



A Gypsy in the Maghreb: Nomadic Subjectivity in Rosita Forbes's Travel Writings

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This article focuses on two travel writings by Rosita Forbes, based on two expeditions to the Maghreb she made in the early 1920s: *The Secret of the Sahara* (1921), a travelogue about her pioneering exploration of the remote oasis of Kufara; and *El Raisuni: The Sultan of the Mountains: His Life Story* (1924), a generic hybrid combining biography and adventure, based on her interviews of a Moroccan chief of bandits. Special attention is paid to Forbes's representation of her complex identity of transnational subject crossing a multiplicity of borders, as well as to her portrayal of a global South to which she is irresistibly lured despite its many dangers. Drawing on Rosi Braidotti's idea of "nomadic subjectivity", Julia Kristeva's theorization of strangerhood and postcolonial concepts, the article examines Forbes's transnationality, offering evidence of her openness to, and fertile interaction with, otherness. The lure of the South is instead analysed through the polysemic noun "sun" which, insistently mentioned in Forbes's 1944 autobiography, tropes an attractive, albeit unsafe, southern dimension of freedom and self-refashioning. Deeply imbued with Orientalist clichés, this South is the space in which Forbes decided to wander like a gypsy, "a nomadic subject" who, in Braidotti's terms, rethinks her gender role and sexuality by "[r]elinquishing all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity".

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Introduction

“I had been – primarily – a gypsy”, writes Rosita Forbes (1893?–1967)¹ in the closing paragraphs of her 1944 autobiography, *Gypsy in the Sun* (Forbes 1944, 371). An adventurous British woman who explored many areas of the world² – from the Caribbean to Africa, from the Middle East to the Far East –, Forbes became an international celebrity in the interwar period. The variety of texts she authored, including travelogues, articles and adventure novels, were widely read at the time, and her glamorous figure became the object of much attention in the popular press before she fell into obscurity.

This article focuses on Forbes's 1920s adventures in two Maghreb areas – Libya and Morocco – reported in two sensational works that gave her international fame: *The Secret of the Sahara: Kufara* (1921), a travelogue about her pioneering exploration of the oasis of Kufara; and *El Raisuni: The Sultan of the Mountains: His Life Story* (1924), a generic hybrid combining biography and adventure, based on her interviews of a Moroccan chief of bandits. While examining these texts and the risky adventures therein narrated, I pay special attention to two aspects: Forbes's complex identity as a transnational subject crossing a multiplicity of borders (geographical, ethnic, cultural, religious, of gender and class) and her portrayal of a global South to which she is irresistibly drawn despite its many dangers. Forbes's transnationality is analysed in light of the concept of “nomadic subjectivity” developed by Rosi Braidotti, who draws upon Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theorization of nomadology. The lure of the South is instead investigated through the polysemic noun “sun” which, recurrently mentioned in Forbes's writings, tropes an attractive, albeit unsafe, southern space of freedom and self-refashioning.

As suggested by the quotation above, Forbes viewed herself as “a gypsy” always ready to leave her London house and embark on thrilling adventures. Her self-representation in nomadic terms, announced in the very title of *Gypsy in the Sun*, is significantly connected to her exploration of remote lands of sunlight and warmth: “The sun was my invariable companion. As soon as winter threatened – in England – off I went with no clock or calendar, no engagements or responsibilities” (Forbes 1944, 371). What is here evoked is a clear-cut geographical and climatic opposition: North *vs.* South. Associated with seasonal discomfort (“winter”), “engagements”, “responsibilities” and time constraints (“clock and calendar”), England stands for the bleak North that Forbes is anxious to escape, while the lands of her wanderings are connoted in terms of warmth and liberty. Interestingly, her longed-for South coincides with no specific region; it is, rather, a wide imaginary space of autonomy, self-transformation and wish fulfilment in which she can develop into a subject free from social obligations. This conceptualization is confirmed by the first sentence of *Gypsy in the Sun*: “If there is one thing I love, it is the sun” (Forbes 1944, 9). By opening and closing her autobiography with images of her loved “sun”, Forbes connotes her early

¹ Rosita Forbes was born Joan Rosita Torr. The year of her birth varies between 1890 and 1893 according to the source (Rogal 1998, 86). Some critics opt for 1890 (Goudie 2017, 63), while others indicate 1893 (Robinson 1990, 91; Teo 2010, 273).

² As Margaret Cole observes in 1938, mentioning Forbes's previous travels to five continents and announcing her planned expedition to Sub-Saharan Africa: “When that is done there will be little of the world left that she has not had a look at except the polar regions; and no doubt she will go to the North or South Pole if she feels any inclination” (Cole 1968, 310).

travels as desired adventures in a vaguely identified, sunny South. A prominent role in her travel history is played by her 1920s expeditions to the Libyan desert and the Atlas Mountains. Hot, arid and full of hazards, these southern lands combine beauty with hardships, challenging the traveller to overcome a multiplicity of boundaries.

Forbes's choice to explore the two Maghreb areas was no coincidence. If the late Victorian age had witnessed a rise in British travels to such imperial outposts as India and Sub-Saharan Africa, the twentieth century, and especially the interwar period, was characterized by "a broadening of real and imaginary horizons" beyond the borders of the British Empire and a significant change of "the main resorts of exotic romance" which were now identified with "Mesopotamia, part of Arabia, and the French Sahara" (Melman 1988, 94). Like their male counterparts, women travellers were enthralled by "the mystique of the Arab revolt, and the romantically supercharged legend of Lawrence of Arabia" (Melman 1988, 94), which made them seek adventure in wild territories controlled by other European nations.³ This is the case of the Maghreb destinations of Forbes's 1920s travels examined here.⁴ When she embarked on her daring expedition to Kufara in 1920, Libya was partly occupied by the Italians, who had established two colonies in the coastal areas, partly controlled by the Senussi tribes under the leadership of the Emir Sidi Idris (Sidi Muhammad Idris al-Mahdi al-Senussi), who exerted his power on the southern desertic territories. Three years later, Forbes encountered El Raisuni in the Atlas Mountains in central Morocco, a region contested between Spain and France. On both occasions, she ventured over the borders of the British Empire without the protection of her mother country, even though her nationality granted her some respect. The position she occupied in the two expeditions was rife with contradictions. On the one hand, Forbes was particularly exposed to dangers as she lacked the authoritative status of colonizer in the lands she visited. On the other hand, as a citizen of a non-occupying country, she had a privileged vantage point in moving around, observing and collecting information. This freedom was reinforced by the prestige still enjoyed by Britain at the time, which often enabled Forbes to ensure the favour of local people.

The "southern phase" of Forbes's life came to an end in the mid-1930s, when she developed an interest in Central Asia and went on an 8,000-miles journey from Peshwar to Samarkand via Kabul. "But in 1935 I ceased to be a gypsy in love with the sun. For, behind all entertainment and interest of life, I was conscious, like many others, of 'appointment with destiny'" (Forbes 1944, 372) she writes in the last

³ Preferred routes changed gradually between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Victorians identified the South with European countries rich in art and culture, such as Italy or Greece, which were "the haunt of the British artists, academics, and literati" (Pemble 1987, 4). Southern territories like the French Sahara and the desertic Middle East rarely attracted British travellers during the nineteenth century. "By the 1890s a few tourists were making their way to Tunis"; "Tripoli, or Libya, was even more remote; and southern Anatolia was *terra incognita*" (Pemble 1987, 50). It was only after being explored and mapped in the early twentieth century that these areas became interesting travel destinations.

⁴ Forbes was not the only woman who travelled to the Maghreb. Others ventured into little-known areas of North Africa in the same period. Some of them, including Isabelle Massieu (1844-1932) and Lucie Delarue-Mardrus (1874-1945), were Frenchwomen who visited the Maghreb positioning themselves as explorers (Godsoe 2009). Another figure worth remembering is Isabelle Eberhardt (1877-1904), a Swiss woman of Russian origins who explored Algeria and crossed-dressed to travel freely through the Sahara.

paragraph of *Gypsy in the Sun*.⁵ Her indication of 1935 as a watershed in her travel history is rather puzzling if we consider all the hot and sunny places she would explore afterwards. Some light onto this statement is cast by the fact that Forbes seems to have no longer ventured into Maghreb areas in her mature life. The special type of adventures she had enjoyed in these areas before 1935 is, probably, what she had in mind when she announced the end of her early career as “a gypsy in love with the sun”.

Forbes's conceptualization of the South did not strictly coincide with North Africa. Yet, the little-known Maghreb regions she explored, on her journeys to Kufara and the Atlas Mountains, were essential components of her southern imaginary. Wandering in these regions was, for her, a unique experience of liberation and growth: she ventured unprotected into hardly penetrable territories, faced physical hardship and people's hostility, and put her life at stake enjoying a thrilling sense of independence. The experiences of endurance and survival she made on both travels were coupled with her proud transgression of gender limits and the exciting prospect of making a career in the publishing industry. Besides disproving gender prejudices with her stamina and courage, Forbes conceived the two expeditions as professional enterprises, planned after receiving commissions by editors and publishers.⁶ These considerations validate the idea that the yearned-for sunny South was the space of her early transformation into an intrepid, glamorous subject who embarked on risky travels, achieved celebrity, challenged normativity and started a professional career. The destinations of her post-1935 journeys (from Central Asia to the Caribbean) were, instead, spaces of mature experiences, in which she escaped the limelight and made new writing experiments, giving up fiction⁷ to practice various non-fictional forms.

Forbes's Orientalized South

The Maghreb territories into which Forbes ventured in 1920 and 1923 were viewed through Orientalist lenses in Britain. Islamized and in part Arabized as a consequence of centuries-long Arab Muslim expansion, Libya and Morocco merged southern exoticism with eastern fascination and, owing to this combination, tended to be perceived and represented through disparaging Orientalist clichés. These clichés were part of a western prejudiced discourse which, as Edward Said famously wrote about Orientalism, aimed at “dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Other” (Said 1985, 3). A discursive macro-category that included various manifestations, such as Byron's romanticizing of the East, Orientalism reinforced imperial propaganda by attaching negative stereotypes to eastern cultures and populations. Travel writing and literature often contributed to this propaganda by racializing Orientals as fanatical, violent and sexually charged people who, while attracting westerners with Arabian Nights fantasies, proved menacing and

⁵ There is here a reference to the sequel to *Gypsy in the Sun* published two years later: *Appointment with Destiny* (1946). These two volumes were preceded by an earlier autobiography titled *Adventure Being a Gypsy Salad* (1928) “written at the height of her fame” (Teo 2010, 274), which anticipates the “gypsy” imagery of the 1944 text.

⁶ In the case of the Kufara expedition, Forbes was commissioned a series of articles on French colonialism in North Africa by *The Daily Telegraph* (Teo 2010, 278). Similarly, the book on El Raisuni was “a job” she “undertook” after being invited by her publisher to interview the legendary “Sultan of the Mountains” (Cole 1968, 305).

⁷ Her last novel, *The Golden Vagabond*, was published in 1936.

untrustworthy. Similar connotations were attached to the inhabitants of the Maghreb, whose ethnocultural traits derived from the coalescence of Islamic and North African traditions. The result was an Orientalized South of mysteries and savagery, beauty and violence – a peculiar cultural artifact as opposed to the rational, advanced European North.

To say this does not entail a sharp division of the world into asymmetrical oppositions. As Billie Melman suggests, Europe's attitude to the Orient – and, we could add, to the Orientalized South – “was neither unitary nor monolithic”: it changed over the centuries and took particular shapes in the case of women, whose travels were often “emancipating experience[s]” (Melman 1992, 7-8). From a temporal perspective, the Victorian tendency to privilege a binary vision alimeted by imperialism became less evident in the interwar years when travels were influenced by “the perturbing recognition that the lines of demarcation between Europe and the other [were] becoming disturbingly blurred” – a recognition stemming “from disillusionment with European civilisation and dismay at its impact on the rest of the world” (Carr 2002, 81). From a gender perspective, moreover, women's attitudes to cultural otherness generally differed from men's. Such differences are widely attested in travel writings. As Catherine Barnes Stevenson notices about Victorian women travellers to Africa, even though they “accept[ed] the notion of British superiority” and sanction[ed] the presence of Britain in Africa”, these women “frequently voic[ed] strong criticism of their country's treatment of specific situations or particular African tribes”, displaying “a special sympathy for and understanding of peoples whose skin color distinguish[ed] them” (Stevenson 1982, 11). Their reluctance to racialize otherness and their ability to befriend “reputedly ferocious African tribes” was also due to their personal experiences of exclusion “as the ‘other’, the alien” (Stevenson 1982, 11) within a sociopolitical system divided along gender lines.

These considerations cast light onto Forbes's attitude to the Maghreb regions she explored in the 1920s. Even though she travelled claiming the privileged position of an educated, wealthy and autonomous Englishwoman, Forbes was animated by a strong curiosity for local cultures and a desire to immerse herself fully in them. Her cultural openness was strengthened by her “serious” political studies, which made her support Arab nationalism with enthusiasm (Cole 1968, 302). If it is true that she advocated “the superior colonizing skills of the British” (Teo 2010, 279) in comparison with other colonial powers, it is also true that she engaged with otherness, animated by a keen interest in local customs and a strong wish to communicate with people met on her way. The fact that she travelled to territories not controlled by Britain in the two cases examined here favoured her cross-cultural encounters, as it made her freer to side with the colonized and explore their little-known cultures. Forbes's openness to ethnocultural otherness is confirmed, in my view, by the excerpts from her travelogues analysed below, which reveal a woman eager to discover new things and experience them fully. For this reason, I disagree with Andrea Lewis's insistence on Forbes's racializing attitude and her supposed advocacy of “England's morally superior position” (Lewis 1996, 57). As will be shown, the superiority Forbes feels as a westerner capable of using reason and technology is counterbalanced by her genuine admiration for the hospitality, the survival strategies and the spirituality of local people, which she never fails to praise.

The Secret of the Sahara offers several examples of Forbes's receptiveness to the cultures she discovered on her hazardous journey to Kufara. The first European to

visit the remote oasis after Friedrich Gerhard Rohlfs,⁸ Forbes was also the only female component of the expedition⁹ that reached Kufara in January 1921, after toiling two months in the Libyan desert. She travelled with the assistance of Ahmed Mohammed Bey Hassanein, a learned Turkish Egyptian, some Bedouin guides and a group of Sudanese slaves. On the way, they suffered from thirst, hunger, extreme heat, and exhaustion, were caught in sandstorms, and faced the hostility of two local groups, the fanatical Senussi and the predatory Bedouins. Details of these sufferings and perils are offered, in highly realistic style, in *The Secret of the Sahara*, which also narrates her entrance in places never seen by Europeans before and the strong emotions she felt in discovering new cultures. Many passages of this travelogue bear evidence of her deep curiosity about the unknown, to which she is drawn with a spontaneity that disproves allegations of a haughty imperialistic attitude.

The spirituality of local people, and especially of the Senussi, is a main object of interest in the travelogue. When she meets Sidi Idris in Jedabia, for instance, Forbes is deeply struck by his ascetism and charisma. She admiringly writes that the emir has “the strange, visionary eyes of the prophets of old”, comparing him to Christ – “the Nazarene” (Forbes 1921, 3) – in a parallel that cancels cultural and religious hierarchies. In addition to his high spirituality, Sidi Idris is endowed with dignity and gracious manners that mark his superiority: “If graciousness be the token of royalty, then Sidi Idris is crowned by his smile!” (4). Charmed by the emir, Forbes is also fascinated by the “warm kindness and hospitality” of his cousin, Sayed Rida, “young, spontaneous and sympathetic, with a very simple, unaffected manner” (11). Aided by both leaders, who give her precious documents for her travel, she is won by their inborn nobility and gentle manners, which are surprising considering the total power they exert on their subjects, a power “difficult for a European to realise” (35).

More linked to the mundane world, Sayed Rida's grandeur is well rendered by the large meal he offers to Forbes – a real “banquet of hospitality” which, as theorized by Julia Kristeva, is a utopian moment of encounter and mutual recognition, a “cosmopolitan” event “outside time”, a “brotherhood of guests who soothe and forget their differences” (Kristeva 1991, 11). Besides giving details of the luxurious abundance of food, Forbes highlights the man's “kindliness” “as simple and natural as his whole bearing” (Forbes 1921, 13), an endowment that ennobles his figure. Unlike him, Sidi Idris is “a mystic imbued with the aloof dignity of another world” (11), whose ascetism anticipates the various manifestations of Bedouin spirituality described in the travelogue. Soon after meeting the emir, for instance, Forbes is enthralled by the prospect of converting to local beliefs. In a reported conversation with Hassanein, she enthusiastically declares: “I feel as if I had left behind me the last shred of civilisation. The simplicity of life is beginning to impregnate me. [...] When we leave the desert I shall be a Moslem” (10). Even though she adopts the word “civilisation” to refer to Britishness, she is anxious to leave her old self behind, conquered by the “simplicity” of local life and the prospect of becoming “a Moslem”. Her identification with local culture and faith grows during the expedition. Compelled to disguise herself as a Muslim woman called Khadija, the daughter of an Egyptian merchant, she learns to

⁸ Rohlfs arrived in Kufara in 1878, but “the locals did not welcome him” (Goudie 2017, 37). He was denied entrance into the sacred city of Taj, his maps were taken in a raid and he was forced to run away from the oasis (Rogal 1998, 87). Unlike him, Forbes was given permission to visit Taj.

⁹ To be more precise, Forbes was the only *free woman* of the expedition. A few Sudanese girls made part of the journey with them, but they were in a completely different position as chattel slaves.

behave like an Arab, wearing native clothes, reciting the Koran and covering her face in the presence of strangers. “Mrs Forbes had disappeared into space, and in her place was a Mohammedan woman called Khadija” (54), she announces while describing how she impersonates her new self. What is striking is the suggestion that she really comes to feel like a local woman, going through a temporary process of nativization that is not perceived as distressful. Instead of suffering in becoming an Other, Forbes seems to like the experience and connotes her newly acquired customs in terms of self-improvement, at least as long as she stays in the challenging space of the Sahara Desert. One thing she learns, for instance, is to be fatalistic when trouble comes. Her western inclination to act is gradually replaced by Muslim faith and acceptance of the inevitable. “The fatalism of the East had begun to grip us. We decided to put our trust in Allah” (68), she declares in reporting a moment of difficulty. Similar statements become more numerous in the later stages of the expedition, as evidenced by the following excerpts:

Long ago I had realized that we should get to Kufara only if Allah willed, and the farther we moved into the desert the more I felt impelled by some interior force. I was never surprised when difficulties piled themselves up and then vanished without reason at the last moment. I began to feel a fatalistic trust [...]. (115)

[...] the fatalistic spirit of the desert had made us careless. (167)

[...] one becomes terribly fatalistic in the desert. “Allah alone knows” is repeated with complete simplicity by every traveller in the great wilderness. By this time I could well understand the carelessness of the Beduins, their lack of forethought, and their childlike trust in Providence. (253-54)

Unlike many western travellers, who exhibit a haughty distance from local culture, Forbes is influenced by Bedouin fatalism. Her use of the pronoun “us” in the second quotation above suggests cultural assimilation. Instead of stigmatizing the Bedouins for their “carelessness”, moreover, she admits to “well understand” it, thereby showing her openness to the world she is exploring. Worthy of notice is also the strong spirituality she feels in the Kufara mosque. Though “utterly unadorned” as their creed “forbids all luxury”, the holy place has a special atmosphere that makes her understand “something of the awe and reverence of any other shoeless pilgrim” (215). Once again, Forbes identifies herself with local pilgrims and, in a subsequent paragraph, favourably compares the austere mosque to luxurious places of worship around the world: “Yet that low dim chamber in the middle of the Sahara is in its way as impressive as St. Peter’s in Rome, or the Temple of Heaven in Pekin!” (216).

Forbes’s yearning to understand otherness and become part of it, albeit temporarily, is also suggested by her strong desire to penetrate the secret of Kufara. “We felt that we had studied its pages thoroughly, but we knew that we had not read all that lay between the lines”, she regretfully notices in leaving the oasis, displeased to start a return journey that brings her away from “an unsuspected civilisation aloof from our own and utterly different” (244). Applied to the Senussi culture, the word “civilisation” confirms her equalizing attitude. Despite their defects, such as “fanaticism” and distrust of strangers, local people are convincingly praised for their qualities, which include “warm generosity” and spirituality (244). Similarly, the travelogue witnesses Forbes’s deep fascination with the desert. When she starts her travel, she is still influenced by colonial stereotypes that feminize and eroticize the

wilderness. A telling example is her personification of the desert as a “siren” that “destroys while she enthrals” in an early passage (58). The sexual undertones of this trope are in line with the “colonial desire” theorized by Robert Young, who explains that the pervasive erotization of otherness in imperialistic discourse renders the simultaneous lure and threat of colonized subjects and lands (Young 1995). In later passages, however, Forbes’s approach to the desert changes. The more she explores the Sahara, the more she perceives and depicts its real essence, juxtaposing images of the astounding beauty of its landscapes with crude details of its dryness and adverse climate conditions.¹⁰

The cultural metamorphosis Forbes undergoes in the desert is insistently highlighted in the travelogue. Her new frame of mind emerges, among others, in an episode in which she is reassured by her Bedouin guide’s assertion that they are on “a blessed journey”: “It is proof of how far one had wandered from the mentality of London and Paris that his words gave me comfort” (Forbes 1921, 116). Equally revealing is the sadness she confesses to feel at the end of her expedition: “[...] suddenly I felt heartsick for the land I was leaving” (299). In a later paragraph, Forbes describes her agitation at the idea that “the Great Adventure was ended!”, followed by her conviction that, “when Allah willed, I should come back to the deserts and the strange, uncharted tracks, would bear my camels *south again*” (308, my emphasis). The quotation not only expresses her absorption of local fatalism and faith; it also configures the Libyan Sahara as part of a loved South she is unwilling to leave.

Conflicting views and emotions are also at the core of *El Raisuni*, Forbes’s biography of “the Sultan of the Mountains” which, like *The Secret of the Sahara*, evidences her openness to, and fertile interaction with, otherness. After a tiresome travel up the Atlas Mountains, in which she suffers from extreme heat,¹¹ Forbes meets the legendary chief in his abode, where she spends days interviewing him. Although he is feared by local people and Europeans alike, Ahmed Ben Mohammed El Raisuni is described as a splendid host and a bewitching figure. “His manners were gracious and his dignity worthy of his ancient race” (Forbes n.d., 35), Forbes observes, later expressing her admiration for the man’s eloquence, charming voice and prodigious memory (37). Insistently stressed in the biography, his personal endowments counterbalance the violence of his enterprises, which are told by El Raisuni himself in numerous interpolated texts. The result is a mythicized narration of the Sultan’s life which, as Forbes anticipates in the Introduction, interestingly combines “quixotry” with “lust of war and lust of gold – the two strongest passions in a primitive heart” (14). Although she strives to offer a realistic account of the Sultan’s deeds, Forbes tends to mitigate his violence and cruelty, insisting on the qualities she personally notices in the man, namely, his charisma, kindness and spirituality. In addition to mentioning his profound intelligence, love of poetry and faith in the Prophet, from whom he is said to be descended (13-14), she lays much emphasis on his kindheartedness – a quality strangely at odds with his notorious bloodthirstiness. Just

¹⁰ A telling example is a passage in which the author’s observation that the desert has almost killed them is followed by her detailed description of how “the red splendour fade[d] into cold mauve and the grey of the sand, while the evening star blazed as if it were a drop of liquid flame in a sapphire cup [...]” (Forbes 1921, 144).

¹¹ “It was then 108° Fahr. in the shade, and, personally, even in Arabia I have never felt anything hotter than the dry, burning wind, which appeared to issue from an oven among the hills” (Forbes n.d., 28).

before leaving his place, for instance, Forbes notices how El Raisuni's gentleness makes him "a different man" (315). "His face was extraordinarily kindly and the size of it seemed to magnify his smile" she observes, noticing how he has "put aside his reserve" to bid her farewell (315). The affection he shows to his many children grouped there – "I watched a benign patriarch smiling" (315) – is a further signal of his good-natured disposition, of "the other Raisuni" (317) whom Forbes exalts in the face of his official stigmatization.

In ways similar to the Senussi leaders met in Libya, the Moroccan chief epitomizes the complexity of a world that entralls Forbes. Her open-mindedness is the key to her success. Instead of looking down on local people, Forbes relates with them on equal terms. In a telling passage of *The Secret of the Sahara*, she asserts that Hassanein's and her own "love of the Arab race" are their "only passport in the Libyan desert" (Forbes 1921, 101). Never feigned, this "love" is an authentic passion Forbes repeatedly claims to feel in her travelogue. Similarly, her genuine fascination with El Raisuni nourishes their interaction, convincing the frightful chief to share his memories with her. Based on reciprocal esteem, the relationship they establish during the interviews is further testimony to Forbes's keen interest in different cultures, which she yearns to penetrate, understand and interact with. Such a desire configures her as a transnational subject, one that – as theorized by Bill Ashcroft – participates in "the rhizomic interplay of travelling subjects *within* as well as between nations" (Ashcroft 2010, 79). As a "gypsy" willingly moving across cultures, Forbes "escapes the bounded national society" (Ashcroft 2010, 73) to which she belongs by birth, acquiring a nomadic identity that has much in common with the neither/nor subjectivity of diasporic people.¹² What Forbes makes, in Kristevan terms, is an experience of "[n]ot belonging to any place, any time, any love", of "the impossibility to take root" (Kristeva 1991, 7). Her choice to live in a "transition that precludes stopping" favours her cross-cultural encounters, as it makes her feel "a foreigner" who recognizes the stranger living "within [herself]" and, through identification, is "spared detesting him in himself" (Kristeva 1991, 8, 1).

Gendered Nomadism and Self-Redefinition

Braidotti's theorization of nomadic subjectivity helps us unravel some complexities of Forbes's self-representation as an ever-on-the-move subject.¹³ Conceived as a "performative metaphor" essential to feminist redefinitions of subjectivity, nomadism is, for Braidotti, also "an intellectual style", consisting "not so much in being homeless, as in being capable of recreating your home everywhere. The nomad carries her/his essential belongings with her/him wherever s/he goes and can recreate a home base anywhere" (Braidotti 1994, 6, 16). Forbes's travels to the Maghreb and her writings based on these experiences bear witness to her self-refashioning as a nomadic female subject. The "homelessness" she evokes, by representing herself as an adventurous "gypsy in the sun", is a "chosen condition" and "the choice of a situated form of heterogeneity" (Braidotti 1994, 17) through which she aspires to overcome rigid social boundaries, especially those gender limitations that, in the interwar period, continued to restrict women's movement and self-development.

¹² Forbes's problematic belongingness is confirmed by her unconventional choice to be a nomad till the end of her life, spending her last years in the Caribbean rather than Britain.

¹³ A scholar who reads Forbes in light of Braidotti's nomadism is Lisa Regan, but she limits her analysis to three of Forbes's novels, overlooking her non-fictional writings (Regan 2017, 11-12, 116-18).

The achievement of suffrage had certainly improved the conditions of British women in the early twentieth century, but their autonomy was still curbed in many fields. Women fought hard to become journalists and succeed in the publishing industry. Few had access to high education, the domestic ideal was still prevalent and unchaperoned travelling strongly discouraged. The unconventional choices made by Forbes in the early 1920s betray her wish to overcome such barriers. She embarked on two risky adventures that she viewed as professional ventures, as she got commissions to publish books that would bring her fame. Such choices were certainly favoured by her social position and personal endowments. A member of the “landed gentry” with financial independence and “political connections”, Forbes was endowed with “traditional ‘feminine’ weapons of youth, beauty and [...] personal charm” and, as a white British citizen, she was treated as an “honorary white man” by members of “strong patriarchal societies” (Teo 2010, 283-84). Yet, she also had to work hard to achieve the freedom she aspired to. As mentioned in her autobiography, she planned “a career of adventure” when she was a child, reading voraciously and acquiring crucial skills through riding and hunting (Forbes 1944, 11-12). After her early marriage with Colonel Robert Forbes, an officer with whom she travelled extensively, she divorced him “much against [her] parents’ wishes” and left for Paris with “the intention of earning [her] living” (13). These few personal details suggest that Forbes was a strong-willed woman who, from an early age, rebelled against social and familial expectations to pursue her own objectives. If it is true that she enjoyed class advantages by birth, it is also true that she made daring life choices that put both her life and reputation at stake.

Besides developing professionally in the male-dominated publishing industry, Forbes got recognitions rarely granted to women;¹⁴ but it was especially by travelling that she achieved unwonted freedom. Her dangerous expeditions to the Maghreb were crucial moments of self-development. After first journeying with her husband and, as a young divorcee, with a female companion,¹⁵ Forbes ventured without European mates into territories shunned by many. The unconventionality of her journeys was recognized by two famous men. One of them was Benito Mussolini, whom Forbes met in Milan in 1920 and to whom she announced her plan to reach Kufara. As she reports in her autobiography, Mussolini mocked her plan, using humiliating gender stereotypes: “That will be never. Some man will make love to you and so it will end”; “It is a pity you are not a man, [...] for those are a man’s thoughts” (Forbes 1944, 39-40). Less patronizing was a remark by El Raisuni who, on their first meeting, asserted: “You ought to have been a man, [...] for you have speech as well as courage” (Forbes n.d., 35). Forbes must have been challenged by both statements. Aware of her skills *despite being a woman*, she pursued her “career of adventure” with determination and succeeded in both travels, transgressing many gender boundaries.

Without ever calling herself a feminist, Forbes struggled to live on her own terms. Travelling was an essential part of this emancipating process, as her freedom to move physically in space entailed a refusal to confine her subjectivity within fixed

¹⁴ In addition to medals and awards received from prestigious societies, Forbes was made a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society (Bassnett 2002, 237).

¹⁵ Together with Armored Meinertzhagen, nicknamed “Undine”, Forbes made a thirteen-months journey around the world described in her first book, *Unconducted Wanderers* (1919). After this *wanderyear*, however, she separated from Undine to travel alone and prepare for the Kufara expedition, studying Arabic and politics.

boundaries. In so doing, she anticipated Braidotti's idea that "Mobility is one of the aspects of freedom, and as such it is something new and exciting for women: being free to move around, to go where one wants to is a right that women have only just started to gain" (Braidotti 1994, 256). In the early twentieth century, Forbes must have perceived her expeditions as exciting transits towards a new consciousness that resisted gender homologation. It is thus hardly a coincidence that, on her first journey alone, she chose to venture into, and write of, the Sahara Desert: "Nomadic writing longs [...] for the desert: areas of silence, in between the official cacophonies, in a flirt with radical nonbelonging and outsidersness" (Braidotti 1994, 16).

The Secret of the Sahara bears evidence of this half metaphorical, half literal view of desertic nomadism. As suggested above, Forbes repeatedly mentions the loss of her old self during her wanderings in the desert. What she experiences, through her mobility and her assumed identity of Khadija, is an existential transition that acquires meaningful gender implications. Her self-estrangement is well rendered by the "pang" she feels when she "must leave every single European garment behind" (Forbes 1921, 33). Dressed as an Arab woman but covertly pursuing an ambitious masculine project, she has a unique chance to reflect on her complex identity. As a westerner, she undoubtedly occupies a privileged position in comparison to local people. Yet, her national advantages are limited by her being a *female* subject who, even in 'civilized' Britain, must struggle to gain autonomy of movement and action. The conflicting personalities of demure Muslim woman and bold Englishwoman strangely coexist in her. When she first wears local clothes, for instance, she feels that both her trousers and her "red tobh" are "tight"; she struggles to get into a "Beduin feminine attire" (44), thereby configuring herself as a 'constrained' woman forced to wear someone else's skin. In the same paragraph, however, she proudly adds that she "wore [her] revolver belt" under it, "with two fully loaded Colts and a prismatic compass in a case" (45). The references to the weapons and the technical instrument not only suggest the presence of two different models of femininity under the same clothes, but also reveal Forbes's aspirations to overcome the strictures of British gender normativity and adopt an unfeminine, self-assured role. Her expertise in using guns, compasses and cameras is insistently highlighted in the travelogue. When she describes her Kufara sojourn, for instance, she explains the extreme care she takes in hiding her "3A kodak" under her garment and secretly taking photos "beneath the shadow of [her] heavy draperies", feeling that "it was dangerous" (202). While riding in the oasis, moreover, she makes efforts "to manage a wild, toy donkey, keep [her] face completely hidden and secrete about [her] pocketless person two kodaks and a spare roll of films!" (210). Her daring and her skills also come to the fore when, confronted by a group of hostile Bedouins, she takes her revolvers out of the folds of her garment, wondering "with an odd, fierce pleasure how many shots [she] could get in" (180).

Rife with contradictions is also her relationship with Hassanein. Introduced as an "invaluable" person invited "to accompany [her]" (6), he is described as someone who often submits to her decisions (46) and, after breaking his collar-bone in an accident, becomes fully dependent on her (302). The leading function Forbes claims to have fulfilled in the Kufara expedition is confirmed by her narration of how she convinces her male travel companions to follow her directions at crucial moments. This self-portrayal as an authoritative female leader – a role traditionally assigned to heroic men in adventure novels and travel literature – must have sounded disturbing in the 1920s as well as in later years. Not surprisingly, in a recent biography of desert

travellers, Andrew Goudie presents Hassanein as the real leader of the expedition and uses gender stereotypes to curtail the role played by Forbes, defined as a “handsome divorcee, with [...] high heels and sophisticated make-up” who “attempted to seduce Hassanein” (Goudie 2017, 62). The sexism of this statement is not only a manifestation of misogyny; it also suggests the difficulties some critics have in interpreting Forbes’s personality which, made by a daring combination of Arab and British femininity, is further complicated by her unfeminine self-assertion.

Forbes’s attitude to local women adds to this complexity. Despite her disguise as an Arab woman, she mostly interacts with men on travel, sharing food and space with Bedouin soldiers, chiefs and the “brotherhood represented by [her] caravan” (Forbes 1944, 44, my emphasis). Unlike men, local women are generally viewed and portrayed from a distance, as “dark-robed” figures “peeping from the low doorways” or victims of child marriages (Forbes 1921, 102, 238). Similarly, in *El Raisuni* Forbes admits to spending most of her time with the Sultan while paying rare visits to his harem (Forbes n.d., 217). Instead of mingling with Maghrebi women, she tends to gaze at them from a remote position, observing the role they play in their own environment. This observation activates what Melman calls a process of “re-valuation” of the woman traveller’s position (Melman 1992, 308): it produces a series of mirror images that make Forbes reflect on the many contradictions of her own gender identity, perceiving herself both as an autonomous subject and as a disempowered individual, marginalized by patriarchal restrictions that are active both in the Maghreb and, less visibly, in Northern Europe.

Sensual Elements and Generic Experimentation

Forbes’s self-representation as a nomad suggests that the Maghreb regions she explored and described in the 1920s were, for her, important spaces of freedom and self-redefinition. In anticipation of Virginia Woolf’s provocative statement that a woman “has no country” because her country “is the whole world” (Woolf 1993, 234), Forbes finds in these southern regions a transnational dimension in which she can escape normative identity while fulfilling her aspirations to make new experiences. The nomadic subjectivity she creates for herself with the “gypsy in the sun” metaphor is inextricably related to the Orientalized South in which she wanders – an exoticized space of liberty and, simultaneously, of multiplying images of the self that challenge her imagination, encouraging her to reconsider her gender, class, ethnocultural and national affiliations. Sexuality itself becomes an object of reflection on travel. Although she makes no explicit references to sexual adventures, Forbes adds interesting sensual details to her writings. In her Kufara travelogue, for instance, she repeatedly mentions the unease she feels in being exposed to Muslim men’s gaze when she happens to be unveiled – a statement strangely at odds with the image of seductress proposed by Goudie. At the end of her journey, she again confesses to be “ashamed before the gaze of Arabs”: “It seemed to me intolerable that a Moslem should see my face unveiled” (Forbes 1921, 309). In *El Raisuni*, moreover, the close relationship she establishes with the Sultan betrays some erotic tension, as evidenced by his gallant comments, her awareness of his charm and her curiosity about his five wives.

Sensual undertones acquire a homoerotic tinge in *The Secret of the Sahara*, in which Forbes describes a few Sudanese slave girls that join their expedition from Jalo to Kufara. After offering details of the handsome corporeality of Zeinab, “the prettiest slave girl” “with curved full lips and big velvet eyes”, she narrates how, during a

sandstorm, she shares her blanket with the girl and other female slaves making friends with them “under the sheltering thickness” (Forbes 1921, 117). Without being overtly sexualized, the reference suggests an audacious crossing of ethnic borders and a transgressive fascination with the beautiful slave. This potential homoerotic desire confirms that the nomadic “process of redefining subjectivity” theorized by Braidotti is applicable to Forbes’s “mobility” in the Sahara which, in addition to encouraging a rethinking of “identity” and “intellectual power”, makes her reflect on her own “sexuality” (Braidotti 1994, 256). A similar potentiality, albeit conceived in heterosexual terms, is found in Forbes’s early novels, especially in *Quest: The Story of Anne, Three Men, and Some Arabs* (1922). As Lisa Regan observes, *Quest* is a desert romance that triggers sexual fantasies at two levels: by depicting the heroine’s attempted rape by a British officer and by projecting seduction onto a political plane, as a lure exerted by the Arab cause on a travelling Englishwoman who has pledged to defend Arab peoples against “Anglo-French treachery” (Regan 2017, 117).

The sensual elements Forbes adds to her representations of a loved South reinforce the connections among different works produced in the early 1920s. If her travel experiences inspire her composition of desert romances, the imagination developed in her fictional texts nourishes her non-fictional writings. The Libyan travelogue and El Raisuni’s biography bear evidence of the generic experimentation she conducts in those years. Both realistic, (auto)biographical and based on notes taken on travel, the two texts merge a variety of textual forms and styles, including the author’s imaginative projection of fears and desires onto the wild spaces she explores. The addition of self-heroizing elements and the mythization of fascinating people met on her journeys contribute to hybridizing the two texts. Written at a time in which Forbes was also composing fiction (her first two novels appeared in 1922), *The Secret of the Sahara* and *El Raisuni* bear witness to the author’s development of travel writing into a capacious heterogeneous genre, which enables her to attach multiple compelling meanings to her nomadic adventures in the sunny South.

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ARTICOLI

A Gypsy in the Maghreb: Nomadic Subjectivity in Rosita Forbes's Travel Writings

[PDF \(English\)](#)

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Abstract

This article focuses on two travel writings by Rosita Forbes, based on two expeditions to the Maghreb she made in the early 1920s: *The Secret of the Sahara* (1921), a travelogue about her pioneering exploration of the remote oasis of Kufara; and *El Raisuni: The Sultan of the Mountains: His Life Story* (1924), a generic hybrid combining biography and adventure, based on her interviews of a Moroccan chief of bandits. Special attention is paid to Forbes's representation of her complex identity of transnational subject crossing a multiplicity of borders, as well as to her portrayal of a global South to which she is irresistibly lured despite its many dangers. Drawing on Rosi Braidotti's idea of "nomadic subjectivity", Julia Kristeva's theorization of strangerhood and postcolonial concepts, the article examines Forbes's transnationality, offering evidence of her openness to, and fertile interaction with, otherness. The lure of the South is instead analysed through the polysemic noun "sun" which, insistently mentioned in Forbes's 1944 autobiography, tropes an attractive, albeit unsafe, southern dimension of freedom and self-refashioning. Deeply imbued with Orientalist clichés, this South is the space in which Forbes decided to wander like a gypsy, "a nomadic subject" who, in Braidotti's terms, rethinks her gender role and sexuality by "[r]elinquishing all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity".

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