Reading and Writing Colonial Women:
Publication and Representation in French Colonial North Africa

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To the woman who is without imagination and resources Africa must soon become a slough of despond, in which she flounders helplessly. She must be able to create her diversions, forget her aversions and devote herself whole-heartedly to the discovery of good in everything, for the new civilisation reveals her delights only to those who have the eager eyes and ears and heart of the explorer; to all others the book is closed.1

When Raymonde Bonnetain, wife of the French naturalist-novelist, turned inveterate world traveller and writer of opium-laced fantasies of Indochinese exoticism, Paul Bonnetain, and herself a nineteenth-century resident of the Sudan, provocatively wrote in 1896: "One colonizes through women,"2 she succinctly summarized the successful development of the French colonial enterprise in North Africa in the nineteenth century, beginning with the 1830 Conquest of Algiers and ultimately extending to Tunisia, which became a French protectorate in 1881, and Morocco which received the same status in 1912. Penned amidst the growing hysteria of metropolitan France's declining birth rate and depopulation crisis and just five years after Jules Ferry's seminal senatorial expedition to Algeria, which would culminate in the abandonment of assimilationist policies and rhetoric with regard to non-European populations in the colonies, Bonnetain's comment references an historical development that the extra-touristic presence and activity of European women in the Maghreb in the nineteenth century incontrovertibly conveys: the social and cultural transition in the North African colonies from a state of military conquest and occupation to one of colonial society. As a result, the residence of European women in these colonies evokes a series of intersecting, discursive networks demarcating the emerging parameters of colonial communal identity: marriage, maternity, domesticity, private life, leisure time, and cultural production and reception. An understanding, then, of the issues informing the gender politics of French colonial culture in North Africa in the nineteenth century—for the purposes of this article, its realities, its publications, and its representations—can be a useful perspective for more effectively, and more interestingly, revealing the contradictory dimensions of what Homi Bhabha has very correctly termed the "conflictual economy of colonial discourse."3

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The history of European women in French colonial North Africa in the nineteenth century has yet to be written and is perhaps unwritable because of the near non-existence of reliable information about gender in colonial commentaries from the period and the fragmentary remains of surviving administrative documentation in archives in France and North Africa. Nonetheless, with the bits and pieces of a narrative scattered through French-language newspapers, journals, and early book publication, a textual history of the gender dynamics of emerging French colonial culture in the Maghreb can be attempted.

The first European women to arrive in colonial Algeria in the wake of the 1830 military expedition, as one might expect, were associated with two groups: the wives and daughters of the upper-echelons of military personnel and early colonial administrators, and the vivandières. The senior officer, Pierre Genty de Bussy, in *L'Établissement des français dans la régence d'Alger et des moyens d'en assurer leur prospérité* (1835), without indicating precisely the nature of their presence in the colony, anecdotally mentions that, of 750 women associated with the occupying army in Algiers in 1833, seven were French and twenty-seven Spanish. Whether these were the wives of military personnel, support personnel such as washerwomen and cooks, or the far more shadowy category of the vivandières, we can only speculate. On the latter, Edmond Pellissier de Reynaud would later recall in his *Annales algériennes* (1836) the soirées indiennes of one such vivandière shortly after the Conquest where “nude courtisanes would pour glasses of an infusion of mocha coffee and the flaming liquid of a punch.” Implying that such establishments and their women were numerous, although perhaps merely misogynist hyperbole, Pellissier de Reynaud would blame these distracting vivandières for the economic failures of the early days of colonial expansionism in Algeria. Later, more reliable documentation, in the form of the French Ministry of War’s official organ the *Annales de la colonisation*, tells us that by 1852, according to the most reliable, up-to-date census information, 38,034 French and European women resided in the colony (as compared to 53,674 non-military men of European origin and 41,274 children).

French emigration to Algeria in the nineteenth century, like the colonial enterprise itself, was, as the gender disparity in these numbers indicates, a patriarchally, if not phallocentrically dominated proposition. In 1853, the *Journal de la Haute-Saône* proudly reported that in the previous year, 289 French citizens had emigrated from that département to Algeria. Of that total, beyond the presumed number of married women in emigrating families, there were only five unmarried women, and, judging from their indicated professions (maids, cooks), it is likely that they accompanied emigrating families. The reluctance of French women to emigrate to Algeria would prompt Joseph Chaillely-Bert and Count Gabriel d’Haussonville to organize the establishment in 1897 of the Société Française
d'Emigration des Femmes, which, like the Female Emigration Society and the United British Women's Emigration Association in England, sought to encourage and financially facilitate the emigration of single French women to North Africa. These efforts, as well as others like the proposal to send French orphans to colonial families, met with limited success.

Journalistic, colonial print culture in Algeria provides glimpses of the presence and activities of these early colonial women, and, indeed, something about their reading habits. After its inauguration with the two issues of the military dispatch L'Estafette d'Alger, colonial journalism emerged in fuller form with the appearance on 17 January 1832, of the first number of the Moniteur Algérien, the colony's official weekly newspaper. Established by special decree of the metropolitan government, the Moniteur's function initially was the dissemination of legal, judicial, commercial, and maritime announcements, but it soon demonstrated its conceiving of Algeria as a communal space of emerging colonial society. As a result, in the issue of 7 April 1832, one finds for the first time in newspaper print the marriage announcement of a military musician and a seamstress named Françoise Lopez. With the expansion of colonial journalism in the 1840s, the presence and activity of women becomes more visible. In the 7 May 1846 number of L'Akhbar, Algiers's second major newspaper and a typical four-page broadsheet publication, which began circulation three times a week on 12 July 1839, we read the advertisement of a certain Madame Pouchon who, because of an imminent departure, is forced to sell her grocery store in Agha. In the 19 May 1846 issue, an advertisement appears in which a party seeks to employ a female cook with local references. Finally, in the 29 September 1846 issue, we read the following: "At the Parisian Hat. Madame Dupon alerts the public that her workshop is now in the rue Jénina, number 4, that she makes hats and clothes for women, all types of embroidery, repairs lace and that she has, at bargain prices, an assortment, linen goods." These banal traces of daily colonial life provide evidence of the public and private lives of the first wave of French and European women in colonial Algeria.

As the colonial population increased in nineteenth-century Algeria, so too did the incidence and dissemination of French-language newspapers. Major urban centers soon had a variety of daily and weekly newspapers. Major newspapers in Algiers included Le Mobacher (founded in 1847), L'Atlas (founded in 1849), Le Colon algérien (founded in 1871), La Vigue algérienne (founded in 1873), Le Petit Alger (founded in 1881), La Nouvelle France (founded in 1881), La Dépêche algérienne (founded in 1885), and Le Reveil algérien (founded in 1893). L'Echo d'Oran (founded in 1848) and L'Oranais (founded in 1860) were published in Oran; La Seybouse (founded in 1833) and Le Courrier de Bône (founded in 1849) appeared in Bône; and Le Journal de Constantine (founded in 1848), La Numidie
(founded in 1875), and La Tribune algérienne (founded in 1876) were published in Constantine. As well, regional communities, in addition to regular newspapers from the major cities, had their own press—as represented by Philippeville’s Le Courrier de Philippeville (founded in 1846), Tlemcen’s Le Courrier de Tlemcen (founded in 1861), Sétif’s L’Echo de Sétif (founded in 1863) and L’Union de Sétif (founded in 1871), Blida’s Le Tell (founded in 1870) and Le Reveil de Blida (founded in 1880), Mostagnem’s Le Courrier de Mostagnem (founded in 1870) and L’Aïn-Sefra (founded in 1885), Tizi-Ouzou’s Le Petit Kabyle (founded in 1886), Tébessa’s L’Écho tétassien (founded in 1891), and Mustapha’s La Lanterne de Mustapha (founded in 1895), among many others. The transformation of the function of the colonial newspaper from an instrument for the exercise of metropolitan authority to a site of colonial discursiveness is illustrated by the diversification of its format, which ultimately included items culled from the regional colonial press, marriage, birth, and death announcements, illustrations, advertisements, fashion columns detailing the latest trends in Paris, and the mercurial feuilleton that meandered through serialized literature, local gossip, and political commentary. Such diversification, while following metropolitan models of print presentation, nonetheless discloses the publication strategies and circulation exigencies of colonial journalists and their editors—by extension mirroring a similarly diversifying and exigent colonial reading public desirous of print representations that more precisely corresponded to its readerly expectations of a colonial community.

The representational (or self-representational) desires of colonial women in Algeria, however, are challenged by limitations enacted by two competing discourses in colonial print culture. On the one hand, the eroticized, aleatory alterities of imperialist constructs of orientalism, frequently produced by travellers through the colony or locally rendered for touristic consumption, clearly originate in, and are destined for, the male gaze. On the other hand, despite colonial culture’s motivated departure from orientalist representation by marginalizing or erasing indigenous alterities beyond a descriptive Maghrebian landscape, the representation of European women remains an equivocal and ultimately problematic proposition. In Louis Bertrand’s Le Sang des races (1899), the apoqée of the colonial novel in late nineteenth-century Algeria, colonial discourse explicitly maps the topology of its gender divide. While the French and Spanish men are valorized as exemplary workers and the builders of a new Algeria (as opposed to the nearly invisible, silent, lazy, and immobile Arabs), colonial women are conventionally depicted as particularly susceptible to the effects of local culture. In Le sang des races, Thérèse, secretly in love with the protagonist Rafael, one night is seduced by the “brutal rhythm” and “wild howling” of an Arab wedding celebration and madly seeks out Rafael, accosting him with her unleashed sexual desire: “Her scruples, her sense of decency from before ... All those ideas that she had brought
with her from France, she now thought of them as strange, as good for back there. They no longer existed, they had melted into the terrible breath of the South. The great wind of sensuality rolled over her, carrying her along in its whirlwind." Filtering metropolitan diagnostic stereotypes of female sexuality and hysteria though the rather curious sub-discipline of colonial medicine in which the European woman's physiology and psychology were deemed ill-suited for other climes and cultures, the representational possibilities of the colonial woman were, hence, thereby severely constricted by a patriarchally-generated colonial discourse.

The incidence of French women writing in North Africa, as travellers to the colonies or as colonial residents, is as irregular as it is sparse. Blanche Lee Childe, writing under the pseudonym Oirda (meaning “rose” in Arabic) for the Revue des deux mondes in 1884 about her recent trip to Tunisia and Algeria, remarks on her visit to the Tunisian mountain village of Takrouna: “I believe that no other European woman has yet been up here,” and proceeds to recount the opportunity accorded her, by virtue of her gender, to spend an afternoon in the harem of the village chief. In the passage that follows, orientalist signifiers of mysterious and dangerous sensuality wither away in a description of an animated group of women who, in comparison to the narrator’s luxurious clothes, her jewelry, the beauty of her hands, and so forth, are rather “hideous like true harpies,” their youth and potential beauty having been consumed by hard work. The only exception, the favorite of the household, is adorned with what seems to be all of the colorful garments and bracelets in the house and, rather than being an exemplar of eroticized alterity, is no more than a figure of gaudy excess, resented by the other women of the harem. The narrator’s departure from exoticist strategies and stereotypes of representation (frequently fantasies rendered without direct knowledge as the harem doors would have been firmly closed off from the male European’s gaze) is rhetorically justified here by her privileged access as a woman. Still, the seeming authenticity of Oirda’s descriptions of the unveiled North African woman, based on a more direct experience, while rejecting orientalist aesthetic conventions, preserves and perpetuates its pejoratively articulated hierarchy of cultural difference, which a metropolitan readership would clearly understand.

The constant shift between a de-orientalizing of descriptive codes and a discursive assertion of metropolitan superiority in Oirda’s prose characterizes the writings of the first significant French woman writer living in Algeria. Writing under the indigenous first name Yasmina, Hélène Roncin published in Algiers in 1897 the volume of travel writing, Croquis tunisiens, and from 1898–1901, fifteen shorter pieces appeared in La Revue algérienne illustrée, the colony’s first major literary and cultural journal founded by Ernest Mallebay in 1888. We know little about the life of Hélène Roncin. The autobiographical details of her
works describe a provincial childhood spent in the Auvergne, the daughter of a wealthy if not aristocratic family. At some point, she married a man whom she would accompany to French North Africa in 1884. In an editorial note in the 3 March 1900 issue of La Revue algérienne illustrée, Yasmina is described as short and slender, and eliciting "the admiration of indigenous women." Little else is known about the life of this writer. Did she remain in North Africa? Why did she stop writing? When did she die? These details have yet to be discovered.

We are far better informed about the textual self left by the work of Yasmina. Yasmina describes her vocation as a writer as the coincidental combination of "the bad habit of throwing down one's impressions onto paper" and the encouragement of her friends who had read some of her texts and urged her to publish them. The taxonomy of her prose generically differentiates between non-mutually exclusive categories such as autobiographical reminiscences (of both her French and Maghrebian pasts), North African nature studies, accounts of contemporary Arab manners, and tales of local history and folklore. In Croquis tunisiens, Yasmina explains that, as a European woman arriving in a completely alien culture, she took pleasure in the study of all that surrounded her: "The country, the flora, manners, indigenous customs and, in particular, Arab women, their habits, their clothes, their lives, the celebrations, the language. So many attractions!" Stylistically, Yasmina's writings are dominated by strong first-person narrators and are written in a lyrically refined diction, frequently following the syntactically liberal and often fragmented structure of the late nineteenth-century French prose poem. Her texts do participate in certain linguistic conventions of colonial discourse and, thereby, on occasion designate indigenous North Africans with pejoratively reductive epithets. Yasmina's prose is regularly punctuated with transliterated expressions from the Arabic, which are not glossed in the text. The presence of these Arabic expressions, however awkwardly they may be transliterated into the Latin alphabet at times, positions the text beyond orientalist cliché and makes the argument for the relativistic authenticity of the North African experience in which certain realities resist translation. Moreover, the insertion of these Arabic words, without recourse to an editorial note into a French linguistic context, confirms a certain familiarity with local culture and conceptualizes the imagined readership of these texts as a colonial, rather than metropolitan, public.

The first two texts in the chronology established by Yasmina's written corpus, coincidentally the most directly autobiographical of her shorter works, frame the ideological complications of her entire literary output. In "Pauvre Mingôh (souvenir d'enfance)," the narrator recounts an episode of her childhood wherein one day a Senegalese man wandered onto her family's estate in the middle of provincial France. Having been abused and exploited in a Marseilles work yard, Mingôh wandered aimlessly through the French countryside until ultimately being taken
in by the narrator’s family as a manservant. The narrator emphasizes the special relationship she and Mingoh share, the latter no doubt “dreaming of his daughter left behind in a far off land.” Inconsolably nostalgic for his lost homeland, Mingoh, in the presence of the narrator, one day violently commits suicide by slashing his throat. The narrator, horrified and speechless, is left standing in Mingoh’s “very red blood, everywhere.” In “Ma première heure en Afrique (poésie en prose),” the narrator recalls her arrival in Tunis. Amidst the disorienting noises and images accompanying her arrival in a strange, new land, she notices the bizarre and aesthetic flowering squills. This arrival in a new land, a new home, “the first hour with ineffaceable memories, where everything seems surprising,” challenges the narrator’s sense of herself. “So many things, at that first hour, pass again and again in the soul: visions, ghosts, memories, regrets, hope, rapid shadows, hastened, fleeting.” Amidst this profusion of evocative newness—names, birds, architecture and plants—the flowering squills become personified under the narrator’s gaze and instruct her to have patience and courage in this strange new homeland. These two texts, taken together, form an allegory of exile in which a displaced subject moves from abject desperation to survival and the possibility of a colonial existence. Particularly significant in “Pauvre Mingoh (souvenir d’enfance)” is the narrator’s clear identification with the non-European ethnic other who has been abused and exploited by her own European culture, an identification that will complicate her representation gesture in colonial North Africa.

The narrative voice of the exiled female subject in Yasmina’s texts is entirely original in emerging French colonial literature in Algeria in the 1890s. In “Ma première heure en Afrique (poésie en prose),” as in her other nature studies (namely, “Au fond du ravin: fantaisie,” “Dernières feuilles,” “En rêvant,” “Papillons blancs,” and “Flocons de neige”), Yasmina’s narrator follows a narrative strategy in which indigenous inhabitants of Tunisia are reduced to fleeting “silhouettes of Arabes” as seen from a passing train, relegated to the same representational plane as other elements of the exotic landscape such as profiles of dromedaries, pink flamingos in the lake, the typically white-domed coubâhs of marabout shrines on the hill, and so forth. While the vast majority of colonial texts written in French in the Maghreb during this period irrevocably distance themselves from native North African inhabitants by reducing the latter to elements of a picturesque landscape or by erasing them altogether—as in, for example, Stephen Chaseray’s Père Robin letters (first appearing in La Revue algérienne illustrée beginning in 1893 before being published in volume form by Ernest Mallebay in Algiers in 1894 as Lettres de l’Oued Melouf); Musette’s wildly popular Cagayous broadsheets (first appearing in the newspaper Le Turco in 1895, then published separately until 1909); or colonial novels like Louis Bertrand’s Le Sang des races (1899)—they replace the
absent indigenous element with images and stories of the European colonial population. These fictional works, then, additionally narrate the fiction of residential legitimacy for a residentially illegitimate group. Yasmina’s nature studies, however, while providing her narrators with the opportunity to allegorize further their isolation and exile on North African soil, in contradistinction to other colonial texts, do not represent in the slightest way the colonial enterprise. Instead, they opt for a “naturalizing” in profuse horticultural detail of the colonial space, which ultimately resists in representation the dichotomy of the colonizer and colonized. These landscapes, emptied of traces of the exercise of colonial power, stand as a mute and impossible alternative to dominant modes of colonial literary representation in Algeria.

At times, Yasmina’s narrators fully participate in what might be called a conventionally colonial perspective. In the account “Sur la montagne: excursion,” which begins as a nature study, the narrator ultimately describes a visit to the mountaintop village of El Khia. Beyond typical depictions of poverty and filth among the local population, the text is peppered with hierarchically denigrating asides. When speaking of the women of the village, she notes that “they are all named Fatma and Aicha in this little place,” and that “the ladies of El Khia rarely have the visit of European women. It is a shame, perhaps they would be more civilized, if they are susceptible to civilization, which I doubt very much.” When reporting a conversation between the European visitors and Bou Farik, a notable in the village, the narrator makes a concerted effort to convey the latter’s lack of mastery of the French language, reproducing basic gender and conjugation errors. In addition, she observes that “nature is in celebration for them as for us, with the sole difference that they do not know how to appreciate it.” At the representational antipodes of this sort of consideration of the North African subject as lacking any sort of identity, ability to assimilate linguistically to the language of the colonizer, or aesthetic sense, other texts, such as “En pèlerinage: étude de moeurs indigènes,” negotiate an entirely different relationship with their non-European subjects. “En pèlerinage: étude de moeurs indigènes,” again beginning as a nature study extolling the beauty of the Algerian countryside, ultimately recounts how Fatma, a renowned pottery artist whose conspicuous trademark is the image of the seductive tirailleur, leaves her husband’s domicile twice a year and goes with the other women from the surrounding area on an all-female pilgrimage to a local marabout, perhaps also the site of a nocturnal lover’s tryst. Despite the fact that “in the area, they say that she has a loose gendourah, and bewitching glances from beneath her half-open malafa,” Fatma’s devoted husband Kabech suspects nothing of her potential infidelity. This infidelity remains potential in the text since the narrator, whose omniscience extends in “En pèlerinage: étude de moeurs indigènes” even to the thoughts of a donkey, never reveals whether it takes place or not. Proceeding by implication without ever
stating, the narrator establishes an unspoken complicity with the North African female subject such that both are inscribed in a written space seemingly beyond colonial and indigenous patriarchal authority.

Yasmina’s first-person narrators do elsewhere move beyond colonial representational conventions and frequently establish a benign relationship between the European “I” of her narratives and their North African subjects. In “Laid Kebir,” the description of a Muslim celebration at the marabout of Sidi Braham Ghorbini, the narrator penetrates the innermost part of the holy shrine where, across from the saint’s tomb, she is “attracted by the meditation of the devout one whose faith I envy ... They seem hypnotized and my presence does not bother them in any way.”42 In “La sirène amoureuse (conte burlesque),” before recounting the story of how a local hunter was transformed into a madman by the spell of a sea roula, the narrator states that “if you like, I will tell you this tale as it was narrated to me, I have invented nothing.”43 At the conclusion of the tale, she invites the reader to “come along with me and I will show you the poor madman.”44 In these two accounts, as elsewhere in Yasmina’s writings, the narrators act as textual liaisons whose privileged knowledge of the indigenous subject provide unprecedented access to the folklore of the other and ultimately seek to mimic indigenousness itself. At two moments in these shorter works, the narrators go so far as to inscribe their nominal presence into the textual production. In “Un Coin de l’Islam: au clair de lune,” the description of another religious celebration at the marabout of Sidi Braham Ghorbini, we read: “Whoever gets the jasmine garlands will have good luck; in any case, it smells deliciously good, and if I dared to ask, I am sure that they would not refuse to give one to Yasmina.”45 In “La Légende du rossignol,” a vaguely fantastic explanation for North African poverty and filth with quasi-Christian overtones, the narrator, who has asked an Arab why he hates the nightingale, states: “Naturally, the legend was forthcoming, I am going to tell it, not according to the prose of the Arab, but according to that of Yasmina.”46 Such third-person asides, like the author’s use of an indigenous first name as a pseudonymous signature, demarcate a space between colonizer and colonized in which self-alienating fantasies establish a hybrid, textual self that pursues an identity beyond Frenchness in colonial Algeria. Coupled with narrative judgments, at times critical of, at times in sympathy with, the indigenous element, Yasmina’s narrators move back and forth across the conventional limits of colonial-signifying practices without being able to resolve the contradictions of the resulting hybridity. While not exactly “native informants” giving voice to a silenced North African subaltern, Yasmina’s narrators trace a tenuous complicity between the European woman and the Maghrebian other.

Yasmina’s works, as with those of other contemporary and later colonial women writers in North Africa like Magali Boisnard, Angèle Maraval-Berthoin, Maximilienne Heller, and the notorious Isabelle Eberhardt, irrefutably partici-
pate in the discursive ramifications of the French colonial enterprise, but they also self-reflexively explore the margins of colonial discourse in which representationally displaced subjects like women and indigenous peoples are accorded a hybrid textuality that anticipates the identity dynamics of francophone post-colonial representation. And so, the "second sex," residentially established in colonial North Africa, enacts a third space in French colonial writing and reading, continually and contradictorily vacillating between the Manichean polarities of colonizer and colonized, never definitively inhabiting either pole, at once accepting and resisting the colonial impulse.

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Endnotes


3 Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994), 84.

4 To date, the two most significant historical studies of the French colonial period that include a consideration of the dimension of gender, Marc Baroli’s La Vie quotidienne des Français en Algérie, 1830-1924 (Paris: Hachette, 1967), and Yvonne Knibiehler and Régine Goutalier’s La Femme au temps des colonies (Paris: Stock, 1985), are groundbreaking efforts, but also testaments to the perfunctory nature of current scholarship in this area.

5 The English translation of the "vivandière," a cabaret or canteen proprietress, fails to convey the full implications of this expression in nineteenth-century French culture. The vivandières are associated with those makeshift, ill-reputed establishments that sprung up in the vicinity of military encampments at home and abroad. The vivandières are invariably the facilitators of that sector of the world of prostitution that caters to a military clientele.

6 Pierre Genty de Bussy, L’Établissement des Français dans la régence d’Alger et des moyens d’en assurer leur prosperité, v. 1 (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1835), 68. From the earliest days of the French colonization of Algeria, immigration from Spain played a significant role in the development of colonial society. Non-French, European immigration to Algeria in the nineteenth century was substantial so that commentaries often compare colonial Algeria to the United States as another melting pot of varied races and cultures. By the late-nineteenth century, in light of disappointing emigration numbers from France, the metropolitan government proposed a series of laws allowing for the naturalization of non-French immigrants and Jews in Algeria. For more on the role played by Spanish immigrants in the colony, particularly in relation to cultural issues, see Daniel-Henri Pageaux, ed. Espagne et Algérie au XXe siècle; contacts culturels et création littéraire (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1985).

7 Quoted in Knibiehler and Goutalier, La Femme au temps des colonies, 86.


The literary incarnations of the feuilleton in the French-language press in nineteenth-century colonial Algeria, while imitating the metropolitan format of being located at the bottom of the broadsheet newspaper's first page, significantly diverge in the quality of their content. The vast majority of the feuilletons published in colonial newspapers in Algeria, clearly of metropolitan origin by exceedingly obscure authors and representing non-colonial subjects, are, however, of exceedingly inferior quality. One must assume that major literary feuilletons produced by the Parisian press circulated in the colony in their original form, thus making the colonial feuilleton a pale imitation of its metropolitan counterpart. One also notices a great deal of irregularity in the publication of the colonial literary feuilleton in Algeria well into the 1880s. Frequently, series are announced, but never appear, many feuilletons are started but do not continue after several installments, and so forth. Such inconsistencies would seem to confirm the hypothesis that the literary feuilletons of the major newspapers of Algiers, Oran, and Constantine were hard pressed to compete effectively with their Parisian or provincial counterparts.

The most incisive analysis of this aspect of orientalist discourse remains Malek Alloula's *Le Harem colonial: images d'un sous-érotisme* (Paris: Slatkine, 1981). In nineteenth-century French literature, the most striking example of the dangerous alterity of the North African woman is Pierre Loti's novella *Les Trois femmes de la Kasbah (contes orientaux)* published in *Fleurs d'enfroi* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1882), in which the French soldiers who pursue her dangerous beauty are punished with a syphilitic infection. In non-fictional commentary, Algeria was sometimes figured as a site of transgressive sexuality and sexual perversion, as in Marcel Desbrières's *Le Vice en Algérie* (Paris: P. Fort, 1899) and Ernest Girault's *Une Colonie d'enfer* (Alfortville: Librairie Internationaliste, 1905).


Ibid.

One of the most curious commentaries in this vein, Pétrus Borel's illustrated *La Femme dans les colonies françaises* (Paris: J. Dulon, 1898), surveys the various colonial venues and provides anecdotes regarding the potential psychological degeneration and sexual perversions that European women risk while living there. For an overview on the twin issues of medicine and women in the French colonies, see Knibiehler and Goutalier, 177–215.


Ibid., 92.

A witness to the 1830 Conquest of Algiers, Paul Raynal, suggestively confirms the exclusion of the European male's gaze with regard to the North African woman when he writes "Women seem to have fled Africa. We only meet Jewesses who walk with their faces uncovered, black slaves who do not have the right to cover their ugly faces, and a few toothless old women, I suppose, who have a kind of thick veil that stops at their eyebrows and a headscarf of thick muslin whose edge just comes up to the lower eyelid. One only sees, therefore, through a little slit the pupil of these women and I have not discovered a pupil that has tempted me. However one sees that there are here very beautiful women. But they remain confined to their houses." *L'Expédition d'Algèrie. 1830. Lettres d'un témoin* (Paris: Société d'Éditions Géographiques, Maritimes et Coloniales, 1930), 98.

*Croquis tunisiens* was published under the pseudonym Yasmina by the Algiers printer Charles
Zamith in 1897. The shorter works by Hélène Roncin located thus far, all signed with the same pseudonym, appeared in *La Revue algérienne illustrée:* "Au fond du ravin: fascination" (16 July 1898); "Pauvre Mingôh (souvenir d’enfance)" (30 July 1898); "Un Coin de l’Islam: au clair de lune" (20 August 1898); "Ma Première heure en Afrique (poésie en prose)" (17 September 1898); "Sur la montagne: excursion" (29 October 1898); "Dernières feuilles" (26 November 1898); "En rêvant" (29 March 1899); "Laid Kebir" (1 July 1899); "La Légende de l’Aroussa" (12 August 1899); "Papillons blancs" (25 November 1899); "En pèlerinage: étude de mœurs indigènes" (10 February 1900); "La Légende du rossignol" (21 April 1900); "La Sirène amoureuse (conte burlesque)" (12 January 1901); "Flecons de neige" (2 March 1901); and "La Légende miraculeuse de l’aqueduc romain" (25 May 1901).

26 Yasmina (Hélène Roncin), *Croquis tunisiens* (Algiers: Charles Zamith, 1897), 1.
27 Ibid., 8.
28 In Yasmina’s prose these expressions include arbî, bicot, its feminine form bicotte, and Fathma (alternatively spelled Fatma).
29 Yasmina (Hélène Roncin), "Pauvre Mingôh (souvenir d’enfance)," in *La Revue algérienne illustrée,* v. 36, no. 4 (30 July 1898): 109.
30 Ibid., 111.
31 A squill is a lilaceous plant (*Urginea matima*), common in the Mediterranean region and sometimes called a sea onion.
32 Yasmina (Hélène Roncin), "Ma Première heure en Afrique (poésie en prose)," in *La Revue algérienne illustrée,* v. 36, no. 11 (17 September 1898): 334.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 335.
35 Recurring images of this sort include plants and insects battling for survival under the relentless, burning North African sun, the leaf or flower torn from its branch or stem by a violent autumn wind, and so forth.
37 Ibid.
38 A member of the infantry troops, also called a turco. In the French colonies and the protectorates, the tireailleurs were recruited from the native populations.
39 Yasmina (Hélène Roncin), "En pèlerinage: étude de mœurs indigènes," in *La Revue algérienne illustrée,* v. 39, no. 6 (10 February 1900): 180. The gondourab is a long, loose-fitting robe worn by both men and women in North Africa. Unlike the djellebah, the gondourab has no hood and shorter sleeves. The *malafa* is a type of head scarf.
40 In the *darja* dialect of North African Arabic, *kabeb* means goat.
42 A siren or water spirit.
43 Yasmina (Hélène Roncin), "La Sirène amoureuse (conte burlesque)," in *La Revue algérienne illustrée,* v. 40, no. 2 (12 January 1901): 54.
44 Ibid., 59.
47 Ali Behdad, evoking the theories of Michel Serres, has suggestively analyzed the relationship of Isabelle Eberhardt’s writings to the colonial power system, identifying the form as a "parasitical" discourse. For more on this reading, see his *Related Travellers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 113-132.