ethnicity and decent make her questionable: of Russian heritage, born in exile and fatherless, living in exile together with an Algerian.<sup>42</sup> During the trial following the attempt on her life, she is found guilty of provocation. To the orthodox, the sight of a (Western) woman together with a revered religious leader and teacher such as a marabout, was offensive. Mahmoud is found guilty of breaking the first commandment in the Quran and has "defied destiny" by dressing in menswear.<sup>43</sup> She has thus offended both a more universal patriarchal law as well as the Muslim religious and the colonial law, and is therefore banned from Algeria.

Through the interlude in Marseille, the sovereignty of the Western, French society is exposed as limited, unmoral and vulgar in contrast to the genuine and refined Arab culture, personified also by Ehnni. Sidi Mahmoud, as in real life Eberhardt, worked as a docker in Marsielle, in the novel depicted as a community of outcasts of different nationality and race, but with vagabondage in common.<sup>44</sup> Mahmoud also encounters Arabic women prostitutes that will, in contrast

<sup>37</sup> L. Chouiten, op. cit., p. 11–12.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>39</sup> J. Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly. Gender Politics and the Right to Appear*, Cambridge 2014, p. 34.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>42</sup> U. Bjerne, *att våga vara...*, p. 156–157.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 162–164.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 195–196.

to Western society, will when they have earned enough, return to their villages, marry some poor young man that they and live as respected members of their community.<sup>45</sup>

A central conversation between Mahmoud and Dardier about regulations, freedom and persecution, originates from orders of conduct, posted on the wall in the infirmary at the military camp in El Oued.<sup>46</sup> It is a reminder of the law regulating the being in the world, and that violations will lead to violence, including the latent violence that the law rests on, and that demands submission from its citizens.<sup>47</sup> Mahmoud's transgressions leads to violence both in the form of the attempt on her life and in the form of banishment.

According to Anne McClintoc, an aspect of modern industrial capitalism, is the rejection of groups of people seen as abject to society but still present as threat and dissolution.<sup>48</sup> Sidi Mahmoud is an outsider, a vagabond and nomad, and a threat to both Algerian and French society, moving along "her lonely path through an indifferent, stupid and corrupt world".<sup>49</sup> She knows people: "As soon as anything does not fit to their charted squares, you could be sure of it being persecuted, scorned and tarnished".<sup>50</sup> An outsider also in the French Western society she has even fewer possibilities of emancipation. In real life, Ehnni managed to get a transfer to Marseille where he and Eberhardt were married according to French law, which made possible the return to Ehnni's native country.

Lynda Choutien points to the immensity of the desert as the classic metaphor for colonial will to greatness, associated with exploration and conquest, present in Eberhardt's work.<sup>51</sup> But the image of the desert is also a symbol of open expanse and to the Westerner, carries the potentiality of the unknown territory, associated with freedom. With *att våga vara...* Bjerne wanted to give testament to "the freedom of the individual, culture of the heart and tolerance".<sup>52</sup> In the long retrospective commentary in her diary in 1956, Bjerne notes that a topic pervading her authorship is the "expansion of the landscape of the female soul".<sup>53</sup> If this can metaphorically be applied to the Sahara Desert, it would not simply coincide with a sexually aggressive, colonial appropriation of territory. To further develop the train of thought, Bjerne's way of appropriation and erotizing the landscape is through a desired expansion.

In the last chapter of the novel, Mahmoud's demise through ill health and death is briefly touched upon, followed by an epilogue that takes the form of a conversation between a group of French army officers in Alger, among them doctor Dardier and Mahmoud's former lover Regnault. The structuring of the

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 198–199.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>47</sup> J.F. MacCannell, *The End(s) of Violence* [in:] *On Psychoanalysis and Violence. Contemporary Lacanian Perspectives*, eds. V. Sinclair, M. Steinkoler, Abingdon–New York 2019, p. 34.

<sup>48</sup> A. McClintoc, op. cit., p. 71–72.

<sup>49</sup> U. Bjerne, *att våga vara...*, p. 7.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 152.

<sup>51</sup> L. Choutien, op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>52</sup> U. Bjerne, "Diaries" (Vol. 41), January 30, 1945.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., February 12, 1956.

course of events and the unravelling, brings that of the ancient Greek tragedy to mind. Sidi Mahmoud's being disturbed the order, induced chaos ending in her death, after which restoration follows.

Bjerne paints the rather unsettling picture of Sidi Mahmoud, buried in the Arabic churchyard, her face turned towards the desert. The grave is marked by a stone but likely to be obliterated by now. But Sidi Mahmoud lives on through the testament of the possibility of embodying an alternative female subjectivity, through new conceptions and images, representations in both body and word.

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