Romans américains: Representations of the United States in Post-9/11 French Fiction

Casey Lynn Warwood
Newtown Square, PA

B.A. in French, University of South Carolina, 2008
M.A. in French, University of Virginia, 2010

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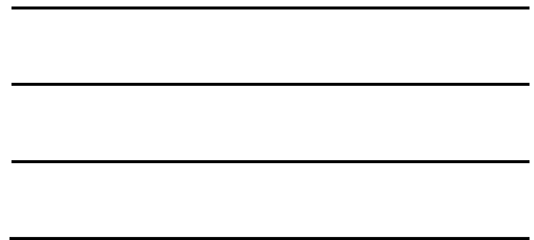

ABSTRACT

Romans américains: Representations of the United States in Post-9/11 French Fiction

This dissertation seeks to define a new sub-genre of the contemporary French novel – the *roman américain* – as texts which engage with and explore America, the Franco-American relationship, or typically American literary genres and topoi. To be sure, French travelers and intellectuals – from Chateaubriand to Tocqueville, from Duhamel to Céline, from Sartre and Beauvoir to Baudrillard – have long been writing about America. In recent years, however, a number of factors – from post-Cold War debates about anti-Americanism, Americanization, and globalization to the terrorist attacks of September 11th and the subsequent war in Iraq, not to forget the "return to storytelling" in post-1980s French literature – have provoked an upsurge in this trend. These *romans américains* represent a range of texts that engage the American experience, from autofictional considerations of the effects of 9/11 and its aftermath on the Franco-American alliance to creative generic experimentations which recast American people, places, and culture as seen through French eyes. This would include, in the first category, Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World* (2003) and Amélie Nothomb's *Une forme de vie* (2010), and in the second category, Jean Rolin's *Le Ravissement de Britney Spears* (2011); Christine Montalbetti's *Western* (2005) and *Journée américaine* (2009), and Tanguy Viel's *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan* (2013). Scholars concentrating on French views of America have long pointed out that, for French writers, America serves as a reflective surface or mirror of sorts. In the *romans américains* that are the subject of this dissertation, the American content is not the only reflective surface. The pages of these self-conscious novels also replicate this reflexivity. The formal, metafictional mirrors make clear that each *roman américain* in this corpus is just as

much about literary creation and the state of the French novel today as it is about the respective authors' views of the United States. American literature and culture may be ubiquitous in France these days, and English may be the global *lingua franca*. These novels are, however, written *en français*. In reflecting on America and in writing their versions of American stories, the authors of *romans américains* refuse to let America – and American literature – have the final word.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation represents the realization of a project that would not have been possible without the guidance, knowledge, and encouragement of many people, especially my dissertation committee. I am grateful to Ari Blatt for serving as director. His engaged readings and rapid responses helped this project to take shape in its earliest days; his astute questions and suggestions continually challenged me to push my ideas further and to draw stronger conclusions. I would like to thank Philippe Roger for sharing his vast knowledge and expertise regarding French (mis)representations of America with me and for helping me to see what is new about the way post-9/11 French fiction engages with America and what isn't. Janet Horne encouraged me to think more globally about France, and her summer program in Lyon offered me a breath of fresh air and new inspiration when I needed it most. I sincerely appreciate Chris Tilghman's willingness to join this project and the unique perspective he brings as someone who knows not just how to critique novels, but also how to write them.

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Most of all, I dedicate this dissertation to my family. I would like to thank my parents, Dick and Sue Ostien, for encouraging my love of French at an early age and for teaching me to run every race with perseverance, including this marathon. Valerie led the way to UVa and continues to inspire me with her adventurous spirit. I'm happy to call her a sister and a friend. Last, but most certainly not least, I am grateful to my husband, Jordan, for his patience and encouragement, unconditional love and understanding. Thank you for sitting beside me throughout this process and for believing in me more than I often did myself.

Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Chapter 1
Traces of Transatlantic Connections in the Wake of 9/11: Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World* 31

Chapter 2
The Pen is Mightier than the Sword in Amélie Nothomb's *Une forme de vie* 71

Chapter 3
Jean Rolin's Take on the Hollywood Novel, *Le Ravissement de Britney Spears* 114

Chapter 4
What is an "American" genre? Christine Montalbetti's Rewrites of the Western and the Road Story 164

Chapter 5
American Pastiche, or Tanguy Viel's Great American Novel *à la française* 210

Conclusion 254

Bibliography 261

Détours et retours:
French Literary Representations of America and Reflections of France

"Je ne dis les autres sinon pour d'autant plus me dire."
Michel de Montaigne, *Les Essais*

In the final week of June 2011, a new edition of the magazine, *L'Express*, appeared on newsstands in France with the headline, "Ce que les Américains pensent des Français." On the cover, amidst the bold stars and stripes of the American flag, a giant eagle's eye stared out at those who passed by the stands or ventured to pick up a copy. Without a doubt, this image presents a clear depiction of *l'œil américain*. The unblinking eye has fixed France (symbolized by the Eiffel Tower reflected in its pupil) in its observant, all-seeing gaze. The implication of this image is that the Dominique Strauss-Kahn affair of May 2011[1] had set off another round of the long-running "jeu de miroirs" in which, as Shanny Peer describes it, members of each country react to the reaction of the other and to the others' perception of himself (Coste "Américains" 58). In other words, another period of transatlantic scrutiny had begun with renewed interest. The article itself explains: "Un peu, beaucoup, passionnément, pas du tout! Le couple franco-américain a connu, au fil du temps, ses hauts et ses bas. Mais les deux peuples semblent plus proches qu'il y a dix ans. L'affaire Strauss-Kahn a-t-elle relancé les malentendus? *L'Express* a regardé dans le miroir qui nous est tendu outre-Atlantique" (Coste "Américains" 58). Thus, over the span of the fifteen-page dossier, a number of journalists and foreign policy specialists

[1] On May 14, 2011, a maid at the Sofitel New York, Nafissatou Diallo, accused Dominique Strauss-Kahn, director of the I.M.F. at the time, of sexually assaulting her. Though the criminal case, "New York vs. Strauss-Kahn," was later dropped, the events and the controversy surrounding them became known as "The D.S.K. Affair." See, for example, Gopnik's May 15, 2011 article in the *New Yorker*.

proceed to examine an array of positive and negative signs in order to assess the state of the Franco-American relationship.

Since the publication of that dossier, the French press has continued to study America and the Franco-American alliance intently.[2] Three months later, in September 2011, French newspapers and periodicals ran countless articles remembering September 11th ten years after the fact. While the articles reveal a variety of viewpoints on the terrorist attacks and their commemoration, they collectively demonstrate that the event remains important in France – and even, that the French feel a specific connection to it.[3] In February 2012, François Hollande's campaign manager told *Le Monde* that Nicolas Sarkozy's campaign would resemble George W. Bush's 2004 campaign (Jaigu). One cannot say precisely how great an effect this comparison between Sarkozy and Bush had on the French voting public. But, "Sarkozy l'américain"[4] would go on to lose the election. Throughout the summer and autumn months of 2012, the French media closely followed the political campaigns leading up to the U.S. Presidential election. The national French news network, TF1, even produced a segment called "L'Amérique et vous: le carnet de route de TF1 aux États-Unis." Over the course of the final weeks leading up to the election, the French journalists for TF1 flew around the United States, reporting their take on the key campaign issues. One month later, French journalists and the public, alike, reacted to the latest mass shooting in America, this

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[2] In this dissertation, when I say America, I am referring to the United States of America, unless I specify otherwise.

[3] In *Le Nouvel Observateur*, one could read articles ranging from "Ces dix ans qui ont changé le monde" to "11-Septembre: la guerre contre le terrorisme a-t-elle été utile?," not to mention "New York Stories," an article on cinema in the Big Apple. In *L'Express* one could read: "Comment le 11 septembre 2001 a-t-il changé les Etats-Unis?," "Le 11 septembre hante la BD depuis 10 ans," "Le 11 septembre en 9 livres," and "Où étiez-vous le 11 septembre 2001?"

[4] See Christophe Deroubaux's "Nicolas Sarkozy l'Américain, le retour," Stephen Kaufman's "M. Sarkozy pourrait aider à ouvrir une nouvelle page des relations franco-américaines," and Nicolas Sarkozy's interview for *Le Monde*, "Nicolas Sarkozy: 'J'aime l'énergie et la fluidité de l'Amérique."

time at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut. They raised questions about the gun control debate and voiced their inability to comprehend the gun culture afforded by their sister republic's Second Amendment.[5]

During the summer of 2013, when Edward Snowden revealed the existence of Prism, the surveillance program which gave the NSA unlimited access to databases with public and private information, many in France and across Europe expressed their distress and disapproval. In July, a French journalist for *Le Figaro*, Jean-Marc Gonin, described the shock of many upon finding out that, because of this "pieuvre américaine [...] Aucun d'entre nous, surtout s'il n'est pas citoyen des Etats-Unis, n'est à l'abri de ce 'cyberregard' inquisiteur." But two months later, Guy Sorman, President of *France-Amérique* seemed to have forgotten all of the spying-related drama. In an editorial, he cited "La convergence des analyses et des intentions stratégiques entre les gouvernements américains et français sur la Syrie" as an example of Franco-American harmony at its best. Whereas the former French ambassador, Jean-David Lévitte, had declared during the fallout over the war in Iraq that the Franco-American relationship "remontait à l'âge de bronze plutôt que l'âge d'or," Sorman optimistically questioned whether France and America were entering "un nouvel âge d'or?" Sorman spoke too soon, it would seem. His article dated September 11, 2013 must have hit the presses before "the trauma of Aug. 31" when President Obama told François Hollande that the U.S. would not participate in "the expected joint military response the next morning to the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons" (Cohen). After all of the ups and downs of the summer and fall months, François Hollande's visit to the United States in February 2014 was a time to mend bridges. Though the French President still expressed his

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[5] See Sylvie Kauffmann's article in *Le Monde*, "Tuerie de Newtown: le fusil et l'identité américaine."

reprobation over the surveillance, L'Elysée and the French press happily viewed President Obama's choice to invite him to Thomas Jefferson's Monticello as "[un choix] éminemment symbolique" (Lesnes).[6] After all, Jefferson was not just a former U.S. ambassador to France (1785-1789), but also a self-proclaimed Francophile who once wrote that if he had to choose to live in any country besides the United States, he would, without hesitation, choose France (Jefferson and H.A. Washington 107). Finally, throughout the fall of 2014, the French media followed closely the series of protests and debates about racial equality and police brutality following the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, as well as the discussions surrounding the problem of sexual violence at American universities.[7]

Indeed, as one can see from these isolated but telling examples in recent history, the French press does not miss an opportunity to comment upon and assess the state of the Franco-American alliance. France is always looking at America for one reason or another. As Éric Fassin states in his 2006 article, "*Libéralisme* and its American Mirror": "In contemporary French public debates, whether good or bad, 'America' always seems – to borrow a phrase from Claude Lévi-Strauss – 'good to think'" (275). While Fassin's article compares French and American forms of liberalism in the 1980s and 1990s, it has contemporary resonance. France needs America "to think," so as to consider by comparison the state of the French nation and the world in the 21st century. This is because, according to Fassin, America remains "a floating signifier" in French intellectual and political discourse (279). This is no less true in the literary sphere.

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[6] See also Wieder and Delesline III.

[7] See, for example, Stéphane Lauer's "Colère à New York après un nouveau non-lieu pour un policier" and Maurin's "Ferguson, Chaudron Des Tensions Raciales Aux États-Unis" and Camille Jourdan's article, "L'épineux problème des viols sur les campus américains."

In fact, one could say that America has served as "a floating signifier" for French individuals ever since the Revolutionary period, and even before. This would be true for Buffon, Raynal, Volney, Chateaubriand, Tocqueville, and many others.[8] Over the course of the 20th Century alone, French writers and intellectuals continually looked to, studied, and explored America, as they had since the founding of the two republics. They did so with renewed interest after each of the world wars. After World War I, Georges Duhamel, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Hergé, and Paul Morand all produced works that scrutinized and critiqued America and the American way of life.[9] Then, immediately after World War II, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir did so as well.[10] This French interest in examining the American way of life continued throughout the second half of the 20th century. From the 1960s through the 1990s, there was a wave of French writers who traveled to and wrote about America: Jean Baudrillard, Yves Berger, Michel Butor, Tony Cartano, Didier Decoin, Maurice Denuzière, Serge Doubrovsky, Philippe Labro, and Alain Robbe-Grillet.[11] They presented a wide range of perspectives and styles, from anti-American to pro-American viewpoints; from very literary to more personal and popular approaches. During that same time period, texts set in France reacted to and represented fears related to Americanization and the hegemonic

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[8] See Buffon's *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière, avec la description du Cabinet du Roy* (1799), Raynal's *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des européens dans les deux Indes* (1780), Volney's *Tableau du climat et du sol des Etats-Unis d'Amérique* (1803), Chateaubriand's *Voyage en Amérique* (1828), and Tocqueville's *De la démocratie en Amérique* (1835).

[9] See Duhamel's *Scènes de la vie future* (1930), Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932), Hergé's *Les Aventures de Tintin: Tintin en Amérique* (1932), and Morand's *New York* (1930).

[10] See Sartres' "New-York, ville coloniale" in *Situations III* (1946) and *La Putain respectueuse* (1946) and Beauvoir's *L'Amérique au jour le jour* (1947).

[11] See Baudrillard's *Amérique* (1986); Berger's *Dictionnaire amoureux de l'Amérique* (2003), *Le Fou d'Amérique* (1976), and *Le Sud* (1962); Butor's *Mobile: Étude pour une représentation des États-Unis* (1962); Cartano's *American Boulevard: De Washington a Los Angeles Par La Route Du Sud* (1992); Decoin's *Abraham de Brooklyn* (1976) and *John l'enfer* (1977); Denuzière's six-part *Louisiane* series (1977-87); Doubrovsky's *Fils* (1977), *Le livre brisé* (1989), and *L'Après-vivre* (1994); Labro's *L'étudiant étranger* (1986), *Un Été dans l'ouest* (1988), and *Rendez-vous au Colorado* (1997); and Robbe-Grillet's *Projet pour une révolution à New York* (1970).

American way of life. On the one hand, George Perec's *Les Choses* (1965) engages with issues related to the coming of consumer society; on the other hand, Pascal Quignard's *L'Occupation américaine* (1994) presents, 40 years after the fact, French reactions to the American military presence in France. Indeed, as Fassin argues, the French perennially look to the United States for a variety of reasons, and their perception of and relationship to America changes constantly.

Since September 11, 2001, this statement rings truer than ever. Following the terrorist attacks, a new generation of French writers and intellectuals has turned to America. In the aftermath of the event, there were very diverse reactions in France, from displays of overwhelming solidarity towards Americans to controversial theories that America all but deserved such an attack, which was merely a symbolic reaction to unchecked capitalist globalization.[12] After all, as Margaret-Anne Hutton explains in her article, "Constructions of Europe and America in '9/11' prose texts": "like all acts of political violence, the terrorist attacks […] led to a re-examination of national and supranational identities and alliances" (250). This is true not just in official discourses of politics, media, and theory, but also in literary texts. In fact, in her article, Hutton treats six French texts that present various views of the connection between Europe (specifically France) and America post-9/11: from positive appeals to the historical

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[12] Two days after the attacks Jean-Marie Colombani's article expressed the utmost solidarity with the United States when he wrote an article entitled "Nous sommes tous Américains." Colombani, the editor of *Le Monde* at the time, would go on to qualify his statements, first, in another article in *Le Monde* in 2001, "À Nos Amis Américains", and then, in a follow-up book, *Tous Américains? Le monde après le 11 septembre 2001*. Baudrillard's essay, "L'Esprit du terrorisme," provocatively states that the collapse of the Twin Towers was the "strongest symbolic shock," and that their "suicide" was evidence that "it [was] therefore neither a clash of civilizations nor of religions […] [but of] triumphant globalization grappling with itself" (406).

Franco-American connection to negative views of a dystopic post-9/11 world" (251-252).[13] She comes to the conclusion that,

> Literary discourse(s) construct considerably more varied, and more subtle, post-9/11 versions of America, Europe, and the relationship between the two than can be found in those discourses which either promote a binary opposition (Europe versus America) or point to the fault-lines within 'the West' and 'global capital.' (Hutton 262-263)

In short, these literary representations provide, as Hutton says, "more varied and nuanced reflections on what it means to say 'we' post-9/11" (249).

What is a *roman américain*?

Indeed, since September 11th, many writers have taken up the challenge of representing the events of the attacks and related themes. Recent French literary representations of America are not, however, limited to texts about September 11th and its aftermath. In fact, contemporary French writers produce works of fiction that present images of the United States from East Coast to West Coast and everywhere in between. They include New York novels, Hollywood novels, thrillers, Westerns, road stories, and even Great American novels *à la française*. As a group, I refer to these works as *romans américains* and define them as French texts which engage with and explore America, the Franco-American relationship, or typically American literary genres and topoi.[14] I would like to suggest that this current turn toward America represents a new sub-genre of the contemporary French novel. If I were to translate *roman américain* into

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[13] She discusses Bruno Dellinger's *World Trade Center 47e étage* (2002), Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World* (2003), Luc Lang's *11 septembre mon amour* (2003), Salim Bachi's *Tuez-les tous* (2006), Didier Goupil's *Le Jour de mon retour sur Terre* (2003), and Maurice Dantec's "Vers le nord du ciel" in *Artefact: Machine à Écrire 1.0* (2007).

[14] Christine Montalbetti actually refers to *Journée américaine* as a "roman américain" in *En écrivant Journée américaine* (36) and then again to the fact that she set out with a desire to write a "roman américain contemporain" in "L'Espace" 127. In both cases, she uses this term in reference to the novel's American setting. My definition of the *roman américain* includes – but is not limited to – this sense of geographic setting.

English it would be "American novel" as distinguished from American novel *tout court*. These books present the image of an American novel while remaining fundamentally French, which is to say that the *roman américain* is always, first and foremost, a *roman français*.[15]

In what follows, I focus, in particular, on novels by authors as diverse in style as Frédéric Beigbeder, Amélie Nothomb, Jean Rolin, Christine Montalbetti, and Tanguy Viel. Their works represent a range of texts that engage the American experience, from autofictional[16] considerations of the effects of 9/11 and its aftermath on the Franco-American alliance to creative generic experimentations which recast American people, places, and culture as seen through French eyes. This would include, in the first category, Beigbeder's *Windows on the World* (2003) and Nothomb's *Une forme de vie* (2010), and in the second category, Rolin's *Le Ravissement de Britney Spears* (2011); Montalbetti's *Western* (2005) and *Journée américaine* (2009), and Viel's *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan* (2013). Ultimately, each is just as much about literary creation and the state of the French novel today as it is about America.

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[15] As I will explain later in greater detail, I define a *roman français*, a French novel, in terms of its publication and reception. See Viart and Vercier 9-10.

[16] In his 1977 text, *Fils*, Serge Doubrovsky defined autofiction as, "Fiction, d'événements et de faits strictement réels. Si l'on veut, autofiction, d'avoir confié le langage d'une aventure à l'aventure d'un langage hors sagesse et hors syntaxe du roman, traditionnel ou nouveau" (10). The author and autodiegetic narrator in *Windows on the World* and *Une forme de vie* do share the author's name. Yet, Beigbeder's and Nothomb's texts do not align perfectly with Doubrovsky's definition because they include fictional characters and imagined events. Since Doubrovsky first named and defined autofiction, there have, however, been many different attempts to define the term. Beigbeder's and Nothomb's variations of autofiction correspond more readily to Marie Darrieussecq's commonly accepted definition: "Récit à la première personne se donnant pour fictif mais où l'auteur apparaît homodiégétiquement sous son nom propre et où la vraisemblance est un enjeu maintenu par de multiples 'effets de vie'" ("L'autofiction, un genre pas sérieux" qtd. in Genon). In using this loaded term, I want to emphasize that Beigbeder's and Nothomb's texts "test the boundaries of generic definition" (Eakin 26) while conveying the "indépassable entre-deux du récit référentiel et de la narration fictive, cette intertextualité constitutive et sans cesse oscillante" (Doubrovsky "Pourquoi l'autofiction?").

In my first chapter, I examine how, in Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World*, the French narrator professes a compulsion to write about the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center so as to understand his feeling of connection to the event and to America. In his view, 9/11 was not a uniquely visual event, nor was it just an American event. The series of spatial, historical, cultural, and personal transatlantic ties he establishes throughout the novel can be read, on one level, as a rhetorical attempt to give himself the authority to write about this tragic event in which he was not directly involved, and on another level, as an attempt to understand the troubled nature of his relationship with America. A second look at the mirrored monologues of the French narrator and his American counterpart combined with a comparative reading of *Windows and the World* and Beigbeder's 2009 autobiographical novel, *Un Roman français*, reveals that, if Beigbeder feels so inexplicably connected to the terrorist attacks in New York, it is because this traumatic event in the present brings memories of the most traumatic moments in his own past to the surface. By turning to America and the 9/11 attacks, Beigbeder is also trying to remember – and write about – his childhood. In other words, this *roman américain* about the largest terrorist attack on American soil, which also depicts the complicated dynamics of the Franco-American relationship, should be considered Beigbeder's first attempt to write *Un Roman français*. The novel, for Beigbeder, is both a window on the world and a mirror into his inner world.

In my second chapter, I analyze how Nothomb writes to denounce war – specifically the American-led war in Iraq – in the hopes that her work will model for her readers how to wage wars *of words*, instead, through diplomacy and dialogue. Throughout the narrative, Nothomb plays with the construction of identity, particularly

with the boundary between the self and the other, and notions of sameness and difference as she presents the epistolary exchange between her autofictional avatar and Melvin Mapple, an American soldier in Baghdad. Overall, she produces a positive picture of Franco-American relations and evidence that, when we look on an individual level, we see that the West is not so hopelessly divided on all issues. As opposed to war which provokes physical and political conflict and brings out human beings' brutality, Nothomb celebrates literature which has the power to create a common fictional reality and focus on shared humanity. Amélie's final deception of Melvin demonstrates, however, the veracity of Blaise Pascal's adage which states that, "L'homme n'est ni ange ni bête et le malheur veut que qui veut faire l'ange fait la bête" (370). Ultimately, one understands that Amélie's initial decision to respond to Melvin in this *roman américain* is meant to mirror the role America played in the War in Iraq. Nothomb shows how – whether in international relations or in interpersonal relationships – good intentions can be misleading. If the shocking dénouement threatens to unravel everything, it also reminds one that, in the end, this is all part of a masterfully crafted story. Nothomb problematizes the distinction between fiction and real life: is fiction, which derives from the Latin word *fingere* meaning "to make or to form," also *une forme de vie*?

In my third chapter, I argue that Jean Rolin's *Le Ravissement de Britney Spears* is not just a pastiche of a spy novel, but also his take on the Hollywood novel.[17] The secret mission to survey and protect Britney Spears from an Islamic group's terrorist threat is merely pretext to explore the ins-and-outs of Los Angeles – not just the glitz and glamour of Hollywood celebrity culture, but also the less-publicized, peripheral and marginalized spaces. As many L.A. writers (American and French) have done before

[17] A Hollywood novel is a text in which the capital of the American motion picture industry serves as the setting, and often, as the central subject-matter.

him, Rolin attempts to demystify the myth of Hollywood and explore these two realities of Los Angeles – what I term the "reel" side (a representational cultural construct populated by celebrities) and the "real," yet often hidden side (a geographic entity inhabited by ordinary people). He draws attention to the superficiality and artificiality of Hollywood celebrity culture, but with a comical detachment, he simultaneously shows how enticing it is. He also brings the fringe spaces into the center of attention, undoing the totalizing opposition between center and periphery (or visible and invisible) and shining a spotlight on the otherwise unnoticed people of Los Angeles. Ultimately, Rolin's "Hollywood novel" challenges the notion of what constitutes "serious" French literature, and leaves the reader to ponder the fate of French literature in an era dominated by images. Based on Rolin's choice of intertexts and metafictional commentary about literature, I believe he wants us to see that novels are worth regarding.

In my fourth chapter on Christine Montalbetti's *Western* and *Journée américaine*, I situate my reading of the novels in the context of the history and iconography of the Western and the road story and draw on Bakhtin's concepts of "generic contacts" and "genre memory" (Bakhtin 157, 106) in order to elucidate how Montalbetti transforms these two genres deemed classically American into "critical" French novels. On a fundamental level, her works of *bricolage*, which reference European cinema of the 1960s (e.g. Godard and Leone), raise issues of transcultural literary borrowing as she refashions American images to fit the French language and her own personal style. In creating literary pastiches of "American" genres, she challenges us not just to read

differently, as Warren Motte would say,[18] but also to look at categories of literature – and the world – differently. In today's cosmopolitan world of increased mobility, communication, and interaction, scholars advocate the need to "remap the geographies of literary and cultural forms" (Jay 4). Ultimately, Montalbetti's *romans américains* cleverly call into question the process by which genres become codified, and especially, the idea that a genre can be termed quintessentially American, French, or otherwise.

In my fifth and final chapter, I argue that *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan* represents Tanguy Viel's playful pastiche of the Great American Novel and an ironic response to the discourses of decline which denigrate French literature and declaim the "death of French culture" more broadly. Just as Viel has previously turned to cinema as a source of inspiration to invigorate his writing, he turns to the contemporary American novel for the same reason, incorporating that which might be said to threaten the vitality of French literature into his writing in order to enliven it. By performing a comparative reading of *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan* and its American and French intertexts, I show how Viel evinces a "cheerful irreverence" as he imitates certain elements of the American novels invading French bookstores, but also departs from them at times, refusing to lose his own style and refusing to let go of his Frenchness. Ultimately, it is quite clear that French fiction is alive and well. After all, *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan* is not a Great American Novel, but rather a Great American Novel *à la française*.

My goal in choosing works that represent a diverse range of styles is to illustrate how widespread this turn to America is in post-9/11 French fiction. Rather than trying to treat all of the *romans américains* that have been published during the time period in

[18] See *Fiction Now* 177-206.

question, I have chosen to analyze at length six specific texts for two reasons. First, the former approach would prove challenging given the number of potential texts that have appeared and continue to appear. I also fear that such an approach would risk superficial and reductive readings that would gloss over the idiosyncrasies of each text in favor of generalizing elements of the larger trend. In this way, my treatment of *romans américains* is quite unlike François Lagarde's treatment of French novels set in America in the fourth chapter of his book, *Français aux Etats-Unis (1990-2005): Migration, langue, culture, économie*. In the 35-page chapter entitled "Romans" he lists more than 80 texts that were published during the timeframe of his study.[19] Given the number of titles, he focuses on the content of the novels, providing summaries and brief analysis of each. In his attempt to classify them, he divides them into two large categories, *romans imaginaires* and *romans réalistes* (which includes novels with an autobiographical basis by tourists, students, expatriates, and immigrants, as well as "faux portraits"). For Lagarde, the novels are just another source of information "après les statistiques et les décomptes officiels, après les rapports et les enquêtes […] qui mettent en scène des Français résidant aux Etats-Unis" (97). In the conclusion to his chapter, he consents that, for many of the novels he has listed, "la valeur littéraire est trop souvent nulle" (131). Certainly, the purpose of his treatment of novels set in the U.S. is very different than mine; literature only figures as one subject among several as opposed to the central concern.

Therefore, while Lagarde's substantial list is impressive – and a helpful resource for future attempts to identify antecedents of the post-9/11 *roman américain* (e.g. Serge

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[19] While he counts approximately 200 French texts set in the United States since the publication of Philippe Labro's *L'Étudiant étranger* in 1986, only half represent a French person or persons in America, the other half "n'ont de français que leur auteur, ni les données de l'histoire ni les personnages du roman n'étant particulièrement français" (97).

Doubrovsky's autofictions) – I have opted for a decidedly different approach. By engaging in-depth with a fixed number of texts, I have endeavored to enrich my analysis by performing comparative and intertextual readings in order to show how these works are situated within each writers' *œuvre* as well as how they interact with the American genres they pastiche and the French texts they recall. In addition to making every effort to situate each text in its historical context and in literary history, I also mobilize concepts of narrative theory developed by Mikhail Bakhtin, Dorrit Cohn, Gérard Genette, and Gerald Prince. Finally, I draw on works of cultural history that trace the genealogy of the Franco-American connection and the major issues of anti-Americanism and Americanization so as to add insight to my readings of these French representations of America.

Because I anchor my study of the representations of the United States in these works in the history of the Franco-American relationship, I have limited myself to works of French literature of the Hexagon. There are certainly Francophone works of merit that present intriguing views of America. The fifth work in Dany Laferrière's American cycle, *Cette grenade dans la main du jeune nègre est-elle une arme ou un fruit*? (2002), would serve as a case in point.[20] In the text, the autobiographical narrator sets out on a journey around the United States in order to write a report on America for which he has been commissioned. Dream and reality clash in the America the narrator discovers, and the resulting portrait he paints is a fragmented one. His journey, it appears, is as much imagined as it is real; as much – if not more so – about his journey to assert his identity as an American writer as it is about his journeys in America. For

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[20] Most often, when Laferrière uses the term, "America," he is referring to North America in general. In this text, however, the trip for which the narrator's work has been commissioned is a trip around the United States. Even so, he often extends his portrait of the United States to include Canada. Laferrière's 2002 edition of *Cette grenade* is a considerable rewrite of the initial 1993 version.

the narrator, who wants to conquer America, writing is both his weapon and his hope of harvesting the fruits of success in America.[21] *Cette grenade* poses important questions about writing and rewriting, intertextuality, and genre, while also addressing issues of contemporary importance about race in America. Nevertheless, if I were to include Francophone works of diverse origin, it would complicate the paradigm and prevent me from drawing any substantial conclusions about the Franco-American relationship. As Dominique Viart has said, "qui trop embrasse, mal étreint. Traiter vraiment de la littérature francophone suppose en effet des compétences bien diverses et très étendues" (*La Littérature* 9). What's more, besides leaving aside Francophone views of America (for now), I am following Viart's example in defining the works I treat as French based on their publication and reception:

> Publication: car c'est un trait discriminant que celui de l'éditeur. Selon que l'écrivain publie la première édition de ses livres en son pays ou en France, il ne se destine pas exactement aux mêmes lecteurs. Lorsque Jean-Philippe Toussaint, Amélie Nothomb ou Eugène Savitzkaya font paraître leurs livres en France, ils écrivent à l'intérieur de la littérature française, quel que soit le sentiment qui les attache à la Belgique. Réception: car le lectorat français reçoit ces écrivains sans faire aucune différence entre eux et les autres. Il lui arrive même de ne pas les savoir étrangers (c'est sans doute un trait de 'l'annexionnisme' français) et d'en faire les représentants majeurs d'une certaine littérature 'française.' (Viart and Vercier *La Littérature* 10)

Amélie Nothomb is Belgian, of course, but, according to these two factors, her literature is French: her works are published by Albin Michel and her writing has been more recognized in France than in Belgium.

Why America Now?

Given the extremely contemporary nature of my corpus, my work enters into relatively uncharted territory. It is true that Beigbeder, Nothomb, Rolin, Montalbetti,

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[21] Without a doubt, Laferrière's title plays with the double meaning of the French word *grenade*, which could be a hand-grenade or a pomegranate.

and Viel's works have all attracted scholarly interest over the past two decades. Numerous articles and books also treat topics related to my dissertation including 9/11 literature, the Iraq War, the European road movie, the "return to storytelling" of the contemporary French novel, and various aspects of the Franco-American relationship. But aside from Beigbeder's *Windows on the World*, the novels of my corpus have received little scholarly attention.[22] There may be a dearth of scholarship about the novels of my corpus, and the idea that these texts form a sub-genre of the contemporary French novel has not received much attention, but I am not entirely alone in remarking this phenomenon. Several months ago, in the October 2014 issue of *The French Review*, William Cloonan's yearly retrospective on the French novel appeared, entitled: "The American Scene (*version française*): The Novel in 2013." In the article, Cloonan lists as primary examples Viel's *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan* and Joël Dicker's *La Vérité sur l'affaire Harry Quebert* (2012), along with novels by Marie Darrieussecq, Paul Fournel, and Richard Millet, among others, which feature the American scene (*version française*), as he calls it.[23] In his view, a rather obvious reason for this trend is the general French fascination with the United States coupled with the fact that American icons have, these days, become international icons (67). Indeed, the upsurge in French novels featuring Hollywood starlets from Marilyn Monroe to Jayne Mansfield and from Britney Spears to

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[22] To date, one article, one book chapter, and one dissertation chapter have respectively been dedicated to *Une forme de vie*, *Western*, and *Journée américaine*. See Chevillot "Invitation," Motte *Fiction Now* 177-206, and Brand "Moving Targets" 106-36. To my knowledge, no scholarly articles have yet been devoted to *Le Ravissement de Britney Spears* and *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan*.

[23] Besides Viel and Dicker's works, the other "American scene (*version française*)" novels that Cloonan cites are: Marie Darrieussecq's *Il faut beaucoup aimer les hommes*, Paul Fournel's *Jason Murphy*, Richard Millet's *Une artiste du sexe*, Karine Tuil's *L'invention de nos vies*, François Saintonge's *Dolfi et Marilyn*, Alban Lefranc's *Le ring invisible*, Tancrède Voituriez's *L'invention de la pauvreté*, Alexandre Mathis' *LSD 67*, and Iegor Gran's *L'ambition*. He also mentions Grégoire Delacourt's *La première chose qu'on regarde* in an endnote.

Scarlett Johansson exemplifies this fact.[24] Cloonan also wagers that American novels attract attention in France "in part because the stories they tell are perceived to privilege action, movement and extreme situations over Gallic cogitation" (68). Though he concludes his article by saying, as I do, that the presence of the American scene in French fiction is a "burgeoning presence" (76), Cloonan admits that it is easier to observe the trend than to explain why it is happening. He acknowledges that his attempts to provide the reasons for the American scene (*version française*) – and what I call the *roman américain* – are "only the beginning of an explanation" (76).

Though I believe that it would be impossible to explain *exactly why* French novelists are presently turning to America, and though I think that the questions of *what* they do and *how* they do it elicit more fruitful responses, I do think it is worth exploring several potential factors that have influenced this phenomenon. As I have mentioned, the terrorist attacks of September 11th garnered much attention in the media, as well as in the intellectual and literary spheres. Scholars have extensively debated the singularity and symbolic significance of the event.[25] Regardless of whether one considers 9/11 an event of historical rupture, one cannot deny that the events of September 11th and the subsequent war in Iraq have incited much literary production. Novels such as Beigbeder's *Windows on the World* and Nothomb's *Une forme de vie* are just two examples of works that quite simply would not have been written if the

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[24] Cloonan mentions two that came out in 2013: François Saintonge's *Dolfi et Marilyn* and Grégoire Delacourt's *La première chose qu'on regarde* (65, 76). Others that fit the bill, besides Jean Rolin's *Le Ravissement de Britney Spears*, are: Nelly Kaprièlian's debut novel, *Le Manteau de Greta Garbo* (2014), Simon Liberati *Jayne Mansfield 1967* (2011), François Bégaudeau *et al.*'s collaborative novel about Anna Nicole Smith, *Une Chic Fille* (2008), and Michel Schneider's *Marilyn Monroe, dernières séances* (2006).

[25] For a wide range of perspectives in the debate, see Baudrillard "L'Esprit" 403-13, Bell and Schuerewegen iv, Borradori 91, Daniel 5, DeLillo 1-2, Doran 3, 10-13, Keniston and Quinn 1-11, and Žižek 387-88.

terrorist attacks of September 11th and the events that ensued had not taken place. Thus, one could certainly argue that 9/11 contributed to the increase in *romans américains*. Yet, in using the epithet Post-9/11 French texts, I do not wish to imply that the event has forever altered the global literary landscape.[26] The relationship between 9/11 and *romans américains* is not one of cause and effect. For some novels in this category, September 11th is merely an historical – and often ironic – frame of reference. This would be true of Jean Rolin's *Le Ravissement de Britney Spears* and Tanguy Viel's *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan*. Other *romans américains*, like Christine Montalbetti's rewrites of the Western and the road story, make no mention of 9/11 whatsoever. Thus, while a French 9/11 literary discourse developed and constitutes one of the prominent subtexts of *romans américains*, I must reiterate that not all *romans américains* are 9/11 novels, or necessarily even post-9/11 novels. In other words, I have chosen the post-9/11 time period to delimit the field.

One could argue that intellectual debates and discussions about anti-Americanism, Americanization, and globalization, which peaked in the years following the Cold War as France and America began to see the differences that their alliance against the Soviet bloc had long kept hidden, have also provoked this proliferation of *romans américains*. Based on the sheer number of academic books and scholarly journals dedicated to these topics over the past 20-25 years, one would be hard pressed to say that these deliberations have not left an indelible mark on the *imaginaire*

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[26] The event has not fundamentally altered writing the same way that World War II contributed to the advent of *l'ère du soupçon*. What's more, American writer, Don DeLillo's 1991 novel, *Mao II*, would confirm that a discourse of terrorism was already well established. See Rothberg 131, Virilio 81, and Wilson 108.

français, writers included.[27] What's more, since the turn of the century, the love-hate dynamics of the Franco-American "love affair" have overshadowed the "official discourse [which maintains] that the two countries are the best of allies" (Bishop 21). If conflict makes for good novels, the Franco-American relationship has, as of late, provided much literary inspiration. This argument would seemingly apply more to Beigbeder's and Nothomb's novels, which directly engage the Franco-American connection, than to Rolin's, Montalbetti's, and Viel's pastiches of American literature and film.

Furthermore, because of Americanization (which is really globalization and the coming of consumer society by another name), American culture is omnipresent in

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[27] Indeed, much has been written about the Franco-American relationship in cultural history, in intellectual and philosophical debates, as well as in economic and political accounts. Studies of how the French perceive America have focused on broad topics such as anti-Americanism and Americanization. Some seminal texts are: Richard Kuisel's *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (1993) and *The French Way: How France Embraced and Rejected American Values and Power* (2011), Jean-Philippe Mathy's *Extrême-Occident: French Intellectuals and America* (1993) and *French Resistance: The French-American Culture Wars* (2000), Jacque Porte's *Fascination and Misgivings: The United States in French Opinion, 1870-1914* (2000, original French edition published in 1990), Philippe Roger's *L'Ennemi américain* (2002), and Vanessa Schwartz's *It's So French!: Hollywood, Paris, and the Making of Cosmopolitan Film Culture* (2007). Since the turn of the century, scholarly journals dedicated to related topics include: *Yale French Studies*' "France/USA Cultural Wars"(2001); *French Politics, Culture and Society*'s "Déjà Views: How Americans Look at France" (2003); *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* (Summer and Fall 2004); *Contemporary French Civilization*'s "After 9/11: European Perspectives" (2005); and *The French Review*'s special edition, "Francophonie aux USA" (2007). Over the past 20 years, a number of M.A. and Ph.D. theses have been dedicated to various facets of Franco-American cultural history and French literary views of America. They include: Seth Armus' "Primacy of the Spiritual: French Resistance to America and the Formation of French Identity," Edward Dawley's "French perceptions of America: From the Roaring Twenties to the Cold War," Catherine Gillot's "La France au miroir de l'Amérique dans les années 1920 (Morand, Duhamel)," Lana Hamon's "Romancing the Land: America in Contemporary French Literature," Mark Harris' "Fantasy America: The United States as Seen through French and Italian Eyes," Holly Hutton's "Imported from France: American Adaptations of Existentialist Ideas and Literature," Dominique Laurent's "America in the French Press: Images of the United States in two French daily newspapers, March-May 1954," Catherine Melvin's "Cross-Cultural Representations: The Construction of 'America' after September 11th in English Canadian, Quebec and French Print Media," Andrew Moore's "French Observations of America: Intercultural Commentary in the Age of Revolution," Alice Pigott's "Echoing Temporalities: French Travelers to the United States of America (1927–1986)," Elizabeth Sawyer's "'The Honest Enthusiasm of Religious Opinion:' Christian Republicanism and America's Quasi-War with France," Julie Schweitzer's "Irresponsibly Engage: Boris Vian and Uses of American Culture in France, 1940–1959," Jennifer Wilson's "Exhibiting France in America: The French Pavilion at the New York World's Fair of 1939," and Elizabeth Zahnd's "Images of the United States in Contemporary Narratives of Quebec and the Francophone Caribbean."

France.[28] Pascal Quignard's 1994 novel, *L'Occupation américaine*, depicts not only America's post-WWII military occupation of France, but also, more importantly, the accompanying cultural occupation. A close look at the evolution of the relationship of two French teenagers, Patrick and Marie-José, and an examination of their respective reactions to American culture reveals that the American military occupation of France – and the subsequent period of Americanization – is the cause of division, disillusionment, and even death. Based on the dark (and perhaps overly dramatic) ending, combined with the fact that the novel describes events 40 years after the fact, Quignard's message is clear: the American G.I.s may have left France, but American culture, which had, as Patrick says, poured out on France like trash from an overturned trash can (120), was there to stay. More recently, a documentary entitled *Made in France. L'année où j'ai vécu 100% français*, which aired on Canal+ in March 2014, presents a young French journalist's self-appointed challenge to spend nine months wearing, eating, buying, and using only French-made products. Paradoxically, Benjamin Carle's enterprise to live life *à la française* reveals just how deeply American culture has pervaded the French way of life. For one, there is great irony in the fact that his definition of "made in France" – based on "fabrication française", not "marque française" – allowed him to continue eating at McDonald's when he discovered that the meat and the potatoes there come from France: "Du coup, on a plus de chances de manger français dans un MacDo que

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[28] What France (and other nations) have often termed Americanization is more generally a part of the process of globalization and the coming of consumer society. As Kuisel explains: "There is a kind of global imperative that goes by the name Americanization. Although the phenomenon is still described as Americanization, it has become increasingly disconnected from America. Perhaps it would be better described as the coming of consumer society" (Kuisel 4). Verena Andermatt Conley also states that, "with globalization [...] France underwent the same transformations as most other Western industrialized countries" (Conley 149). See also Mathy "Popularity" 151-54 where he presents his reading of Régis Debray's discussion of Americanization in *Contretemps*. Mathy ultimately says that, "Consumers worldwide are Americanized, then, only in the sense that, to paraphrase Marx, the dominant culture is the culture of the dominant country" ("Popularity" 152).

dans une mauvaise brasserie où l'on servirait des produits surgelés" (Carle). Secondly, Carle admits that, while it was a challenge, in general, to refrain entirely from consuming cultural products not made in France, his "main regret [...] was not being able to go see Hollywood thriller *Gravity* in 3D" (AFP). Perhaps, it should not come as a surprise that the hardest thing for Carle during his "made in France" mission was to change his "listening, reading, and viewing habits" (AFP). Today, American literature represents nearly one third of books being sold in French bookstores (Morrison; cf. Marie). Despite quotas to guarantee a certain percentage of French-language cultural products on French radio, television, and at French cinemas, American culture flourishes in those domains, as well. If what we read and watch influences what we think and write, then one can certainly imagine that the presence of American culture in France influences the writers of *romans américains* – or even influences writers to write *romans américains*. After all, the five authors whose works I treat were all born after WWII and grew up during this time when economic and cultural globalization was becoming a reality and when America was, to borrow Kuisel's phrase, "seducing the French." What's more, since American novelists are touted for their storytelling abilities, and since French novelists have been returning to storytelling since the 1980s, one can see how imitating American literature might aid French writers who are "returning" in that direction while also forging new paths.[29] Parody and pastiche are, after all, part and parcel of postmodern French literature.

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[29] See Riding and Morrison. Riding, like Morrison, says the contemporary French novel still suffers from the influence of the introspective and esoterically experimental *nouveau roman*, is not open to the world, is navel-gazing and narcissistic, and does not tell stories. In his article about the "American scene (*version française*)," William Cloonan wagers that American novels attract attention in France, "in part because the stories they tell are perceived to privilege action, movement and extreme situations over Gallic cogitation" (68). See also the comment Arno Bertina's made during the "Faim de la littérature" roundtable discussion: "C'est ce qui différencierait la littérature américaine de la

At the same time that American literature is thriving in the French market, French literature is fading in the American market, representing only 1% of books published there (Kaprièlian; cf. Marie). Over the past five years, numerous articles have appeared questioning the exportability and translatability of French novels to the U.S.[30] In the section of *L'Express*'s June 2011 dossier on what Americans think of French celebrities, it is telling that Michel Houellebecq, a writer who always attracts attention (and controversy) in France, received a score of 0/10 and the question, "*Who's he?*" (Coste, Epstein, and Gyldén 70-71, emphasis in original). Bernard-Henri Lévy received a 4/10 while Marion Cotillard, Vanessa Paradis, Tony Parker, Catherine Deneuve, Christine Lagarde, and Edith Piaf all earned superior scores between 8/10 and 10/10. The lopsided dynamics of transatlantic literary exchange could lead one to speculate that, in writing about America, French novelists are trying to write novels that will conquer the all but hermetically sealed American literary market. Even in France, literary critics have criticized the narcissism and navel-gazing of the contemporary French novel. For example, in "Pour une littérature voyageuse" and again in "Pour une littérature-monde" Michel Le Bris espouses his desire to see French writers rediscover the world in their works of contemporary fiction: "il n'est pas de 'littérature pure,' [...] c'est l'épreuve de l'autre, de l'ailleurs, du monde, qui, seule, peut empêcher la littérature de se scléroser" (29). That said, one has to wonder: would the average American really care to read novels in which French narrators are commenting on and critiquing America?

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littérature française: 'eux' sauraient raconter des histoires, déployer un monde. Si on peut leur reconnaître ce talent, ajoutons que les écrivains français ou francophones explorent et magnifient un autre aspect de la littérature: le travail sur la langue" (Viart and Demanze 264).

[30] See Bouchy, Kaprièlian, Marie, Savigneau, and Schofield.

In recent years, several of the French works of art that have been most successful in America either have nothing to do with America or give "the illusion of Americanness" (Sciolino). The former is the case for Muriel Barbery's *L'Élégance du hérisson* (2006). The latter is true of Pierre Morel's spy action film, *Taken* (2008), of Michel Hazanavicius' Academy Award winning film, *The Artist* (2011), and also of Joël Dicker's bestselling American-style thriller, *La Vérité sur l'affaire Harry Quebert*. The works I am treating, on the other hand, occupy an in-between space. These *romans américains* talk about America and/or are situated in America, but unmistakably, they depict French individuals recounting the stories they have written or are in the process of writing. They imagine and present America, but simultaneously exude Frenchness. One would not think the writers of the *romans américains* I am studying would be opposed to having their novels translated into English. In fact, three of the novels of my corpus (*Windows on the World*, *Une forme de vie*, and *Western*) are already available in American English translation. But, when it comes to exploring the reasons for the increase in *romans américains*, one could do no more than speculate about the desire to be translated serving as a motivation.[31] It would be more plausible, perhaps, to argue

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[31] On the other hand, the French Cultural Embassy in the U.S., which has been busy promoting bilingual programs in American public schools in recent years and reopening a French bookstore in New York City, would almost certainly be in favor of an increased French literary presence in America (Mathieu; cf. Coste "So Chic," Jaumont, Mokha, Semple). After all, the only article about French translations in America which presents the issue in a positive light was Laurence Marie's article which appeared in *Le Nouvel Observateur* and also on the French Culture in the U.S. embassy website entitled "Why do French Books Sell Abroad?" Literature is, after all, a form of cultural influence, a fact which is clear in the first section of Alain Dubosclard's *Le livre français aux États-Unis 1900-1970*, a section entitled, "Le livre: objet symbolique, outil d'influence." (The fifth section is more ominous, "Espoir et échec du livre commercial français aux États-Unis.") As Sophie Meunier has said, "the unique 'rayonnement' of French culture" has enabled France "to project greater political might in the world and weigh more heavily in international affairs than would be dictated by its size alone" (86). Not coincidentally, perhaps, *France-Amérique: Le journal français des États-Unis* has seemingly redoubled its efforts as of late. In summer 2014, a letter from the President, Guy Sorman, described the revamped editions with new rubrics and *mise en scène*. Each month's edition includes a segment entitled "L'Amérique vue par…" that presents the work of a writer who has written about America and the American experience, including: François-René de Chateaubriand, André Maurois, Blaise

that writers of *romans américains* are trying to recapture French audiences. When Montalbetti describes the action on the field at an American football game or when Viel explains what a homerun is in baseball, it is exceedingly clear that these texts are addressed to French readers. As Cloonan says, "The French interest in the United States has not been lost on French novelists, many of whom share that curiosity, and have thus decided to explore the place from their own literary perspective" (68).[32] Ultimately, the impetus for *why* each writer is writing *romans américains* would undoubtedly be different. As I said, I think it is much more interesting to consider *what* they say and *how* they say it.

The American Mirror meets the Mirror in the Text

As a "floating signifier," America has come to represent many different things for French writers over the years. America can be seen as a laboratory in which social, political, educational, and economic models for the future are tested (Roger "Rêves" 8).[33] Depending on the perspective of the French observer and depending on what aspect of America they are observing, America can also be seen as a utopia or a dystopia. If, as Jacques Portes has asserted, everyone finds what they are looking for when looking at America (434-35), this is because the America that French writers discover and describe is often an America they have constructed. It is no surprise that scholars often note a disconnect between representations of America and the empirical

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Cendrars, Edgar Morin, Paul Morand, Georges Clemenceau, Philippe Sollers, Romain Gary, Tocqueville, Didier van Cauwelaert, Maylis de Kerangal, Jean-Paul Sartre, Paul Adam, and Louis-Ferdinand Céline.

[32] He also says that, "even when the American policies are a source of annoyance, the French still want to read about the country. For that they have the French press, particularly *Le Figaro* and *Le Monde*, as well as in a very different register, the contemporary novel" (Cloonan 76).

[33] See also Bishop 26, Fauré and Bishop 9-13, and Kuisel 2, 12. Throughout this dissertation, I refer to three different Philippe Rogers as indicated in the bibliography.

reality of America (Mathy *Extreme-Occident* 4).[34] America is both a myth and a metaphor, "the repository of the world's dreams, phobias and fantasies" (Mathy "Popularity" 151-52). This explains why, in *Extreme-Occident: French Intellectuals and America*, Mathy chooses to refer to the novels, poems, essays, travel narratives, historical *and* social scientific analysis he studies "as so many 'fictions' of America" (13).

French literature imagines America, but there is also the sense that these literary constructions of America help to form an image of France. As Mathy says, "Judgments passed on the United States *from* France must be read as discourses *about* France; they tell us more about an author's position in French intellectual and ideological fields than about social and cultural processes within American society" (Mathy *Extreme-Occident* 7).[35] A perfect example of this would be the deep-rooted French anti-American discourse which occurs, as Philippe Roger has said, when the "imagined" side of things becomes the center of the discourse (10-11, 18).[36] Looking at America and using this transatlantic Other as a foil helps reaffirm a sense of French or

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[34] See also Mathy "Popularity" 151-52. Kuisel says that the French conception of "an American other" is not always entirely based on a precise portrayal of American social reality (Kuisel 235). Tom Bishop says that that the "myth" of America "is "above all a history of a cultural impact, of *the production of representations* rather than of any significant acquaintance with it" ("I Love You, Moi Non Plus" 26, my emphasis). He goes on to list the various images of America, some which "imposed themselves on French culture without being imitable: images of gigantic natural and constructed spaces, of technological futurism, of the canonical image of a freedom in politics, of a multicultural society. Other images from across the Atlantic found a place in the functioning of French life: the cult of a consumer society, the preoccupation with faster and better communications, the structures and organization of higher education and scientific research, new forms of social behavior, the subversion of norms by a counter-culture, and political and legal institutions" (26).

[35] Kuisel says similarly that the nature of "The Gallic response to America, as discussed earlier, was heavily marked by the French thinking about themselves, their identity, and their future" (*Seducing* 9).

[36] With the history of alliance between France and American at the foundation of the United States (Washington and Lafayette), it seems illogical that France is the country where the anti-American discourse is the most entrenched. But, according to Roger, anti-Americanism *is* irrational. See also Kuisel who says that anti-Americanism "derives from French encounters with an American reality as well as from Gallic preconceptions, anxieties, aspirations, and sense of self-identity. Anti-Americanism, in short, was (and is) about both America and France" (Kuisel *Seducing* xii). According to Kuisel, anti-American discourse often identifies America as France's foil, its counteridentity.

European identity (Portes 437-38). In fact, scholars concentrating on French views of America have long pointed out that, for French writers, America serves as a reflective surface or mirror of sorts. According to Kuisel, "The American model was a kind of *mirror* in which the French viewed themselves or, perhaps, before which they preened" (Kuisel *Seducing* 235, my emphasis). Mathy says similarly that, "In the *mirror* of America, the cultivated elites looked at themselves, at the culture their forebears had helped fashion, or had resisted, for centuries" (*Extreme-Occident* 255, my emphasis).[37] In other words, when constructing their "fictions" about America, French writers are often seeing – or at least gaining insight about – France. In attempting to discover America, they actually (re)discover themselves. After all, as Christine Fauré and Tom Bishop explain in the introduction to *L'Amérique des Français*, "Au centre de toute démarche comparatiste se développe une véritable affirmation de soi, l'autre, dans un rapport dialectique bien connu, servant de prétexte à une auto-analyse, à un retour réflexif" (Fauré and Bishop 12).[38] The cover image of the June 2011 edition of *L'Express*, which I have referenced above, aptly depicts this. From one perspective, the fact that the Eiffel Tower is reflected in the eagle's eye most obviously illustrates the idea that America is looking at France. But from another perspective, it also suggests that the reader who picks this magazine up off the newsstand in France looks at America, and in

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[37] It is not a coincidence that many French academic studies of America have the word mirror in their title. To name two examples besides Fassin's "*Libéralisme* and its American Mirror," see Roger's *Rêves et cauchemars américains: Les Etats-Unis au miroir de l'opinion publique française (1945-1953)* and Catherine Gillot's dissertation, "La France au miroir de l'Amérique dans les années 1920 (Morand, Duhamel).

[38] In a very similar way, Kuisel says that, "Recent research has also established that a sense of nationalism is usually constructed by a kind of dialectic with 'others,' with those outside the collectivity whose difference helps define the singularity of one's own community or nation. National identity is formed through negation, by establishing a counteridentity, by constructing a 'we' / 'them' dichotomy. [...] Beginning in the interwar years and reaching a climax in the first postwar decades, America served as the other that helped the French to imagine, construct, and refine their collective sense of self" (Kuisel *Seducing* 6). This certainly also applies to an individual's identity formation process.

the process, sees an image of France. Moreover, the text of the article reinforces this idea with its references to the "jeu de miroirs" and "le miroir qui nous est tendu outre-Atlantique" (Coste "Américains" 58). Certainly, as Fauré and Bishop wrote, "le détour américain est une recherche de soi" (12).

The *romans américains* that I am studying reflect this *détour* and *retour* in both content and in form. While writing about America, these authors are reflecting on their own identities as French individuals and writers. This is especially evident in Beigbeder's and Nothomb's novels. They each use a dual narrative structure in which French narrators define themselves with, but also against, their American counterparts. Though it is less obvious in Rolin's, Montalbetti's, and Viel's texts, the self-conscious French narrators define themselves and the works they are writing in contrast to the works of American writers (and filmmakers) whose works they pastiche. In all cases, America (and here I mean America in a broad sense – people, land, and culture) serves as a mirror. The American content is not, however, the only reflective surface. The pages of these self-conscious novels also replicate this reflexivity. Each of these authors situates the narrative instance at the center of the text. They present French writers writing (and readers, not necessarily French, reading). This is fiction about fiction, or rather, metafiction.[39] It is no coincidence that the *romans américains* in my corpus use overt metafictional techniques of narrative mirroring from dual narrative structures which reveal (distorted) Franco-American doubles to inter- and intra-textuality, from

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[39] According to Linda Hutcheon, metafiction, which has been increasingly present in the literary scene since the 1960s, "is fiction about fiction – that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity" (1). Gerald Prince defines metanarrative more technically as "About narrative; describing narrative. A narrative having (a) narrative as (one of) its topic(s) is (a) metanarrative. More specifically, a narrative referring to itself and to those elements by which it is constituted and communicated, a narrative discussing itself, a self-reflexive narrative, is metanarrative. Even more specifically, the passages or units in a narrative that refer explicitly to the codes or subcodes in terms of which the narrative signifies are metanarrative and constitute metanarrative signs" (*Dictionary* 51).

metalepsis to – especially – *mise en abyme*. Lucien Dällenbach did, after all, dub this last technique "the mirror in the text."[40]

Through their use of these formal mirrors, it is clear that Frédéric Beigbeder, Amélie Nothomb, Jean Rolin, Christine Montalbetti, and Tanguy Viel are also reflecting on the nature and state of the French novel today. In fact, as I suggested above, I would argue that each *roman américain* in my corpus is just as much about literary creation and the state of the French novel today as it is about the authors' views of America. These French writers are not merely looking at America to measure their individual and national identity by comparison. They are looking to America in an attempt to determine their place and the place of French literature in a digital and global age. At a time when borders are increasingly transgressed, the writers of *romans américains* not only blur the boundaries between fiction and reality, but also attempt to blur geopolitical boundaries. In today's globalized world, they question how one can define a novel based on national frontiers: what makes a novel French, American, or otherwise? Also, at a time when the power dynamics in the Franco-American relationship seem increasingly lopsided, these writers respond to anxieties about the hegemonic presence of American culture in France and to perennial accusations of the "death of French culture."[41] Contrary to claims of contemporary Cassandras like Donald Morrison and

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[40] The original French title of *The Mirror In the Text* was *Le récit spéculaire: essai sur la mise en abyme*.

[41] Bourdieu explained the lopsided dynamics, as follows: "C'est dire que nombre des choses qui s'écrivent ou se disent, à propos de la France ou des USA ou de leurs rapports, sont le produit de *l'affrontement entre deux impérialismes, entre un impérialisme en ascension et un impérialisme en déclin*, et doivent sans doute beaucoup à des sentiments de revanche ou de ressentiment, sans qu'il soit exclu qu'une partie des réactions que l'on serait porté à classer dans l'antiaméricanisme du ressentiment puissent et doivent être comprises comme des stratégies de résistance légitime à des formes nouvelles d'impérialisme" (Fauré and Bishop 153-54 my emphasis). More recently, Justin Vaïsse (a French historian who was, at the time, director of the Center on the U.S. and Europe and a senior fellow in Foreign Policy at the Brooking Institute) explained the unequal alliance as follows: "Bien sûr, vu du côté américain, cette idée d'une concurrence française, encore vivace pendant la

Alan Riding that the narcissism or navel-gazing of French novels cuts them off from the world, the "narcissistic" aspects of these narratives help to put the novels in dialogue with the world.[42] As Roland Barthes theorized in "Écrivains et Écrivants":

> Et le miracle, si l'on peut dire, c'est que cette activité narcissique ne cesse de provoquer, au long d'une littérature séculaire, une interrogation au monde: en s'enfermant dans le *comment écrire*, l'écrivain finit par retrouver la question ouverte par excellence: pourquoi le monde? Quel est le sens des choses? En somme, c'est au moment même où le travail de l'écrivain devient sa propre fin, qu'il retrouve un caractère médiateur: l'écrivain conçoit la littérature comme fin, le monde la lui renvoie comme moyen: et c'est dans cette déception infinie, que l'écrivain retrouve le monde, un monde étrange d'ailleurs, puisque la littérature le représente comme une question, jamais, *en définitive*, comme une réponse. (149)

While these writers write about writing, they also wrestle with serious questions about war and diplomacy, center and periphery, reality and virtuality that affect the real world, not just the imaginary worlds of the texts. Literature serves not only as the medium, but also as the mediator. It occupies an in-between space which allows them to reflect on what distinguishes French and American individuals and cultures while also interrogating the boundary between fiction and reality. What's more, these French writers appropriate American art and rework it in an effort to uplift their own. American literature and culture may be ubiquitous in France these days, and English may be the global *lingua franca*. These novels are, however, written *en français*. In reflecting on America and in writing their versions of American stories, the writers of

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guerre froide et même dans le conflit en Irak, s'estompe ces dernières années, d'autant plus que la Chine monte en puissance et apparaît comme l'unique rival de l'hégémonie américaine. La prétention française à l'universalisme ne suscite souvent que de l'indifférence" (68). See also Bishop 21.

[42] I am using "narcissistic" in the same non-pejorative sense that Linda Hutcheon uses it in *Narcissistic Narrative*: "'Narcissistic' – the figurative adjective chosen here to designate this textual self-awareness – is not intended as derogatory but rather as descriptive and suggestive, as the ironic reading of the Narcissus myth which follows these introductory remarks should make clear. Nor are the inevitable psychoanalytic connotations to be taken negatively, as many who have not read Freud himself on the subject might tend to do. In fact, it was Freud who conferred on narcissism the status of the 'universal original condition' of man, making it the basis of more than just pathological behavior. These psychological associations, while likely inevitable, are here, however, irrelevant in that it is the narrative text, and not the author, that is being described as narcissistic" (1).

romans américains refuse to let America – and American literature – have the final word.

Traces of Transatlantic Connections in the Wake of 9/11: Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World*

"Aujourd'hui les livres doivent aller là où la télévision ne va pas. Montrer l'invisible, dire l'indicible. C'est peut-être impossible mais c'est sa raison d'être. La littérature est une 'mission impossible.'"
Frédéric Beigbeder, *Windows on the World*

"Écrire (et lire) pour essayer de faire quelque sens de soi."
Serge Doubrovsky, "Pourquoi l'autofiction?"

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 caught America by surprise. They were of unprecedented scale and scope, dwarfing the largest previous attack on American soil, the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995.[1] "Small wonder, then," wrote David Bell in an edition of *Contemporary French Civilization* dedicated to European perspectives on 9/11, "that the attacks on the World Trade center and the Pentagon, as well as the hijacking that resulted in the crash of United Airlines Flight 93 near Shanksville, Pennsylvania on September 11, 2001, were immediately experienced and described as a trauma, in fact, as a national trauma" (Bell and Schuerewegen iii-iv). Bell went on to insist, however, that the effects of this major contemporary upheaval are not just felt by Americans. His co-editor, Franc Schuerewegen corroborated this point, saying: "l'Europe aussi s'est reconnue dans la terrible journée du 11 septembre; disons mieux encore: l'Europe aussi a été traumatisée" (Bell and Schuerewegen v). Indeed, looking back, scholars recognize that September 11th was not just a national trauma, but also a global one. It was not only the fact that people from more than 90 countries died in the terrorist attacks that made 9/11 a global event. The simultaneity of the worldwide media coverage played a large role. According to Benedict Anderson,

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[1] According to Richard Doran, "Before 9/11, anti-American terrorism was considered by all but a tiny minority of US officials to be a nuisance, which implied no reconsideration of domestic or international priorities; after 9/11, every non-localized terrorist threat is treated *as a potential catastrophe*" (11).

simultaneity is "identified as one of the three essential factors in the creation of an imagined national community" (22-36; cf. Hutton 265). Because people around the world watched the terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon unfold live on television, "the constructed community was, of course, a supranational, if not quite global, one" (Hutton 265).

Following the terrorist attacks, numerous Francophone writers and intellectuals turned their attention to America with renewed interest. As Margaret-Anne Hutton has said, "Like all acts of political violence, the terrorist strikes on the World Trade Center and, in equal measure, the subsequent pre-emptive policy of the US, led to a re-examination of national and supranational identities and alliances [...] Europe, America, and the relationship between them were constructed and reconstructed through a nexus of different discourses" (Hutton 250). Thus, in the aftermath of the event, there were very diverse reactions in France, from displays of overwhelming solidarity toward Americans to controversial theories that America all but deserved such an attack, which was merely a symbolic reaction to unchecked global capitalism.[2]

In 2003, Frédéric Beigbeder joined this community of writers engaging in a dialogue about 9/11 when he published *Windows on the World*. The novel, named after the restaurant that was located at the summit of the World Trade Center's North Tower, recounts – or attempts to recount – minute by minute, what happened on the upper

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[2] For an example of solidarity, see Jean-Marie Colombani's article, "Nous sommes tous Américains." Colombani, the editor of *Le Monde* at the time, wrote this article expressing solidarity with the United States two days after the attacks. But, he would go on to qualify his statements, first, in another article in *Le Monde* later in 2001, "À Nos Amis Américains", and then, in a follow-up book, *Tous Américains? Le monde après le 11 septembre 2001*. For a more controversial reaction to the events of 9/11, see Baudrillard's "L'Esprit du terrorisme," which provocatively states that the collapse of the Twin Towers was the "strongest symbolic shock," and that their "suicide" was evidence that "it [was] therefore neither a clash of civilizations nor of religions [...] [but of] triumphant globalization grappling with itself" (406). For a wide range of perspectives in the debate, see Baudrillard "L'Esprit" 403-13, Bell and Schuerewegen iv, Borradori 91, Daniel 5, DeLillo 1-2, Doran 3, 10-13, Keniston and Quinn 1, 11, and Žižek 387-88.

levels of the Twin Towers the morning of September 11th. The dual narrative structure alternates chapter by chapter between an American and a French narrator.[3] The American is a father named Carthew Yorston who has taken his two sons to have breakfast at Windows on the World; the Frenchman, Beigbeder's avatar in the text, is a writer who is both fascinated with and horrified by the events of September 11th.[4]

Based on his conviction that the American media has failed to do justice to the memory of the victims, Beigbeder claims to write *Windows on the World* to go where television does not, as evinced by the first quotation in the epigraph of this chapter. He critiques the American media, which simultaneously "spectacularized" and sterilized the event. Demonstrating his belief that "Le roman [est] le dernier endroit où l'humanité respire" ("Utopie" 35), Beigbeder attempts to put the people back into the story. His effort to humanize the representation of the event is also an attempt to memorialize. It is clear that if 9/11 was not a uniquely visual event, in Beigbeder's view, it was also not just an American event: "le climat avait tourné à l'angoisse planétaire" (*WW* 114). *Windows on the World* is Beigbeder's investigation of his morbid fascination with the event. In order to understand why he feels so compelled to write this novel, he enumerates his American connections – spatial, historical, cultural, and personal. This emphasis on transatlantic ties can be read as a rhetorical attempt to give himself the authority to write about this event in which he was not directly involved. Especially

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[3] This is not the first time Beigbeder has experimented with narrative voice and using constraints for his chapters. In *Vacances dans le coma*, each chapter represents one hour of a night between 19h00 and 7h00. In *99 francs*, a different subject pronoun (je – tu – il – nous – vous – ils) demarcates each section.

[4] While visiting the rooftop of the Tour Montparnasse, the French narrator says specifically: "Une affiche tente un calembour: 'La Vue Parisienne'. Voici le mien: je m'appelle Frédéric Belvédère" (*WW* 122)." The pun suggests that the French narrator and Beigbeder are one and the same. After all, they are both men named Frédéric who are each writing a novel at the top of a skyscraper with a panoramic view of Paris. However, the use of Belvédère instead of Beigbeder denies a complete onomastic identity. Therefore, to distinguish between the narrator and the author, I will refer to them respectively as Frédéric and as Beigbeder.

since he was writing at a time when anti-Americanism was on the rise, the presentation of these connections that recall France and America's historic friendship, as well as his personal ties, was necessary to quell potential controversy. In this way, Beigbeder complicates the "us/them" dichotomy typical of French anti-American discourses. As Versluys says, "the gap between the continents seems smaller in fiction than in politics" (69). Yet this official discourse of transatlantic ties masks an underlying tension, namely that Beigbeder has a troubled relationship with America. He holds America responsible for globalization, the coming of consumer society, and the problems they have created in today's society, and specifically, in his own life: namely, he believes that these phenomena are to blame for his parents' divorce and his own inability to love. A comparative reading of *Windows and the World* and Beigbeder's 2009 novel, *Un Roman français*, reveals that, if Beigbeder feels so inexplicably connected to the terrorist attacks in New York, it is because this traumatic event in the present brings memories of the most traumatic moments in his own past to the surface. By turning to America and the 9/11 attacks, Beigbeder, who claims to have no memories of his childhood, is also trying to write about his past. Thus, in this chapter, I will argue that, while *Windows on the World* is a 9/11 novel concerned with the challenges of representing the unrepresentable, it also about the challenges of self-narration. In other words, this *roman américain* about the largest terrorist attack on American soil, which also depicts the volatile dynamics of the Franco-Americans relationship, should be considered as Beigbeder's first, veiled attempt to write *Un Roman français*.

9/11 is Not Just a Visual Event

From the outset of *Windows on the World*, the French narrator acknowledges that it would be impossible for him to know what really happened on the upper levels of

the World Trade Center on the morning of September 11th, much less what the experience was like for the people trapped there. He describes the epistemological and representational challenge as well as his need to write about the event in the following way:

> Il est désormais impossible d'aller vérifier. L'écriture de ce roman hyperréaliste est rendue difficile par la réalité elle-même. Depuis le 11 septembre 2001, non seulement la réalité dépasse la fiction mais elle la détruit. On ne peut pas écrire sur ce sujet mais on ne peut pas écrire sur autre chose non plus. Plus rien ne nous atteint. (*WW* 20)

It is a problem of knowing and a problem of telling. Only those who were there could tell what the experience was like, but they all died that tragic day. Recognizing the challenges inherent in writing a realistic account of this event that has surpassed fiction, he determines to imagine the unimaginable. Frédéric admits nonetheless that *Windows on the World* is "une tentative – peut-être vouée à l'échec" (*WW* 76).[5]

One of the main reasons Frédéric claims to have written *Windows on the World* is because he wants to make up for the shortcomings of the American media presentation of 9/11. In a 2006 interview with Alain-Philippe Durand, Beigbeder explained his view of the inadequate televised images of September 11th: "On dirait en fait un film de fiction hollywoodienne, on dirait que ce sont des effets spéciaux et donc on ne souffre pas" (Durand *Beigbeder et ses doubles* 27). Throughout the text, the two narrators convey this idea. Frédéric likens the length of the book to the length of a Hollywood movie (*WW* 83, 18). At one point, Carthew states directly that he hates disaster movies (*WW* 75). At another point, he tells his sons that the plane they saw crashing into the WTC was a 3D movie for which George Lucas did the special effects

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[5] Later, he says, "Je me saoule méthodiquement […]. Je savoure mon échec. Je rumine ce livre" (348). He also concludes with a similar comment that, "Je ne saurai jamais si les choses se sont passées ainsi que je les ai imaginées, et vous non plus" (360).

and he wishes that it was, after all, only a disaster movie (*WW* 78-81). Frédéric also remarks that reality imitated special effects (*WW* 324) and that what everyone saw could not be true; it must be a film (*WW* 329-30). Both Frédéric and Carthew refer to American action films in an effort to imagine possible rescues and alternative endings (*WW* 184-86, 252-53).

Beigbeder is certainly not alone in challenging the American media's coverage of 9/11. Numerous scholars, theorists and cultural critics have also commented on the media's role in turning 9/11 into a spectacle. Baudrillard, for example, says that "There is no good use of the media: the media is part of the event itself [...] terrorism would be nothing without the media" (414); "The spectacle of terrorism imposed the terrorism of spectacle" (414). It is not surprising, then, that Baudrillard, along with Virilio, Žižek, and Bhabha also likens watching the American media coverage of 9/11 to watching a Hollywood catastrophe film or TV movie.[6] According to Baudrillard, the spectacular images of the media, like those of Hollywood films, are dangerous because the image "consumes the event insofar as it absorbs the event and gives it to the consumer" (412-

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[6] Baudrillard says that, "In the singularity of this event, in this Manhattan catastrophe film, the two elements of mass fascination of the twentieth century are fused to the highest degree: the white magic of cinema and the black magic of terrorism; the white light of the image and the black light of terrorism" (413). Žižek says that, "...the landscape and the shots of the collapsing towers could not but be reminiscent of the most breathtaking scenes in big catastrophe productions [...] just remember the series of movies from *Escape from New York* to *Independence Day*. That is the rationale of the oft-mentioned association of the attacks with Hollywood disaster movies: the unthinkable which happened was the object of fantasy, so that, in a way, America got what it fantasized about, and that was the biggest surprise" (15). Virilio notes that, 'As the attack on the World Trade Center was being broadcast live, many TV viewers believed they were watching one of those disaster movies which proliferate endlessly on our TV screens. It was by switching channels and finding the same pictures on all the stations that they finally understood that 'it was true'!' (38n). Bhabha, the only one who did not author a book in the Verso 9/11 anniversary series, makes this connection, as well. In "Terror and After..." he writes that, "Each of the unimaginable actions we were subjected to on our tv [sic] screens on Tuesday, have been repeatedly imagined and applauded in movie houses around the country by law-abiding Americans, and successfully exported to other ordinary film-loving folks across the world" (3).

13). The images "exalt[ ] the event" but also take it hostage; they multiply it, but also divert and neutralize it (412-13).

Indeed, the images displayed to viewers were not just "spectacularized" like in a Hollywood movie; they were also sterilized: "Live video footage and photographs appeared briefly on TV and in newspapers, but then the images were taken out of circulation and continued to be carefully edited from retrospective coverage of 9/11 in America" (Frost 185-86).[7] In *Windows on the World*, Beigbeder voices this critique through the American character who questions why "his country's media" did not display any evidence of the carnage inside the WTC:

> Quoi? La pudeur? Il ne fallait pas choquer les enfants? Il ne fallait pas faire du sensationnel avec nos corps suppliciés? Trop dégueulasse vis-à-vis des familles des victimes? [...] Le soi-disant 'respect des familles' ne dérange d'habitude pas les journalistes, en particulier américains. Quoi? Elle est sale, notre boucherie de viande humaine? [...] Pourquoi a-t-on caché les morts? Ce n'est pas la pudeur déontologique, c'est de l'autocensure, voir de la censure tout court. Cinq minutes après l'entrée du premier avion dans notre tour, la tragédie était déjà un enjeu dans la guerre des images. Alors patriotisme? Certainement. Un réflexe nationaliste a poussé la presse US à bomber le torse, cacher notre souffrance, couper les plans de jumpers, les photographies de grands brûlés, les 'body parts'. On peut parler d'une omerta spontanée, d'un black-out médiatique sans précédent depuis la première guerre du Golfe [...] Moi, j'aurais aimé qu'on nous montre à la face du monde. Qu'on ose nous voir, comme on doit se forcer à garder les yeux ouverts devant les images de *Nuit et Brouillard*. Mais c'était déjà la guerre: en temps de guerre, on masque les dégâts causés par l'adversaire. Il faut faire bonne figure, cela fait partie de la propagande [...] Et c'est ainsi qu'eut lieu une des plus grosses opérations de désinformation audiovisuelle de l'après-guerre. Cachez ce sang que je ne saurais voir. Un building s'effondre, on le diffuse en boucle. Mais surtout ne montrez pas ce qu'il y avait dedans: nos corps. (*WW* 318-319)

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[7] Jean-Luc Godard also described the censured images: "Tout ce qui pouvait choquer, déranger, indigner, a été systématiquement nettoyé. Pas un corps, pas de traces de violence, ni de feu ni de sang, sinon la grandeur des ruines. Tout ce qui était en-deçà ou au-delà de la fiction ne trouvait pas sa place" (Habib qtd. in Evrard 12).

Carthew accuses the American media of censuring the images as a nationalist reflex, a wartime desire to hide the suffering and casualties. The images became merely patriotic propaganda in a 21st century war of images. This passage echoes a claim that Frédéric had made earlier in the novel, namely that: "Nous vivions une époque étrange; la guerre s'est déplacée. Le champ de bataille est médiatique: dans ce nouveau conflit, le Bien et le Mal sont difficiles à départager. Difficile de savoir qui sont les bons et les méchants: ils changent de camp quand on change de chaîne" (*WW* 145). While the two passages echo one another, it cannot be coincidental that Beigbeder opts to voice the outright, extended critique through the voice of the American narrator and not his own avatar in the text. Here, Beigbeder directly engages Baudrillard's ideas. The evocation of a vow of silence and of "un black-out médiatique sans précédent depuis la première guerre du Golfe" recalls the title of Baudrillard's 1991 text, *La Guerre du Golfe n'a pas eu lieu*. September 11th may be one of the most televised events in history, but for Beigbeder, the censured televised images are limited, or incomplete. In his view, because one does not see the human beings, the televised images "de-realize" the already "unreal" event.[8] They are merely simulacra. Beigbeder, however, desires "total transparency."[9]

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[8] Žižek also comments on the absence of any human presence: "the same 'derealization' of the horror went on after the WTC collapse: while the number of victims – 3,000 – is repeated all the time, it is surprising how little of the actual carnage we see – no dismembered bodies, no blood, no desperate faces of dying people" (13).

[9] See Durand, where he discusses Beigbeder's desire for "total transparency" and how he "deliberately confronts the contemporary extreme and refuses to avoid any details" ("Beyond the Extreme" 109). According to Durand, "Novels of the contemporary extreme […] are set in a world both similar to and different from our own: a hyper real, often apocalyptic world progressively invaded by popular culture, permeated with technology and dominated by destruction […] they do not merely reflect on violence, they seek it out, engage it, and, in a variety of imaginative ways, perform it. Thus, contemporary extreme novels enact an aesthetic that does not strive for harmony or unity but, instead, forces the confrontation between irreconcilable differences, most notably the difference between reality and art" ("Beyond the Extreme" 1). See also where Durand likens Beigbeder's belief that "narration […] must go beyond the extreme, beyond the real, where fiction becomes reality and vice versa" to Virilio's and also Baudrillard's essays ("Beyond the Extreme" 113).

The problem of the media tape loop which circulated the same sterilized and spectacular images of the plane hitting the South Tower and of the towers falling repeatedly was that, instead of allowing viewers to confront the trauma in order to begin to "work through" it, the repetition of the images only reinforced the trauma and interfered with its cognitive assimilation.[10] After all, according to Cathy Caruth, "To be traumatized is precisely to be [repeatedly] possessed by an image or event" (*Trauma* 4 qtd. in Frost). Thus, instead of helping individuals to understand what they were seeing, the repetition of the images only reinforced the viewers' disbelief and drew attention to their unreal or fictional quality. [11] For this reason, Laura Frost maintains that "what we saw is not the whole story, and that the focus on sanctified images may keep us from facing what lies beyond the frame" (200-01). In other words, she, like Beigbeder and many others, feels that the inside story has been erased – the victims of the terrorist attacks remain largely off-screen. Consequently, she argues for the need for literary engagements with 9/11 based on the fact that "literature both responds to visual culture and [...] often offers a critique of the common idea that visual culture is the medium best suited to representing 9/11" (183). Though scholars writing nearly a decade after 9/11 recognize the need for narratives to make sense and to memorialize, that was far from the consensus in the years immediately following the attacks.[12] In fact,

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Windows on the World was controversial, not only because it was one of the earliest 9/11 novels, but also because of how directly it confronts the events of 9/11. See also Durham 167, and Frost 183.

[10] See Evrard 10. David Bell adds that, "The deleterious effects of the traumatic experience, embedded ever more indelibly by the video loop, were evident: incapacity to take any analytic distance from the events, a desire to react immediately rather than to act effectively, a veritable psychosis of nationalist isolation and loathing of the other in any form" (Bell and Schuerewegen iv).

[11] As DeLillo wrote, "The events of September 11 were covered unstintingly. There was no confusion of roles on TV. The raw event was one thing, the coverage another. The event dominated the medium. It was bright and totalizing and some of us said it was unreal. When we say a thing is unreal, we mean it is too real" (9).

[12] See Keniston and Quinn 2 and 14, Obajtek-Kirkwood 207-08, and Versluys 67-68.

some asserted that "dignified silence" was the only appropriate response "in front of mass death and unprecedented terror" (Versluys 67). American writers such as Paul Auster and Norman Mailer claimed that writing a novel about "une histoire pareille" was out of the question, at least for the foreseeable future (Quiriny para. 1).[13]

Beigbeder was clearly not of the same opinion. In *Windows on the World*, Frédéric claims that he is compelled to write about this event because of his belief that, as I have said, "Aujourd'hui les livres doivent aller là où la télévision ne va pas. Montrer l'invisible, dire l'indicible. C'est peut-être impossible mais c'est sa raison d'être. La littérature est une 'mission impossible'" (*WW* 359). The media cut the evidence of human beings out of the events that unfolded; Beigbeder must write to put them back in.[14] He must write to humanize the event which mass media turned into a spectacle. In a 2006 interview with Durand, Beigbeder describes his goal more explicitly:

> Mon but en écrivant un roman qui se passe à l'intérieur de cette boule de feu, c'est de souffrir, c'est de ressentir quelque chose, c'est finalement d'humaniser, de remettre de l'humain dans ce simulacre. C'est là où Baudrillard et moi, peut-être, on se complète. Il faut qu'il y ait quelqu'un pour dénoncer le simulacre mais il faut qu'il y ait quelqu'un aussi pour l'humaniser. Et ça c'est le rôle du romancier. (Durand *Beigbeder et ses doubles* 27-28)

What Beigbeder may have lacked in critical distance and perspective that can only come with time, he made up for by communicating the complex and competing emotions

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[13] Indeed, it would be several years before any American dared write a book-length fictional account about this unprecedented event on American soil. According to Keniston and Quinn, "The history of literature written about and after 9/11 can also be seen, at least in part, as a sequence of genres. That is, shorter forms appeared first – essays, brief personal reminiscences, and poetry. It took several years longer for novels and full-length memoirs to appear" (3). See D. G. Myer's "Completed Annotated Guide to 9/11 Novels" for a list of Anglo-American 9/11 novels and their publication dates. Hutton says that the period of silence might be explained by the logical fact that, "some discourses by their very nature take longer than others to emerge" (251). Michael Rothberg suggests that the period of silence could be seen as evidence of traumatic shock, "a period of silence that quickly gives way to a flow of discourse" (Rothberg 135).

[14] Beigbeder has explained that the fact that he inserts himself into the events is the distinguishing feature between his French 9/11 novel and an American 9/11 novel that authors like John Grisham or Stephen King might write. See Durand *Beigbeder et ses doubles* 22.

individuals felt upon witnessing the attacks. Even though the works of cultural critics and theorists like Baudrillard, Virilio, and Žižek similarly critique the media's role in making a spectacle of 9/11, their essays lack "human detail," as Emma Wilson puts it (103). In her view, "They work best read alongside more emotive reflections on 9/11, where the human and the theoretical may impact on one another, and shore one another up" (103).[15] That is where works like Beigbeder's novel come into play. As Beigbeder has said elsewhere, "Le roman c'est le dernier endroit où l'humanité respire" ("Utopie" 35). In this way, *Windows on the World* provides an archetypal example of what Michael Rothberg argues in his article "Seeing Terror, Feeling Art," namely that: "Literature and other forms of art are especially important after 9/11 because they allow us to imagine alternative responses to the violence of terrorism and the spectacles of mass-mediated culture. Literature and art can become sites for exploring the intersections between the public and the private and for understanding the feelings that terrorism draws on and produces" (131). Whereas terrorism creates fear and instills fear, literature promotes reflection and allows one to imagine more constructive responses.

In *Windows on the World*, Beigbeder is evidently determined – page by page, minute by minute – to fill the empty time and space, and humanize it, by giving the American character, an imagined victim of 9/11, a voice and a psychological presence in his final minutes. While Carthew is only a fictional character, he represents the real-life

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[15] Wilson says of Baudrillard's *The Spirit of Terrorism*: "His comments capture something of the emotional effect – the unreal horror and unavowable exhilaration – of seeing the towers fall [...]. Yet the violence of Baudrillard's image of suicide, its appeal to the imagination, obliterates the human victims of that suicidal plunge" (104). In reference to Virilio's *Ground Zero*, she says: "An irony, though, and this is an obvious point to make, is that his own argument about dehumanization itself evacuates the human in its theoretical twists" (109). According to Wilson, only Žižek "proves able to encompass both the Real and the material reality, horror and sorrow of 9/11" (110). See also page 111.

victims, both American and foreign. Beigbeder does not ignore the fact that over 370 victims were not American. When Carthew scans the room at Windows on the World, he remarks that: "Il y a des Arabes, des Anglais, des Pakistanis, des Brésiliens, des Italiens, des Vietnamiens, des Mexicains, tous gros. Le grand point commun entre les clients du *Windows on the World*, c'est leur ventre" (47). In that regard, one could apply a comment Audrey Evrard made about the Naudet brothers' documentary film, *9/11*, to *Windows on the World*. Like the Naudet film, Beigbeder's novel:

> propose à chaque spectateur de re-vivre cette journée comme un traumatisme avant tout humain et personnel ayant eu également une portée historique non seulement pour les Etats-Unis mais pour le monde entier. A partir du moment où le témoignage se fait humain, il transcende les oppositions arbitraires dressées entre 'nous' et 'eux': il tend au contraire vers l'universalisme. (16)

Beigbeder underscores the universal – or global – aspects of 9/11, by emphasizing the humanity of a victim of the attacks.

Moreover, humanizing the event is also a means of memorializing. Instead of cutting the victims out of the story, Beigbeder immortalizes their memory in the novel. The voice of the deceased Carthew confirms this, as he whispers in the wind that whirls around Ground Zero: "Seule la mort nous rend immortel" (*WW* 358), he says. What's more, the text on pages 366-68, written in the shape of the Twin Towers, concretely symbolizes the desire to preserve their memory. This symbolism is especially clear because it occurs in the chapter at 10:28am, the precise minute the North Tower fell. In this way, the text literally serves as an artistic presence to fill the void that remains in the absence of the Twin Towers.[16] In his 2001 essay, "In the Ruins of the Future," Don

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[16] Durham goes into greater discussion of how Beigbeder "explicitly contrast[s] the fragility of buildings to the permanence of art" in her article. She notes how he points out, for example, that Hemingway's book about his life as an expatriate in Paris was called *A Moveable Feast*, and ironically, the building he lived in on Rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs is no longer there. See 170-71.

DeLillo states that, after 9/11, there was "something empty in the sky" and describes how the task of the writer is to fill the void left at Ground Zero, "to give memory, tenderness, and meaning to all that howling space" (30; cf. Versluys 67). Beigbeder does just that. And in doing so, he succeeds in "reappropriat[ing] the media […] instead of remaining beholden to […] the media's anesthetizing spectacle (Rothberg 140).[17]

Despite his best intentions to humanize and memorialize, Beigbeder still encounters an ethical dilemma in writing his 9/11 novel. After all, he is writing in the first person about a catastrophe in which he was not directly involved. He lacks the legitimacy and authority of a first-hand witness.[18] The controversial nature of *Windows* was only reinforced by the fact that Beigbeder is also not American. After all, many Americans believed that 9/11 was a specifically American event.[19] In the text, it is quite

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[17] Rothberg states this in relation to D. Nurske's 9/11 poem, "October Marriage."

[18] According to Durand, "When analyzing accounts of tragic, ineffable events, many critics react differently to those written by survivors and those by people who did not experience it first-hand" (116), because, "being a survivor and direct witness to these events confers a certain legitimacy and powerful credibility to the accounts" (*"*Beyond the Extreme*"* 116). This is an argument that also comes up with relation to testimonies about the Holocaust. It explains why some critics, like David Horspool, praised Art Spiegelman for *In the Shadow of No Towers*, yet criticized Beigbeder for *Windows on the World*, accusing him of "a lack of taste," despite similarities between the two works (Durand *"*Beyond the Extreme*"* 116-17). Spiegelman lived very close to the WTC and was thus a first-hand witness of the attacks; Beigbeder was not.

[19] While *Windows* was well received in France, and even won the 2003 Prix Interallié, its reception was much more controversial in America. At the time Beigbeder's book came out in America, the initial period of post-9/11 transatlantic solidarity had all but faded and anti-Americanism was on the rise in France. So, in America, the English-language translation of *Windows* was met by "a strong sense of outrage that a foreigner, and particularly a Frenchman, has somehow dared to appropriate America's national tragedy to his own literary ends" (Durham 172). American readers were "scandalized by the disjunction of tone and significance that they perceive between the two stories that make up the dominant framework of the novel" (Durham 168-69). Consequently, just as the American media censored images of the people in the WTC, the American version of *Windows* also censored information, removing, for example, an explicit pornographic scene between two traders right before the collapse of the North Tower (*WW* 342-44) and Beigbeder's comparison of dying in the 9/11 inferno to dying in a gas chamber at Auschwitz (*WW* 334). As Durand says: "we must conclude once again that, for the American publishers and public, he is lacking the authenticity that is reserved for survivors when it comes to relating major tragic events" (*"*Beyond the Extreme*"* 117). While, officially, the changes were Beigbeder's decision, Durand makes clear that that was not really the case: "Officially, the editing was Beigbeder's decision: 'Because [Beigbeder] believes Americans may be more sensitive to the subject matter, he made some changes in the U.S. version. He decided […] to 'suggest rather than elaborately describe' some of the scenes of human suffering' (Memmott

clear that Beigbeder recognizes these ethical issues. While Frédéric visits Paul Virilio's Parisian exhibit of catastrophic art, "Ce qui arrive,"[20] an unshakable malaise prompts him to question his own writing project: "[A]-t-on le droit? Est-il normal d'être à ce point fasciné par la destruction? […] N'est-il pas trop tôt pour esthétiser une telle désolation?" (*WW* 161), and finally, "Vais-je pouvoir me regarder dans la glace après avoir publié un roman pareil?" (*WW* 163). Certainly, Beigbeder recognizes that he is entering into uncharted aesthetic territory that will undoubtedly be hotly contested. As Keniston and Quinn explain, "early journalistic and eyewitness accounts of terrorist attacks codified a narrow range of acceptable responses to 9/11 – heroism, solidarity, transformative change – that at once rendered all other reactions taboo and questioned the very aesthetics of even attempting to portray 'an event that seems incommensurable, inaccessible, and incomprehensible,' in short, that is, *unrepresentable*" (5).[21] In posing these questions through his French narrator, Beigbeder anticipates a mixed reaction. At one moment, Frédéric says that he would like to wash his hands of the event, but as a human, he feels implicated (*WW* 162). Nevertheless, the knowledge that he faces an ethical and aesthetic dilemma does not deter him from this writing project: "personne n'est obligé de […] lire un livre" (*WW*

5D). In reality, it was one of several requests the publishers imposed upon Beigbeder. While Beigbeder refused some of the proposed changes, he acceded to others" (Durand *"*Beyond the Extreme*"* 114).

[20] Virilio's exhibition was on display at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain from November 29, 2002 to March 30, 2003. The press release describes the project as such: "Exposer l'accident. Tous les accidents, du plus banal au plus tragique, des catastrophes naturelles aux sinistres industriels et scientifiques, mais aussi l'accident heureux, du coup de chance au coup de foudre. Exposer l'accident pour ne plus être simplement exposé à l'accident. Tel est le projet de Ce qui arrive" (3).

[21] In many ways, these questions are similar to ones associated generally with trauma studies, and in particular, with WWII, the Holocaust, and the unspeakable (Hutton 265, cf. Frost 199-200). According to Keniston and Quinn, early works treated the events of 9/11 more directly, but experimented with more formal innovations. Later works, however, treated 9/11 more indirectly, depicting the aftermath and "registering the reverberations of 9/11" in texts that were formally conservative (4). See also Keniston and Quinn 12.

161). Frédéric's unwillingness to back down in the face of potential controversy should come as no surprise. Beigbeder has never shied away from treating taboo topics (or from creating controversy) in his previous works, especially *99 francs* (2000). In fact, one can even read the questions cited above as a rhetorical strategy wherein he acknowledges the ethical issues only to dismiss them. The *mission impossible* is too important to him. In his 2006 interview with Alain-Philippe Durand, Beigbeder explained further why he felt he had not only to write about this event, but also to engage himself physically in this story:

> à un moment je me suis dit que je ne pouvais pas écrire sur autre chose […] C'était cet événement là qui avait changé mon époque, qui avait inauguré le vingt-et-unième siècle […] Alors pour quelqu'un qui va vivre dans ce siècle là, il était important de rentrer dans cette catastrophe et de ne pas rester à l'extérieur. Et si on y va, il faut y aller avec son destin intime, personnel, son humanité […] Il faut essayer de s'engager physiquement dans cette histoire. (Durand *Beigbeder et ses doubles* 23-24)

Beigbeder insists that he felt a sense of obligation to write about this historically significant event, which, in his view, was neither just a visual event, nor a uniquely American event.[22]

Traces of Transatlantic Ties

In writing this novel, Beigbeder is trying not only to provide a less "spectacularized," more humanized account of 9/11, but also to understand his morbid fascination with the attacks to which he feels personally connected.[23] Thus, throughout the novel, Beigbeder highlights a series of spatial, historical, cultural, and personal

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[22] Many scholars and intellectuals do not view 9/11 as a moment or event of historical rupture. American writer, Don DeLillo's 1991 novel, *Mao II*, would confirm that a discourse of terrorism was already well established. See Rothberg 131, Virilio 81, and Wilson 108. Beigbeder does, however, view it as a point of rupture, namely as the end of the capitalist utopia, just as he sees 1989, the year the Berlin Wall came down, as the end of the communist utopia (*WW* 202).

[23] In an interview, Beigbeder has said that, "[*Windows on the World*] est aussi une enquête sur mon attirance et mon émoi" (Durand *Beigbeder et ses doubles* 22).

transatlantic ties.[24] Rhetorically, the presence of these connections in the text, represents Beigbeder's attempt to overcome the questionable ethics of his writing project, by insisting on his connection to the event as a Frenchman with American ties, and quite simply, as a human being. They demonstrate "how European and American realities interpenetrate each other" (Versluys 73). They also anchor the *unreal* elements of the real-life event in a more *realistic* fictional context. The more imaginative Beigbeder's account becomes as he enters minute by minute into the unknown, the more concrete – or personal – he must make the Franco-American connection.

First, Beigbeder sets about establishing a transatlantic, spatial connection. The French narrator chooses to write this work at the Ciel de Paris restaurant at the top of the Tour Montparnasse. Clearly, he does this to create a sort of parallel space from which to imagine what it would have been like to be in Windows on the World on September 11th. After all, he says, "Le *Ciel de Paris* est tout ce qui reste du *Windows on the World*: une idée" (45). If Frédéric calls the Tour Montparnasse the WTC's "endroit jumeau" (*WW* 53), the use of the word "jumeau" can be read as a gesture not only to the fact that the WTC was commonly known as the Twin Towers, but also to the idea that the Tour Montparnasse is the WTC's double. As Versluys has said, "[In *Windows on the World*] the American and French locales are each other's equivalents rather than each other's counterparts" (73). Week after week while writing this novel, Frédéric has coffee or breakfast at the 56th floor restaurant just as many did at the 107th floor

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[24] Durham, Hutton, and Versluys have also treated various aspects of spatial, historical, cultural connections, But I believe this topic deserves more attention and detailed analysis. With regard to Beigbeder's historical connections, for example, Hutton contends that at times, "his turn to the past becomes increasingly rhetorical and indeed tenuous" (256). Her overall argument is well supported by her reading of the six texts with which she engages. At the same time, because she addresses six texts, she is unable to go into great detail about each one, and some of her arguments become somewhat reductive. Such is the case, I would argue, for her reading of *Windows on the World*, and I believe more attention needs to be given to Beigbeder's representation of transatlantic links.

restaurant of the WTC on the morning of September 11th (*WW* 18-19). While there, he compares the facts and figures of the World Trade Center and the Tour Montparnasse, reads descriptions of the Windows on the World restaurant in guidebooks dated prior to the attacks, observes the other patrons at Le Ciel de Paris, and studies the view of Paris below – a view which he jokes is the best view of the Paris skyline because it is the only one in which the Tour Montparnasse does not figure (*WW* 19).[25] On one occasion, Frédéric even takes his daughter to Le Ciel de Paris with him, just to imagine what it would have been like for his fictional alter ego to take his two sons to the WTC (*WW* 131).[26] On another occasion, he describes taking the stairs all the way down from the 56th floor, just to simulate the experience of the firemen and those who were evacuated from WTC (*WW* 146). Despite his efforts to create a "parallel space," he recognizes the shortcomings of his attempt: "Pour que je puisse décrire ce qui est arrivé de l'autre côté de l'Atlantique, il faudrait qu'un avion entre sous mes pieds dans cette tour noire" (*WW* 21). The spatial parallels are not enough. He must establish a more concrete physical connection.

Thus, just over midway through the novel, Frédéric attempts to bridge the transatlantic divide by eliminating the spatial separation altogether. He decides to leave Paris and travel to New York. "[J]e pars pour New York," he says, "Non, la tour Montparnasse n'est pas la troisième tour du World Trade Center [...] Flaubert disait: 'Je voyage pour vérifier mes rêves.' Je dois vérifier mon cauchemar" (*WW* 193). This

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[25] The website for the Tour Montparnasse even advertises it as "La plus belle vue de Paris: 360° sur les plus beaux monuments." Frédéric admits that many Parisians detest the Tour Montparnasse, but says that, according to Art Spiegelman, the Twin Towers, "étaient les deux jambes sur lesquelles reposait le mythe américain" (*WW* 284). He also notes the fact that both skyscrapers opened around the same time period. In fact, they both opened in 1973, although he erroneously cites 1974 as the date the Tour Montparnasse opened. He even notes that Pompidou originally planned to construct two towers (*WW* 90).

[26] In reality, however, there were not any children at Windows on the World on September 11th.

physical relocation symbolizes his desire to identify even more with Americans and to acquire more authenticity. The first thing he does when he arrives in New York is to take a taxi to Ground Zero (*WW* 213). The view of the "trou béant" and of an exhibit dedicated to the rescue workers at Saint Paul's Chapel moves him so much, he claims, that, "Pour la première fois, j'ai ressenti le Onze Septembre" (*WW* 215). In another attempt to close the space separating him from 9/11, Frédéric goes to an old aircraft carrier where a piece of the fuselage of American Airlines 11 is on display (*WW* 241-42). He approaches the relic of the plane which hit the North Tower, the tower in which the imagined half of Beigbeder's story takes place: "je me tiens devant ce qui reste du Boeing qui est entré sous le *Windows on the World*, " he says, "C'est une pièce de métal tordue, rayée, brûlée [...] Je n'ai jamais été plus proche du bain de sang" (*WW* 241). If it were not for the Plexiglas barrier, he could touch the fuselage.

Throughout the book Frédéric insists on describing his pilgrimage to spaces that represent his individual connections to 9/11 and commemorate Franco-American connections more generally. The Tour Montparnasse and the WTC are not the only parallel spaces. In Paris and New York, many other buildings, monuments, and neighborhoods point to numerous Franco-American links. One morning, from his perch atop the Tour Montparnasse, Frédéric gazes at the Eiffel Tower and the Hôtel des Invalides, each a reminder of transatlantic influences and associations: the engineer of the Eiffel Tower, Gustave Eiffel, was also the engineer for the Statue of Liberty; and Napoleon Bonaparte, whose tomb is on display at Les Invalides, was the Frenchman who sold Louisiana to the United States in 1803 (*WW* 146). Frédéric also explores the neighborhood around the Tour Montparnasse. He remarks: "Ce n'est pas un hasard si Pompidou a fait construire la réplique miniaturisée du World Trade Center à

Montparnasse: c'est le quartier dont l'âme est importée d'outre-Atlantique" (*WW* 169-70). It was there, after all, that the American expatriates of the Lost Generation – Ernest Hemingway, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, Henry Miller, and John Dos Passos, among others – lived and wrote in the 1920s and 1930s. While Hemingway's old building on 113, rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs and the brothel Henry Miller frequented have disappeared, numerous brasseries (La Closerie des Lilas, Le Dôme, La Rotonde, Le Select, La Coupole, and Le Falstaff) remain as *lieux de mémoire* of these Americans' years in Paris.[27]

In an analogous way, while in New York, Frédéric discovers many sites that indicate French influence. He does not hesitate to point out that a Frenchman, Christian Liaigre, designed the furnishings for the Mercer Hotel where he is staying (*WW* 347). When he orders white wine at Kevin McNally's trendy French restaurant, Pastis, he rejoices "de voir ce décor de brasserie français reconstitué en plein 'Meat Market'" (*WW* 219). He visits renowned French writer, Alain Robbe-Grillet, in his apartment at New York University (*WW* 270-71).[28] In addition, he references his own time spent in New York in the 1980s and compares what has changed in America since then (*WW* 235-36, 270, 287-89). Claiming that New Yorkers have become more polite (*WW* 235), but have also discovered doubt – l'ère de Descartes (*WW* 326-27) –, he draws another parallel between France and New York and likens New York after 9/11 to Paris after WWI (*WW* 227). Perhaps it is not a coincidence then that Beigbeder's attempts to describe New York are, in many ways, reminiscent of the writings of famous French travelers in

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[27] Beigbeder borrows some of this information from Noel Riley Fitch's *Walks in Hemingway's Paris*, which he references in his acknowledgements section (*WW* 371).

[28] According to the chronology of his life on the Editions de Minuit website, Robbe-Grillet taught at NYU from 1972-1997, but within the text, it is not clear whether this visit, supposedly in 2003, is real or imagined.

America during the interwar period.[29] When he comments on the fragility and vulnerability of New York, a city "au destin apocalyptique" (*WW* 269), his thoughts recall Sartre's "mal de New-York" (*WW* 113) and the resulting fear that Nature would crush the city. When he talks about getting vertigo from filming the WTC in *contre-plongée* (*WW* 295), his words echo Céline's description of the "espèce de vertige à l'envers" (*WW* 245) a foreigner could get while visiting this *ville verticale*. Indeed, in writing about New York, Beigbeder writes himself into the history of French travel writers in America, the "grande tradition française depuis Chateaubriand et son neveu par alliance, Tocqueville" (*WW* 234).

Certainly, the portrait Beigbeder paints of Paris and New York is one in which transatlantic connections abound as he "strives to show how 9/11 is an event that spills over the conventional boundaries of place and time" (Versluys 72-73). In addition to drawing spatial parallels between New York and Paris, Beigbeder also highlights historical connections between France and America that date back to the Revolutionary period and the founding of the two republics. For example, Frédéric describes how he often visits the marble plaque at 56, rue Jacob in Paris, because, "C'est ici, à l'hôtel de York, que le traité de Paris a été signé le 3 septembre 1783 par John Adams et Benjamin Franklin, mettant fin à la guerre d'Indépendance avec les Anglais […] c'est ici, à deux pas du *Café de Flore*, que les États-Unis d'Amérique sont nés" (*WW* 38). His American counterpart, Carthew, also stresses positive historical links. When his sons ask him, "C'est quoi un Français?" (*WW* 26), he explains to them that France and America are countries that have come to each other's aid in times of need (the Revolutionary War

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[29] See Sartre's *Situations III* and Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit*. In addition, Beigbeder's descriptions of the view from the top of the WTC echo those of Michel de Certeau in "Marches dans la ville."

and World War II, for example) and that the Statue of Liberty is a gift from France to America (*WW* 26-27). There is, of course, another side to his self-admittedly simplified story.

The fact remains that, since the Revolutionary period, the history of the Franco-American relationship has been a dynamic one of alternating periods of friendship and rivalry. Tom Bishop has effectively described the vicissitudes of the Franco-American connection in the following way:

> the official discourse is that the two countries are the best of allies, that they have repeatedly come to each other's defense, and even rescue, and that they are the only two major powers that have never waged war against one another. All of this is true. Franco-American friendship is a fact of life.
>
> But the real truth is that the relationship between France and the United States, especially in the past half century, is more that of a love affair than that of a friendship, with its passions, jealousies, idyllic moments, suspicions, break-ups, reconciliations, heartbreaks, the perpetual accusations that 'you don't love me as much as I love you.' (Bishop 21)

On one side of the Atlantic, Americans concurrently romanticize visions of French culture and scoff at French cultural exceptionalism, French national pride, and French cowardice. On the other side of the Atlantic, France has continually asserted its cultural superiority over America and promoted a discourse of Anti-Americanism, alternately denouncing America's cultural poverty, American isolationism, Americanization, and American imperialism. French and American individuals have been known to quarrel passionately over points of historical difference from gastronomy to religion; foreign policy to cultural matters.

Literature, film and intellectual discourse, do in fact often characterize the Franco-American relationship as a love-hate relationship – or in some cases, as a sibling rivalry. That is the case in *Windows on the World*. Although Beigbeder reinforces the

"official discourse of friendship" by highlighting convivial Franco-American connections, he does not ignore the less amicable aspects. In fact, he intersperses several examples of the sibling rivalry between the two sister Republics throughout the narrative. At one point, Carthew describes the sibling rivalry between his two sons as such: "C'est bizarre, deux frères: à la fois inséparables et tout le temps en guerre" (*WW* 41). Replace the words "deux frères" with "deux Républiques" and his words could easily describe the Franco-American relationship. "Guerre" should, of course, be read in a figurative sense in both cases. Just as the two brothers were not literally at war with one another, France and America have never fought against each other in a declared war.[30] That said, Beigbeder provides several ironic examples of the combativeness of the Franco-American sibling rivalry. For example, Frédéric claims that the French built the Concorde jet, "une de nos grandes fiertés nationales" (*WW* 194), in the 1970s because the Americans walked on the moon: "puisque les Américains gambadaient sur la Lune, il fallait trouver autre chose… Les Français sont puérils… C'étaient des adultes, des scientifiques très sérieux, des spécialistes en aéronautique; mais c'étaient aussi des gamins, des bébés trop mignons qui faisaient mumuse avec leur nouveau joujou" (*WW* 196, ellipses in original). The child-like language Frédéric employs comically reinforces the impression of a competition between two young siblings always striving to outdo one another. In another instance, while in New York, he goes to the Empire State Building and talks about how, upon its completion in 1931, Americans had finally realized their dream since 1899 of building a building that would surpass the Eiffel Tower (*WW* 248). This comparison is historically inaccurate for several reasons. For

[30] The closest France and America ever came to war was the Quasi-Guerre, which began in 1798 after the United States secretly signed the Jay's Treaty with Great Britain. For more, see Roger 56-57. As he has said, "Les historiens américains l'appelleront 'the Undeclared War'; et pour être une guerre, il ne lui manque en effet que le nom" (*L'Ennemi* 57).

one, he cites 1899 not 1889 as the inauguration of the Eiffel Tower. Secondly, it was the Chrysler Building, not the Empire State Building, that was the first New York skyscraper to surpass the Eiffel Tower upon its completion in 1930. Despite these discrepancies, the importance of this comparison is that, for Frédéric, it stands as yet another example of the Franco-American sibling rivalry.[31] It illustrates how, since the late-19th Century, French observers have come to see the United States as a formidable competitor in the race to becoming truly modern. As Jacques Portes has said:

> Having wholeheartedly embraced modernity, [the United States] had more or less explicitly become the symbol of that trend; *by 1880, after all, it had already invented the skyscraper* and the trust, to mention only these examples. The French clearly perceived the importance of such advances in various fields; they had now become the image of the future. No longer embodied by the institutions or by the pioneer who freely tilled his land, the future was now seen in the fast-paced rhythm of sprawling cities, in the speed of the trams, in the apparent freedom of women, and in the charm of the comforts that coddled the lives of the privileged. These examples explain why one has the impression that certain remarks and certain reflections of observers of the *Belle Epoque* could have been made today. […] *On the one hand, the rush of modernism they observed further increased their certainty that the Americans were amazing people who behaved in extraordinary, often amusing, and sometimes irritating ways. It also confirmed that the United States was always ahead, always the strongest. That is why the observers marveled at the height of the buildings in New York, which was fantastic by definition, whatever it might be* […] On the other hand, the fascination with which the French observed so many excesses spawned reactions of rejection, or at least major misgivings. (433-34, my emphasis)

Indeed, according to Portes' presentation, certain comments that French observers made during the *Belle Epoque* resonate strongly today, particularly in Beigbeder's novel.

As further evidence of the ongoing fraternal one-upmanship between France and America, Frédéric even dares reference the WTC attacks. With more than a hint of his characteristic dark humor, he says: "En Amérique tout est plus grand, même les

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[31] In a sense, this was repeated again in the 1970s. The Twin Towers also dwarfed their French counterpart. At 200m, the Tour Montparnasse was less than half their height.

attentats. Chez nous, une station de métro explose, un magasin de vêtements est dévasté, mais les immeubles ne bougent pas. Ici, le premier attentat étranger, c'est tout de suite le plus meurtrier de l'histoire de l'Occident: le plus grand massacre instantané de civils depuis la fondation des Etats-Unis" (*WW* 355). The examples Frédéric provides, especially this one, make the Franco-American rivalry seem childish and illogical. The idea that the United States would take pride in having suffered a bigger terrorist attack is, quite simply, absurd. However, the irrationality implied within such a comparison is on par with the rather irrational nature of the ongoing Franco-American debate over which country had the better revolution. Ultimately, all of this boils down to what Bourdieu refers to as the clash of "Deux Impérialismes de l'Universel":

> C'est dire que nombre des choses qui s'écrivent ou se disent, à propos de la France ou des USA ou de leurs rapports, sont le produit de l'affrontement entre deux impérialismes, entre un impérialisme en ascension et un impérialisme en déclin, et doivent sans doute beaucoup à des sentiments de revanche ou de ressentiment, sans qu'il soit exclu qu'une partie des réactions que l'on serait porté à classer dans l'antiaméricanisme du ressentiment puissent et doivent être comprises comme des stratégies de résistance légitime à des formes nouvelles d'impérialisme… (Fauré and Bishop 153-54)

In spite of his desire to stress positive historical ties, Beigbeder cannot ignore his country's longstanding rivalry with America and history of anti-Americanism, much less the fact that, as he was writing *Windows on the World*, anti-Americanism was on the rise in France in response to America's decision to wage war in Afghanistan and Iraq. This increase in anti-Americanism was in response to what Richard Kuisel calls a "situational factor." As opposed to the "substratum of virtually fixed stereotypes that pass from generation to generation," he defines "situational factors" as "contingent attitudes […] more temporal, even ephemeral, attitudes that derive from specific historical circumstances, often from foreign policy and trade relations" that may

temporarily amplify or assuage anti-Americanism based on "fixed stereotypes" (*Seducing* 10).[32] In *Windows on the World*, the French narrator describes the protest in Paris against the War in Iraq, the largest anti-war protest since the Vietnam War, as a battle between anti-Americans and Francophobes[33]: "Les antiaméricains se déchaînent contre les francophobes. Les deux côtés de l'Atlantique s'insultent copieusement à la télévision (*WW* 123). Nevertheless, Frédéric treats the subject with a touch of humor. He wonders jokingly if joining the demonstration makes him "munichois, lâche, antisémite et pétainiste comme l'écrit la presse américaine" (*WW* 123). While in New York, he relates how, on three occasions, he adopts a Spanish accent, implying that he must disguise his French identity in order to avoid potential backlash from Francophobes (*WW* 227, 281, 289). His humor and irony stand as an attempt to diffuse the anger and diminish the seriousness of the matter. Though Beigbeder acknowledges France's history of sibling rivalry and the increasing anti-American sentiment in France, he distances himself from such attitudes not only through humor, but also by stating directly: "J'écris ce livre parce que j'en ai marre de l'anti-américanisme hexagonal" (*WW* 30).

In addition to highlighting Franco-American spatial and historical connections, Beigbeder strives to forge a more personal bond to make up for the fact that he was, of course, not *personally* involved in September 11th. He connects collective history to his own life and experiences. After all, Beigbeder has very real transatlantic ties, a fact

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[32] "Situational factors" may temporarily amplify or assuage the "fixed stereotypes," but they rarely transform them (Kuisel *Seducing* 10). In *Windows*, Beigbeder points out several fixed stereotypes: "le chauvinisme américain, son isolationnisme culturel, l'absence totale de curiosité des Américains envers les travaux des étrangers (sauf à New York et San Francisco)" (*WW* 33).

[33] In response to increasing anti-Americanism, "Francophobia" and "French basing" were also on the rise in America as signified by the infamous rechristening of French fries as "freedom fries." See Vaïsse "American Francophobia."

which his avatar references explicitly in the novel. For example, he explains that his parents were Americanophiles who had attended college in the United States and that, consequently, he grew up surrounded by American culture (*WW* 95-97; cf. *RF* 76, 88). He also recalls his trips to New York – and specifically to the World Trade Center – first, as a child with his father, and later, on his own as a young adult (*WW* 19-20, 103, 207, 219, 240, 287-89, 294-96). Furthermore, he reveals his most concrete connection: specifically, the fact that his paternal grandmother, Grace Carthew-Yorstoun, was American: "Carthew Yorstoun est le nom de famille de ma grand-mère. Enlève le 'u' et tu obtiens Carthew Yorston, un personnage de fiction" (*WW* 364, 271, 360-61). One might think these details are entirely fictional, but Beigbeder repeats them with more detail and a backstory in his 2009 autobiographical novel, *Un Roman français* (47-55). As the altered identity of Beigbeder's real-life American grandmother, Carthew represents not only Frédéric's fictional alter ego, but also Beigbeder's most concrete real-life ties to America.

It is not surprising, then, that Beigbeder establishes parallels in the characterization of the two narrators. While one narrator is French and the other American, they are both quadragenarian fathers of the same generation. Both are products of bourgeois families who grapple with their responsibility as fathers and commitment as lovers. Both voice their regrets and hint at a deep desire for freedom from the constraints of contemporary society, from the banality of their daily lives, and from their past mistakes (usually with regards to their romantic relationships or child-rearing). They are afraid to change, yet afraid to stay the same. They long for freedom, but are unsure what that looks like exactly. Beigbeder explains this tension surrounding

this desire for liberty in the following way when referring to another one of his novels, *Au secours pardon* (2007):

> Evidemment [la liberté est] une valeur fondamentale. Mais en même temps, c'est très compliqué d'être libre […] beaucoup d'hommes de ma génération ne savent pas trop quoi faire de leur liberté. Est-ce qu'il faut être seul? […] Est-ce que justement on n'a pas besoin de rogner sur notre liberté pour retrouver un sens? Est-ce qu'à ce moment-là ça signifie construire une famille? Est-ce que ça signifie trouver un boulot, rentrer dans le rang, croire en Dieu, suivre les préceptes d'une religion? (Durand *Beigbeder et ses doubles* 35)

The Frenchman and the American are united in their struggle with these questions.[34]

As they wrestle with such matters, parallels between the thoughts of the narrators create a mirroring effect between the two as they alternate chapter by chapter. One minute (at 8h42), the French narrator contemplates the dull childhood he cannot remember, yet which fears he never escaped (*WW* 60-63). The chapter begins with his claim: "Je ne me souviens pas de mon enfance. Tout ce que j'en ai retenu c'est que la bourgeoisie ne fait pas le bonheur" (60). After relaying the only memory he can recall – a memory of slipping on black ice and missing the bus on a day that was *sombre, morne,* and *banal* – he concludes the chapter by saying that, "Je ne suis jamais sorti de ce matin-là" (*WW* 63). On the next page, representing the next minute (at 8h43), the American narrator describes his picture-book childhood and voices his fear at having left that bubble of protection in which he grew up. He opens by saying that, "La mienne d'enfance se déroule dans un paradis verdoyant de la banlieue chic d'Austin, Texas" (*WW* 64). He goes on to recount his childhood, which reads as the description of a "un film en Technicolor" about a stereotypical suburban family (*WW* 64-67). Everything

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[34] Thematically, their struggles echo those of Lester Burnham in Sam Mendes' 1999 film, *American Beauty*, which Beigbeder references both explicitly and implicitly several times throughout the text. See *WW* 17, 56-57, and 135. These are themes that are present in many, if not all, of Beigbeder's works.

was picture-perfect, yet nothing stood out. The words of the American narrator seem to be the reply of an interlocutor. Indeed, as *Windows on the World* progresses minute by minute, the mirroring of the monologues becomes a dialogue of sorts. Whether reflecting on their childhoods or wishing their lives were more exciting, the two narrators effectively engage in a conversation as they voice their deepest thoughts.[35] In this way, Beigbeder blurs, on yet another level, the boundaries between Frenchman and American.

What is significant in Beigbeder's evocation of transatlantic ties is that he acknowledges the distinctiveness of France and America and calls attention to the sources of historical conflict between the two nations while simultaneously breaking the long-entrenched barriers between them. With his rhetoric, he apparently attempts to dismantle the view that America is the counter-identity against which Frenchness may be articulated. Instead, he stresses the common heritage many French and Americans share: "Si l'on remonte huit générations en arrière, tous les Américains de peau blanche sont européens. Nous sommes pareils: même si nous ne sommes pas tous américains, nos problèmes sont les leurs, et les leurs sont les nôtres" (*WW* 360-61) and again he insists, "We do not hate you. Vous nous faites peur parce que vous êtes les chefs du monde. Mais nous sommes consanguins" (*WW* 364). Based on their common heritage, Frédéric insists any problem of America's is France's concern, as well, and vice-versa. Given the history of the Franco-American sibling rivalry and the growing

[35] At 9h39, Carthew Yorston considers all of the things he should have done or accomplished in his life, coming to the conclusion: "J'aurais simplement dû essayer d'être un homme meilleur" (*WW* 263). A minute later at 9h40, Beigbeder begins a similar passage of self-reflection by saying that he would like to invent a new genre, "l'autosatire,"and furthermore that, "Je suis vide [...] Tout ça pour oublier que je n'ai aucun passé et que je sonne creux" (*WW* 265). Both narrators reveal their fear of death and feeling of regret or incompleteness about their identity. At 10h13 and 10h14, each narrator takes his turn considering *le libéralisme* (*WW* 337-41). For other example of this "mirroring" phenomenon see the following chapters: 8h33 and 8h34, 9h16 and 9h17 (and 9h18), 9h42 and 9h43, 9h44 and 9h45, 10h04 and 10h05.

presence of anti-Americanism and Francophobia at the time he was writing this work, it is essential that Beigbeder reestablish this "transatlantic discursive community, sharing essential values and traditions" (Versluys 70). It further builds the connection that gives him artistic license to describe this event. By using his transatlantic ties – spatial, historical, cultural, and personal – as a rhetorical strategy to gain authenticity while he engages in the controversial act of imagining the unimaginable, Beigbeder attempts to justify his writing project and preempt any criticism about its ethical status. The transatlantic connections he establishes demonstrate his identification with America and Americans, and thereby complicate the "us/them" dichotomy typical of many French anti-American discourses. He connects personal with collective, local with global and vice versa as he focuses on shared history and humanity. In doing so, he promotes transatlantic dialogue and understanding.

Based on such a reading, *Windows on the World* could be considered an apology for *99 Francs*. After all, as Frédéric says, "Comment me faire pardonner le meurtre de la vieille dame de Floride à la page 201 de *99 francs*?" (*WW* 284). On its own, however, such a reading would be reductive. In this text that changes tone as frequently – if not more frequently – as it switches narrators, it would be irresponsible – and even, impossible – to reduce the story to an apology and a sincere declaration of Franco-American friendship. The rhetoric of transatlantic ties is akin to Bishop's "official discourse" of Franco-American friendship. It masks the underlying reality: Beigbeder has a love-hate relationship with America, and particularly with New York.

Underlying Tensions, or Beigbeder Blames America

Perhaps the best example of a passage that can be read both as an "official" declaration of friendship and "unofficial" reproach of a spurned lover or jealous sibling

is the chapter (8h34) in which Frédéric claims that his favorite writers, musicians, and filmmakers are American and then proceeds to enumerate them at length: from Walt Whitman to Bret Easton Ellis; Frank Sinatra to Kurt Cobain; and Howard Hawks to M. Night Shyamalan. From a literal perspective, Frédéric lauds the constant revitalization of American art and the "nouveauté qui nous parle de nous-mêmes" (*WW* 31) which speaks to more than just Americans. He commends the way in which American authors are critical of their own nation: "Aucune démocratie n'est plus contestée au monde par sa propre sphère littéraire. Le cinéma indépendant et underground américain est le plus subversif qui soit" (*WW* 31). French artists, he explains, do not suffer from a superiority complex *vis-à-vis* their American counterparts, but rather from an inferiority complex. Thus, jealousy and thwarted love ("amour déçu") are, he says, at the root of French anti-Americanism. Based on a literal reading, his words in this passage come across as a defense of American art over French art.

The framing of this passage suggests, however, that an ironic reading is necessary. Just prior to the list of American artists, Beigbeder's narrator makes his claim that he is writing because he has had enough of French anti-Americanism. He then goes on to say, "Mon penseur français préféré, c'est Patrick Juvet: 'I love America.' Puisque la guerre est déclarée entre la France et les Etats-Unis, *il faut faire gaffe à bien choisir son camp si l'on ne veut pas être tondu après*" (*WW* 29-30, my emphasis). While the first sentence would seemingly reinforce the pro-American (or anti-anti-American) reading of this passage, the second sentence suggests that one should not take what he is saying at face value. This passage has been autocensored. What is said is the opposite of what is meant. Frédéric is being facetious when says that American culture "n'écrase pas la planète pour des raisons économiques mais pour son talent spécifique" (*WW* 30). He

says that his favorite artists are American, but what the nearly page-long list of American artists shows is how economic and political factors have allowed American culture to occupy France (and the pages of French texts). This subversive message becomes crystal clear when he concludes the chapter in the following way:

> Ce qui nous gêne n'est pas l'impérialisme américain mais le chauvinisme américain, son isolationnisme culturel, l'absence totale de curiosité des Américains envers les travaux des étrangers (sauf à New York et San Francisco). La France aujourd'hui a le même rapport avec les Etats-Unis que la province avec Paris: mélange d'admiration et de rejet, désire d'en être, gloire d'y résister. On veut tout savoir sur ce pays pour pouvoir hausser les épaules d'un air dédaigneux. Etre au courant des dernières tendances, des nouveaux endroits, des ragots new-yorkais, afin de souligner ensuite à quel point on est bien ancré dans la réalité profonde de notre terroir. Les Américains semblent avoir effectué le chemin inverse de l'Europe: leur complexe d'infériorité (pays récent, 'nouveau riche', puéril, dont l'histoire et la culture sont en grande partie importées) a viré au complexe de supériorité (leçons de savoir-faire et d'efficacité, xénophobie culturelle, mépris commercial et écrasement publicitaire. (*WW* 32-33)

In the final paragraph of this chapter, the narrator claims to speak for the French people (as designated by "on") as he unabashedly sums up several reasons for France's love-hate relationship with America. What he reproaches most is the average American's cultural isolationism and chauvinism which results in a one-way cultural exchange.[36]

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[36] At times, Carthew and his sons are a perfect example of the American chauvinism Beigbeder references. For example, when Carthew tells his sons what a French person is, "[s]es garçons s'en foutent même s'ils apprécient les 'french fries' et les 'french toasts'" (*WW* 27). Later, when considering who could have orchestrated the terrorist attack Carthew thinks to himself: "Insensé le nombre d'individus qui haïssent l'Amérique. Y compris des Américains. Pourtant je ne déteste pas le reste du monde, moi. Je le trouve sale, vieux et compliqué, c'est tout. À vrai dire, je m'en fous complètement" (*WW* 140). In addition, the fact that the American tourists at the Ciel de Paris restaurant throw a fit when the waitress tells them they do not serve eggs for breakfast (*WW* 69) serves as a perfect example of their absence of curiosity with regard to other cultures. One should not, however, take this passage to imply that Beigbeder hates all American art or American influences. In fact, he uses American intertexts throughout all of his works. In Beigbeder's two essays on his favorite 20th century and contemporary novels, *Premier bilan après l'apocalypse* and *Dernière inventaire avant liquidation*, he includes numerous American works. Moreover, Beigbeder's appreciation of J.D. Salinger's writing has led him to make a documentary, *L'Attrape Salinger* (*Catching Salinger* in the U.S.) about trying to meet the latter. More recently, he wrote a novel, *Oona & Salinger* (2014), in which he fictionalizes Salinger's relationship with Oona O'Neill. Beigbeder's

It is not coincidental that the chapter began with two anecdotes implying that Americans have all but forgotten their French allies. First, after claiming that he often visits the plaque at 56, rue Jacob where the Treaty of Paris was signed on September 3, 1783 and suggesting that all American tourists should visit this reminder that the Revolutionary War ended in Paris, Frédéric second-guesses his suggestion, saying, "c'est ici, à deux pas du *Café de Flore*, que les Etats-Unis d'Amérique sont nés. Peut-être préfèrent-ils l'oublier?" (*WW* 28). Then, after reflecting on the joy of being on top of the world at the rooftop café of a skyscraper, he quotes the final section of Walt Whitman's poem, "*Salut au monde!*" He insists on the fact that the original French title illustrates how, "Au XIXe siècle les poètes américains parlaient français" (*WW* 29). The use of the imperfect tense brings home his underlying message: American poets *used to speak* French, but no longer do. The ironic passage that follows implies that Americans also no longer share the same inclusiveness and joyful openness to the world that Whitman expresses in the poem.[37]

Indeed, even if Beigbeder establishes transatlantic ties to investigate his American connections and to rhetorically give himself authority to write about 9/11, he cannot hide that he has a troubled relationship with America. In several passages, of *Windows on the World*, Frédéric holds America (indirectly) responsible for creating a generation of men who are unable to find love, struggle with existential questions, and turn to superficial outlets of decadent excess. This problem in today's society, he suggests, began with his parents' generation when "le Spectacle de l'Amérique a séduit

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transgressive writing style has even been linked to that of American writers like Bret Easton Ellis, Douglas Coupland, and Chuck Palahniuk. See Sabine van Wesemael's article.

[37] Though the poem concludes with "the ascription of primacy to America in the achievement of nation-wide equality worthy of leadership" (Warfel 156), the affirmation of the equality of men and women of all races is clear throughout.

le reste du monde" (*WW* 98).[38] The image America conjured in their minds was of an idyllic, picture-perfect country, full of promise: "L'Amérique des années 50: comme sur les documentaires en noir et blanc. Le rêve s'étendait au reste du monde occidental. Les longues Cadillac à ailerons, les ice-creams extra-large, le buttered pop-corn au cinéma, Eisenhower réélu: symboles magiques d'un bonheur parfait" (*WW* 95). For them, America was the incarnation of modernity, efficiency, and liberty and a picture of what they hoped France would look like in the future. Accordingly, they welcomed globalization and its inherent aspects of Americanization with open arms (*WW* 95- 96). Not all of the changes were innocuous, however. In fact, some of them would forever alter life in France for future generations. According to Beigbeder's depiction, the biggest impact the American influence would have was on the transformation of masculinity in the 1960s. Seduced by America and inspired by jet setting playboys who held high-profile roles in the entertainment industry or espionage, men like his father wanted to resemble Tom Jones, Gunter Sachs, Porfirio Rubirosa, Malko Linge,[39] Julio Iglesias, Curd Jürgens, Roger Moore, Roger Vadim, Warren Beatty, Burt Reynolds, and especially, Hugh Hefner:

> L'homme moderne des sixties est devenu le 'womanizer'. Le nouveau don Juan devait conduire une voiture rapide, fumer des cigarettes américaines, s'entourer de blondes aux gros seins en bikini au bord de piscines turquoise [...] Ajoutons l'arrivée de la pilule contraceptive, la simplification du divorce, la révolution féministe et sexuelle, et nous obtenons le PLAY-BOY INTERNATIONAL: 'L'homme sans gravité' décrit par le psychiatre Charles Melman, celui qui doit 'jouir à tout prix'. Que s'était-il passé? La liberté avait tué le mariage et la famille, le couple et les enfants. La fidélité était devenue un concept réactionnaire, impossible,

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[38] Beigbeder's use of the word, "seducing," when describing the process of Americanization and the spread of consumer society calls to mind Richard Kuisel's seminal text on the subject, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization*. See *WW* 95-96, 176-77.

[39] Malko Linge is actually a fictional character, the hero of Gérard de Villiers series of spy novels, *Son Altesse Sérénissime*.

> inhumain. Dans ce nouveau monde, l'amour durait trois ans, grand maximum. (*WW* 176-77)[40]

What the narrator describes is the way his parents' generation's newfound freedoms led to moral decadence which destroyed the traditional values of marriage and family. In this passage and the one previously cited on how his parents' generation was seduced by America, it is clear that, for Beigbeder, globalization, Americanization, the coming of consumer society, and May '68 are all linked.[41] Together, the changes that took place in the 1960s and 1970s – from the desire to have American liberties and luxuries to the resulting changed conception of masculinity – all contributed to his parents' divorce and his father's departure, as well as his own generation's inability to love for longer than three years.

Because Beigbeder blames America for the problems he perceives in today's globalized, consumer society, it is not surprising that he consistently portrays consumer society in a negative light in his other works. In the Marc Marronnier trilogy,[42] he offers the reader a picture of the social exploits of a superficial, young *mondain* who only cares about *la fête, le fric*, and *le sexe* (*Vacances* 18), while refusing to grow up and act

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[40] This last sentence is clearly an allusion to the title of Beigbeder's novel, *L'amour dure trois ans* (1997).

[41] Beigbeder clearly struggles with how to view Americanization. Scholars have long debated whether Americanization is a matter of content (the spreading of American culture, politics, etc.) or a matter of form that is really evidence that Americanization is part of globalization (changes in technologies and communication that have brought about new global trends for consumerism). See Mathy's reading of Régis Debray's *Contretemps* in "The Popularity of American Culture" 146, and especially, 151-54. With regard to May '68, the French narrator says that he is convinced May '68 was not an anti-capitalist revolution, "mais au contraire l'installation définitive de la société de consommation" (*WW* 97) and that, "La génération de mes parents a été irrémédiablement marquée par 1968. Leur société s'est transformée du tout au tout: les valeurs ont changé, les mœurs aussi. Plus rien n'a jamais été comme avant […] 1968 fut pour mes parents comme une seconde naissance, d'où leur divorce inévitable. Ils n'avaient plus de repères" (*WW* 339-40). See *WW* 219-21 where Beigbeder explains that "les enfants de 1968" grew up without male role models. See also Durand's "Defending Narcissus" where he comments on the role May '68 played in the lives of Generation X (179-80).

[42] *Mémoires d'un jeune homme dérangé* (1990), *Vacances dans le coma* (1994), and *L'Amour dure trois ans* (1997).

responsibly. Despite his carefree lifestyle, Marc is constantly morose, wondering if there is any meaning behind his charade of life (*Vacances* 100). The strongest example of Beigbeder's critique of consumer society occurs in *99 Francs*. In that novel, which appeared three years before *Windows on the World* and thus one year before the events of 9/11, he depicts a world in which "tout est provisoire" (*99F* 17) and in which publicity is likened to propaganda for World War III (*99F* 34). Moreover, if three of his fictional characters kill an elderly American women in *99 Francs*, it is specifically because she represents, for them, the globalized system of capitalism (208-15).

Across the board, Beigbeder's heroes suffer from the complex of individuals who live in "hypermodern times." As Gilles Lipovetsky describes in *Les Temps hypermodernes*:

> D'un côté, la société-mode ne cesse d'inciter aux jouissances démultipliées de la consommation, des loisirs et du bien-être. De l'autre, la vie devient moins légère, plus stressante, plus anxieuse [...] C'est sous les traits d'un composé paradoxal de frivolité et d'anxiété, d'euphorie et de vulnérabilité, de ludique et d'effroi, que se dessine la modernité du deuxième genre. (63)

Even though individuals living in this culture "désunifiée et paradoxale" benefit from more freedom and comfort, they experience a constant "détresse existentielle" (Lipovetsky 77, 79). In this time when, "la relation à autrui (enfant, amour, amitié) [...] fait la qualité de vie du plus grand nombre," the failure to love or be loved would make one even more fragile and destabilized (Lipovetsky 80-82).

This insatiability, existential anxiety, and inability to love, are the very same issues that the two narrators of *Windows on the World* wrestle with in the chapters where their mirrored monologues become dialogues. Versluys has argued that the "undifferentiated treatment of the two main characters makes for a thinness of texture and psychological poverty" (73). I would argue, however, that the doubling effect is rich

with texture and psychological significance, and furthermore, that an understanding of this significance is essential to a deeper appreciation of the text. If one considers closely the similarities between Carthew and Frédéric, one realizes that there is another reason Beigbeder's feelings of personal connection to America – and thus to 9/11 – are so profound, yet so conflicting. The American character represents not only Frédéric's American alter ego and the altered identity of Beigbeder's paternal grandmother, but also, more importantly, a shadowy figure of Beigbeder's father. This trace, which is implicit in *Windows on the World*, is explicit in Beigbeder's 2009 work, *Un Roman français*. In it, he refers to *Windows on the World* (along with *L'égoïste romantique*, and *Au secours pardon*) and states: "J'essayais de parler de mon enfance, sans oser vraiment" (*RF* 21). In *Windows on the* World, he does claim on several occasions that he has no memory of his childhood (*WW* 60, 98, 121, 194, 220-23, 288-89). Writing about the terrorist attack in New York brings Beigbeder's forgotten, or suppressed, childhood memories to the surface. This is because Beigbeder associates New York with the confusion, disillusionment, and emptiness he felt following his parents' divorce and his father's departure. In *Un Roman français*, he describes how, after his mother and father divorced, his mother explained his father's absence by saying that he was working in New York (*RF* 222-23). Thus, the young Beigbeder became obsessed with the Big Apple and began watching American movies and television series, hoping to establish some sort of connection with the father he believed had abandoned him:

> Je m'imaginais que j'allais le surprendre au coin d'un immeuble, dans le feuilleton, le voir sortir d'un restaurant, monter dans une limousine en ajustant son nœud de cravate entre deux rendez-vous d'affaires. *New York me donnait des nouvelles de mon père débordé*. La fumée blanche qui sort du trottoir, les escaliers extérieurs rouillés, les néons des hôtels qui clignotent, les sirènes de police, les ponts suspendus… *c'était la maison de mon père*. Mon père était le détective Mannix, ou le héros de *Mission Impossible* dont le magnétophone 's'autodétruira dans les cinq secondes.'

> *Je l'accompagnais mentalement dans cette Amérique où je n'avais jamais mis les pieds. J'étais new-yorkais comme lui, la nuit je rêvais de gratte-ciel irréels et gigantesques,* de promenades où mon père me prenait la main pour m'emmener au cinéma, où nous mangions du pop-corn, hélions un taxi jaune, et cela ne me dérangeait pas de l'attendre entre deux réunions dans le lobby d'un grand hôtel, ou le couloir d'un building climatisé. J'étais loin de la rue Monsieur-le-Prince, dans ce film américain qui n'existait que dans ma tête. Un rêve au pays de ma grand-mère Carthew-Yorstoun, où je n'aurais pas perdu mon père. (*RF* 224-25, my emphasis)

Once one understands the role New York played in Beigbeder's relationship with his absent father, the underlying significance of Carthew's character in *Windows on the World* becomes clearer. After all, Carthew is a divorced father on vacation in New York with his two sons, visiting the sites that Beigbeder once visited with his own father and brother (*WW* 294).[43]

Certainly, it is no coincidence that the mirroring of the Frenchman's and American's monologues in the text appears, at times, to create a dialogue between the two. As Beigbeder says in *Un Roman français*, "Les livres sont un moyen de parler à ceux auxquels on est incapable de parler" (*RF* 239). Years after the fact, Beigbeder is still trying to establish a connection with his father and make sense of his "enfance" which he says rhymed with "silence, absence, indifférence" (*RF* 226). Because Beigbeder associates New York with such emotionally charged events, it is no surprise that the WTC's destruction affected him deeply. Clearly, he connects New York with his father following his father's departure. The WTC was a personal *lieu de mémoire* for Beigbeder.

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[43] This connection helps the reader to understand why Beigbeder imagined a father with his two sons at the Windows on the World restaurant when, in reality, no children were there the morning of the attacks. Several traits or penchants Beigbeder attributes to Carthew's younger son, David, reappear in *Un Roman français*, as his own characteristics and predilections: for example, his frequent bloody noses and his love of science fiction novels as an escape from reality. One also understands that the sibling rivalry in *Windows on the World* represents not only the Franco-American relationship, but also Beigbeder's fraught relationship with his older brother, Charles. See especially the chapter, "Frère du precedent" (*RF* 194-204)

It held memories of his childhood and adolescent visits there.[44] Thus, the traumatic event of the WTC's destruction brings the memories of his own past trauma to the surface. This would be an example of "Freud's notion of *nachträglichkeit* or the tendency of traumatic events to be assimilated not at the moment of their occurrence but later, often through repetition and reenactment" (Keniston and Quinn 7). In other words, "Trauma piles upon trauma" (Keniston and Quinn 6).[45] Just as America experienced a loss of innocence on the ill-fated September day of September 11, 2001, Beigbeder experienced a loss of innocence when his parents divorced and his father left. In his mind, the two events that respectively represent historical rupture and personal fissure become intertwined. Beigbeder uses one unspeakable event to make sense of the other. He writes in an attempt to fill the void at Ground Zero, but also in an effort to fill the void in his own life: "Écrire (et lire) pour essayer de faire quelque sens de soi" (Doubrovsky "Pourquoi").[46]

Conclusion

The realization that Beigbeder is not just trying to imagine what happened in the WTC, but that he is also trying to find himself by remembering his childhood encourages the reader to reconsider a passage which, I believe, serves as a thematic

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[44] Besides the fact that his childhood amnesia began when his mother told him the lie that his father was no longer around because he was working in New York (*RF* 240), Beigbeder describes how it was the time he spent in New York as an adolescent that made him realize his childhood had ended, and it was his time in New York that made him realize he would become a writer (*RF* 264-67).

[45] Another example of this phenomenon would be how Art Spiegelman's experience of 9/11 brings back memories of his parents and the Holocaust. See Keniston and Quinn 6.

[46] In *Windows*, he says, "Je suis vide [...] je n'ai aucun passé [...] je sonne creux" (*WW* 265). In *Un Roman français*, after repeating that he has no memories of his childhood, he reiterates that, "Je suis une forme vide, une vie sans fond" (*RF* 17). See also the chapter in *Windows* where the Beigbeder's narrator addresses why people like him want to be artists: "Pourquoi voulons-nous tous être des artistes? [...] Ce n'est qu'un prétexte. [Nous voulons] être célèbres. Nous voulons être célèbres parce que nous voulons être aimés. Nous voulons être aimés parce que nous sommes blessés. Nous voulons avoir un sens. Servir à quelque chose. Dire quelque chose. Laisser une trace. Ne plus mourir. Compenser l'absence de signification. Nous voulons cesser d'être absurdes" (*WW* 265-66).

mise en abyme of Beigbeder's two-fold narrative endeavor. At 9h50, the French narrator muses that:

> Certains disent du cinéma qu'il est une 'fenêtre sur le monde'. D'autres disent cela du roman aussi. L'art serait une Window on the World. Comme les glaces fumées des tours de verre, dans lesquelles j'aperçois mon reflet, grande silhouette courbée en manteau noir, héron à lunettes déambulant à vastes enjambées. Je fuis cette image en accélérant le pas mais elle me suit comme un oiseau de proie. Écrire un roman autobiographique non pas pour se dévoiler mais pour disparaître. Le roman est un miroir sans tain, derrière lequel je me cache pour voir sans être vu. Le miroir dans lequel je me regarde, je finis par le tendre aux autres. (*WW* 287-88)

Windows on the World is not just a novel about 9/11, but also a veiled attempt at an autobiographical novel. Shortly after this passage, Beigbeder's narrator tries to return to the office where he worked in New York, only to be turned away. He says "Je suis éjecté de mon passé. Mon passé ne veut pas de moi. Mon passé me raccompagne dans la Revolving Door. Je dois lui tourner le dos, une fois de plus" (*WW* 289). Though Beigbeder succeeds, albeit it fictitiously, at inserting himself into the events of 9/11 through the creation of his American double, he does not succeed in accessing his own past via Frédéric. The depth of the personal resonances remains hidden, buried, and inaccessible. It is not until *Un Roman français*, that Beigbeder is able to access his childhood memories, as signaled by his declaration: "J'habite mon enfance, je m'installe dedans, j'ai le sofa mental" (*RF 103*).

This key passage in *Windows on the World* in which Beigbeder admits the failure of his attempt at autobiography can also be read as Beigbeder's defense of what a novel is and does. Through Frédéric, Beigbeder espouses his view that a novel is both a window and a two-way mirror. Having the properties of a window with tinted glass or a two-way mirror, the novel alternately allows for transparence and reflectivity. In other words, for a writer like Beigbeder, the pages of a novel simultaneously serve as a

transparent mediator between self and world and a specular mediator between one's present and one's past. The imbrication of collective history with one's individual history is a fundamental feature of the novel.[47] At a time when many accuse the French novel – and especially Beigbeder's novels – of a narcissism which breeds insularity, *Windows on the World* testifies to the fact that the novel can be both a mirror into one's own life and a window on the world. If reading allowed a young Beigbeder to escape the world and imagine alternative realities, writing allows him to engage the real world and reinvent himself (*RF 139-43*; cf. "Utopie" 28). In his contribution to a 2004 collection of essays about the state of the French novel entitled *Le roman, pourquoi faire?* Beigbeder insists emphatically: "Le roman ne vous coupe pas du monde, il vous y ouvre" ("Utopie" 33), and furthermore that, "il m'arrive de penser que le roman [...] est notre seul espoir [...] Le roman est notre dernière chance. La seule utopie qui nous reste" ("Utopie" 37). The French narrator's dream of a peaceful, utopian world democracy in the last third of *Windows on the World* may be just that, a utopia – existing no place on Earth. Nevertheless, this work which blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction; visual and literary; French and American; past and present suggests that the novel – "l'art le moins limité au monde" (Beigbeder "Utopie" 34) – does not have to be constrained by geopolitical realities. A novel can be both a *roman français* and a *roman américain*.

[47] In his interview with Durand, Beigbeder explains that: "Le rôle de l'histoire dans nos vies personnelles quotidiennes, voilà selon moi ce qu'est un roman" (Durand *Beigbeder et ses doubles* 23).

The Pen is Mightier than the Sword in Amélie Nothomb's *Une forme de vie*

"Il n'y a que deux solutions: la guerre ou la diplomatie."
Amélie Nothomb, *Une forme de vie*

"L'homme n'est ni ange ni bête et le malheur veut que qui veut faire l'ange fait la bête."
Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*

In the immediate aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attacks, Jean-Marie Colombani's article in *Le Monde* entitled "Nous sommes tous américains" exemplified the initial sentiment of increased Franco-American camaraderie. Such solidarity quickly faded, however, and was all but gone by early 2003 as the United States carried out its war on terrorism in Afghanistan and made preparations to invade Iraq. The French, led by President Jacques Chirac and Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, were staunchly against military action, favoring, instead, a more diplomatic approach, as they had since the mid-1990s when the U.S. and France disagreed over how to deal with Iraq – and specifically Saddam Hussein's regime – following the first Gulf War (Kuisel "Deteriorating Images" 111). Indeed, leaders of France did everything in their power to prevent the 2003 military invasion of Iraq and subsequent war. French citizens were in an uproar and protested in Paris on January 18th. On January 20th and again on February 14th, Dominique de Villepin declared that the war was not justified and threatened to veto the vote in the U.N. Security Council. On February 15th, hundreds of thousands of people marched through the streets of Paris toward the Bastille as part of the largest worldwide anti-war protest ever recorded.

Besides their strong diplomatic convictions, French anti-war protesters were expressing fears and beliefs traditionally associated with anti-Americanism. They

disliked America's unilateralism and imperial attitude.[1] Not convinced that Iraq was the problem, they did not see the U.S.'s peremptory war as necessary (Albouker 335). Many questioned the Bush administration's reasons for entering Iraq, wondering whether there were any real, verifiable links between Al Qaeda and Hussein's regime (Albouker 335; cf. Rancière 253-54, Kuisel "Deteriorating Images" 112). They suspected America's altruist motivations actually to be self-interest in disguise.[2] Convinced that the reasoning was all propaganda, French philosopher, Jacques Rancière, who has written about the role of international organizations in determining who can justify war or human rights interventions, likened George W. Bush's America to Goebbels' Germany in his article entitled, "On War as the Ultimate Form of Advanced Plutocratic Consensus" (256). Étienne Balibar, a fellow French philosopher who served as a co-writer, along with Rancière, for Louis Althusser's *Lire le capital* (1965), saw Europe as a "vanishing mediator" which could bring about a new era of international relations (Mathy, "Iraq" 420). In expressing their opposition to military intervention in Iraq, French anti-war advocates and diplomats sought to show that France could serve as a counterweight to the United States (Mathy "Iraq" 418). Nevertheless, on March 19, 2003, the U.S. led a team of allied forces into Iraq, without France's support.

French disapproval of the war in Iraq only increased after the military action began. Polls of the French public show that French views of the U.S. steadily

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[1] See Régis Debray's satirical essay *Empire 2.0: A Modest Proposal for a United States of the West by Xavier de C*** * (2004, originally published in French under the title *L'Édit de Caracalla* in 2002). The French title makes explicit the parallel Debray draws between the United States and the Roman Empire. See also Cullen Murphy's *Are we Rome?: The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America* (2008).

[2] See Albouker. See also Kuisel who said that many French revealed that they thought oil and a desire to dominate the world and target Muslim governments were the U.S.'s ulterior motivations for the invasion of Iraq ("Deteriorating Images" 112). Alain Badiou proposed that the American wars that took place after end of the Cold War aim to protect "Western" comfort and pleasure and to destroy that which is not homogenous" (223).

deteriorated from early 2003 to early 2004 (Kuisel "Deteriorating Images" 93). The Iraq crisis created a Franco-American crisis, which Philippe Roger said was "d'une gravité exceptionnelle" ("Questionnaire" 467). Anti-American sentiment skyrocketed in France while French bashing was on the rise in the United States.[3] Many feared that an irreparable divide had opened up in "the West," especially between France and America.[4]

There have been many fictional engagements with this moment in the history of the Franco-American relationship. Bertrand Tavernier's 2013 film, *Quai d'Orsay*, which is based on the comic books by Abel Lanzac (Antonin Baudry) and Christophe Blain, offers an amusing look at life in the French Foreign Minister's office during the months leading up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Names are changed, but there is no doubt that Alexandre Tailleur de Vorms represents Dominique de Villepin, Arthur Vlaminck is Antonin Baudry, and Lusdemistan is Iraq. (Only George W. Bush's identity is not changed.) No one is spared. Numerous opportunities are seized to point out the Americans' negative qualities. They are characterized as being stupid and ignorant, motivated solely by "pognon, pétrole, intérêts" (as opposed to the *esprit* and *vision* that motivates the French). For the French minister, the fact that 30% of Americans eat in

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[3] For more on this, see Kuisel "Deteriorating Images," Vaïsse "American Francophobia," Mathy "Iraq," and Roger "Questionnaire."

[4] Robert Kagan, for example, spoke of a growing ideological gap between Old Europe and the New World in his book *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order*. He writes: "It is time to stop pretending that Europeans and Americans share a common view of the world [...]. Europe is entering a post-historical paradise of peace and relative prosperity, the realization of Immanuel Kant's 'perpetual peace.' Meanwhile, the United States remains mired in history, exercising power in an anarchic Hobbesian world where international laws and rules are unreliable, and where true security and the defense and promotion of a liberal order still depend on the possession and use of military might" (3; quoted in Mathy "Iraq" 416). While Mathy claims that Kagan is not entirely right because " 'Europe' and 'America' are not homogenous totalities, opposable to one another as a whole" (416), he does allow that there is a growing tendency to essentialize Franco-American differences (Mathy "Iraq"419). See also Kopstein and Steinmo's book, *Growing Apart?: America and Europe in the Twenty-First Century*.

their cars serves as proof that Americans don't know how to *s'aimer*. The film also pokes fun at ridiculous aspects of French ministerial and political work. There may not be any Internet at Quai d'Orsay, but there is a man who can decrypt telegrams working beneath the fountain in the courtyard. The Minister, who cannot use a word processor, never reads or writes, but only cites writers and highlights what others have written. He slams doors and sends papers flying every time he enters a room, but he never puts pen to paper. And yet, this film praises the power and persuasiveness of language that has characterized France's greatest orators from Bossuet to De Villepin, not to forget De Gaulle. The film may comically present the minister's insistence on his talking points (variations of the triad, "Responsabilité, Unité, Efficacité – Sinon c'est la guerre!"). But it also shows that language is, as the Minister says, "ce qu'il y a de plus important"; "Écrire, la vrai vie!" To that end, it ends with the round of applause after the Minister delivers his rousing speech to the U.N. Security Council. The language is borrowed directly from De Villepin's February 14, 2003 address. In this film, Tavernier, who is a self-described "gourmand des mots," brings home the point that "le dialogue, c'est l'action" ("Bertrand Tavernier"). It is no surprise that the English translation of Lanzac and Blain's comic book is cheekily entitled *Weapons of Mass Diplomacy*.

Written several years before *Quai d'Orsay*'s release, Amélie Nothomb's 2010 novel, *Une forme de vie*, engages with similar tensions.[5] In the novel, which is situated

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[5] Nothomb is Belgian, of course, but, in many ways, the French have taken her in as one of their own and I consider her to be representing a French perspective in *Une forme de vie*. Dominique Viart has addressed the difficulty of defining what constitutes "French" literature in today's world where: "les frontières, pas plus que les catégories, ne sont étanches. Quel critère décide qu'un écrivain est français plutôt que francophone? sa naissance? sa résidence? son éditeur originel? sa nationalité? Toutes choses – ou presque – qui peuvent changer" (*La Littérature* 10). He ultimately asserts that it comes down to two determining factors: publication "car c'est un trait discriminant que celui de l'éditeur. Selon que l'écrivain publie la première édition de ses livres en son pays on en France, il ne se destine pas exactement au même lecteurs" and reception "car le lectorat français reçoit ces écrivains sans faire aucune différence entre eux et les autres. Il lui arrive même de ne pas les savoir

during the last few years of the war in Iraq (from December 18, 2008 to March 5, 2010), Nothomb interweaves her reflections on the war, the Franco-American relationship, the reader-writer relationship, and the distinction of fiction amidst the epistolary exchange between her autofictional narrator and Melvin Mapple, an American soldier in Baghdad. Knowing that Amélie[6] reads and responds to her fan mail, the American soldier, who has battled obesity since the start of the War in Iraq, sees a kindred spirit in Amélie and writes to her in the hopes that she will understand his plight. She does, and a bond forges between the two based on their shared disapproval of the war in Iraq, their respective struggles with eating disorders, and their mutual love of fiction. In the end, however, things are not as they initially appear, as is often the case in Nothomb's writing. Melvin Mapple is not a soldier at all, but rather, an obese computer programmer who has woven a web of lies and created a fictional account of his life in order to cope with the isolated existence he truly leads in his parents' tire warehouse in Baltimore. Amélie is not as caring and compassionate as she initially made herself to be, and her sincerity is called into question.

In this chapter, I will analyze how Nothomb writes *Une forme de vie* to denounce war in the hopes that her work will have an impact on her readers, encouraging them to wage wars *of words* through diplomacy and dialogue. Throughout the narrative, Nothomb plays with the construction of identity, particularly with the boundary between the self and the other and notions of sameness and difference. The polyphonic

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étrangers (c'est sans doute un trait de 'l'annexionnisme' français) et d'en faire les représentants majeurs d'une certaine littérature 'française'" (10). According to these two factors, Nothomb's literature is "French": her works are published by Albin Michel, and her writing has been more recognized in France than in Belgium. What's more, she lives in Paris, and in the *New York Times* op-ed she wrote, she even puts herself in the position of spokesperson for the French people.

[6] Throughout this chapter, to distinguish between author and narrator, I will refer to the narrator as Amélie and to the author as Nothomb or Amélie Nothomb.

qualities intrinsic to the epistolary novel allow her to realistically offer different points of view. At first, Nothomb's text may seem anti-American because of her harsh critique of America's foreign policy in Iraq. A study of the treatment of war in her previous works reveals, however, that her negative portrayal of the war in Iraq in *Une forme de vie* is part of a general critique of war and not evidence of strident anti-Americanism. Overall, as in her previous works, she produces a nuanced picture of Franco-American relations and evidence that, when one looks on an individual level, one sees that the West is not so hopelessly divided on all issues. As opposed to war which brings out human beings' brutality, Nothomb celebrates literature which has the power to create a common fictional reality and focus on shared humanity. If the end threatens to unravel this idyllic idea, it is very typical of Nothombian writing. Amélie's final deception of Melvin demonstrates the veracity of Blaise Pascal's adage, paraphrased early on in the novel, which states that, "L'homme n'est ni ange ni bête et le malheur veut que qui veut faire l'ange fait la bête" (*Pensées* 370).[7] Ultimately, one understands that Amélie's initial decision to respond to Melvin in this *roman américain* mirrors the role America played in the War in Iraq. Nothomb shows how – whether in international relations or in interpersonal relationships – good intentions can be misleading. The shocking dénouement wherein the romantic tone becomes ironic also reminds one that, in the end, this is all part of a masterfully crafted story. It forces one to reconsider what has come before and to reflect on the distinction between fiction and real life: is fiction, which derives from the Latin word, *fingere* meaning "to make or to form,"[8] also *une forme de vie*?

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[7] Nothomb merely quotes the second half of the maxim, "qui veut faire l'ange fait la bête" (34).
[8] See Cohn *Distinction* 1.

Anti-war, Pro-Diplomacy

If, initially, *Une forme de vie* seems anti-American, it is because, right away, one sees that Nothomb disapproves of the Bush administration's foreign policy and is adamantly against the war in Iraq. On the first page and in the very first letter, Melvin Mapple claims that he is writing to Amélie because he is suffering in "cette fichue guerre" and hopes that she will understand (*FV* 7). The fact that Amélie's fictional American correspondent refers to the War in Iraq as "cette fichue guerre" immediately indicates that he does not view the war in a positive light. Certainly there were many Americans against the combat, but these words are especially surprising in the mouth of an American soldier. Upon receiving Mapple's letter, Amélie asks herself: "N'y avait-il pas une censure militaire qui n'eût jamais laissé passer le *'fucking'* devant *'war'*?" (*FV* 8). Mapple's statement becomes even more shocking when Amélie relates what Mapple had actually said before she translated his words into French for the reader's benefit.[9] Amélie does not let this characterization of the conflict go unnoticed. By repeating Mapple's words, as he had written them in English, she only draws more attention to them, thereby reinforcing the negative view of the hostilities from the start. In this way, Nothomb takes advantage of the iterative and polyphonic possibilities intrinsic to epistolary novels (Genette 115-16, 190).

Throughout the narrative, Melvin describes the war as senseless and horrific. He tells Amélie that it was the horror of the fighting that caused his obesity. Upon debarking in Iraq, he turned to food for consolation from his terror (*FV* 27). He asserts that the volume of the food he consumed and of the weight he gained – 100 kilos – is directly proportional to the level of the horror he experienced (*FV* 80). Because of his

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[9] The fact that Nothomb translates indicates to the reader that the fictional correspondence between Nothomb and Mapple was supposed to have actually taken place in English.

extreme obesity, Melvin acknowledges that he may seem inhuman. But, as he sees it, any soldiers who have killed civilians and whose lifestyles are not grossly affected by the battle are the inhuman ones (*FV* 38, 41-42). In his anti-war declarations to Amélie, Melvin even goes as far as saying that the war was waged based on false pretenses: "Il n'y avait pas d'armes de destruction massive en Irak. À supposer qu'il y ait eu des doutes sur la question, il n'y en a plus aujourd'hui. Ce conflit était donc une injustice scandaleuse" (*FV* 38). For Melvin, the fact that the war is unjust only adds insult to injury. Therefore, he relates how he decided to turn his problem into his platform. His obesity became his act of sabotage, his way of revolting against the violence. He and the other obese soldiers cost the Army a tremendous amount in terms of food, clothing, and healthcare (*FV* 43-46). Moreover, his obesity is a reminder to himself and everyone else of his guilt over having participated in such evil (*FV* 63). He even personifies his excess weight, imagining that it is one of the innocent Iraqi women that he massacred and naming it Schéhérazade (*FV* 30, 39). "Sans métaphore," he says, "je porte le poids de mon crime" (*FV* 39). In this way, he turns his obesity into his *œuvre*, his way of becoming engaged so as to express to the world "l'horreur sans précédent de cette guerre" while remembering its civilian casualties (*FV* 80). Amélie's sympathetic response to Mapple reinforces his view of the war in Iraq, just as her repetition of his use of expletives did. She commends him for his sabotage, saying that it is "infiniment louable" (*FV* 48).

In the end, the fact that Mapple's story about being an American soldier is fabricated (*FV* 138) further emphasizes the negative view of the war in this text. Once Mapple admits that he contrived the entire scenario, one recognizes that his lies merely serve as pretext for Nothomb, who, in a dizzying display of *mise-en-abyme*, fabricates

this story of a character fabricating a story in order to condemn the war in Iraq while also commemorating innocent victims who were killed. This is not the first time Nothomb has used *mise en abyme* like this. She did so in *Hygiène de l'assassin* (1992), as well. Nothomb's first novel writes the ending to a dying, fictional novelist's last, unfinished novel by the same name. In each case, the masterful stories imagined or written by her characters are subsumed within her writing. Thus, her use of *mise en abyme* conveys all literary genius to her. It also blurs the boundary between fictional and imaginary worlds, a subject which I will address in the final section of this chapter.

The subject of war is also not new to Nothomb.[10] In a 2011 interview with *France Today* about *Une forme de vie*, she spoke directly of her perspective on warfare: "I had already spoken out on the first Gulf War in a previous novel [...] These wars are appalling to me. But I'm just an average citizen, and the only way I can express my feelings about them is by writing" (Bisson 31). Indeed, in her first novel, *Hygiène de l'assassin*, which takes place over the course of five days from January 14, 1991 to January 18, 1991, Nothomb makes numerous references to the January 15th American ultimatum that preceded the first Gulf War.[11] In *Hygiène*, five journalists interview Prétextat Tach, a renowned writer and Nobel laureate, who, after years of seclusion, has just revealed that he suffers from a fatal cancer and only has two months to live. However beautiful his prose, the man behind the words is a monstrous, mean, misogynistic, and misanthropic individual who engages all those who visit him in antagonistic conversations that amount to veritable bouts of verbal torture.

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[10] It is interesting to note that, in her interview with Bernard Babkine Nothomb cited Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* as her favorite reading experience as an adolescent ("Écrire").

[11] Nothomb briefly refers to this same time period at the end of *Stupeur et tremblements* (1999). In that case, Nothomb mentions that she began writing her first novel on January 14, 1991 while everyone had their eyes on Kuwait, waiting to see what would happen before the January 15th deadline of America's ultimatum (183, 186).

With regard to the first Gulf crisis, Tach, who claims his books are "plus nocifs que la guerre" (*HA* 67), appears alternatively ambivalent and expectant. When the third journalist asks Tach if he is in favor of the U.S.-led coalition's pending airstrikes, he responds with incredulity:

> Aimer la guerre! Énorme! Comment peut-on aimer la guerre? Quelle question ridicule et inutile! Vous en connaissez, vous, des gens qui aiment la guerre? Pourquoi ne pas me demander si je mange du napalm au petit déjeuner, tant que vous y êtes? […] Et moi, j'aurai été un écrivain de génie universellement admiré, j'aurai reçu le prix Nobel de littérature, tout ça pour qu'un blanc-bec vienne me lanciner de questions quasi tautologiques, auxquelles le dernier des imbéciles fournirait une réponse identique à la mienne! (*HA* 51-52)

Tach feigns insult, and yet, he never says directly that he dislikes this war which "une 'bande de rigolos' nous a promis […] pour le 15 à minuit" (*HA* 51). In fact, on January 15th, he states that he is not a pacifist (*HA* 36). Then, on January 16th, when there has still been no sign of military action, he declares that the conflict is now a necessity because one would not want to disappoint the young soldiers who are chomping at the bit. Still more perversely, on January 17th, after the combat has officially begun, he says: "Ainsi, en ce 17 janvier, les petits gars ont pu enfin commencer à *s'amuser*" (*HA* 65, my emphasis). Tach's association of war and fun makes him seem even more sadistic than he already did and make it appear that he truly is in favor of the fighting. Clearly, his arguments about the war appear increasingly absurd as he shows greater support for the American-led war with each passing day.

By portraying Tach as a malevolent, uncaring person, who does not appreciate the value of human life, Nothomb encourages the reader not to support his view of the hostilities. After all, his name is Prétextat Tach, which implies that anything for him –

and perhaps also for the Americans with whom he seems to side – is pretext to attack.[12] Furthermore, from the narrator's reminder that there will be casualties (*HA* 48) to the lingering rhetorical question, "Comment peut-on aimer la guerre?" (*HA* 51), not to mention the reference to America as a "bande de rigolos" (*HA* 51), one understands Nothomb's implicit questioning of the legitimacy and necessity of the First Gulf War.

The critique of war in *Hygiène de l'assassin* was only the beginning for Nothomb. Over the course of the seventeen works (sixteen novels and one play) that separate *Hygiène de l'assassin* and *Une forme de vie*, Nothomb continued to write about warfare, whether or not America was involved.[13] In fact, according to Frédérique Chevillot, war is omnipresent in Nothomb's works, appearing equally on autobiographical, diegetic, and metaphorical levels ("Guerre" 100). This is clearly the case in *Une forme de vie*. War appears in all three of the capacities Chevillot mentions: it provides real-life historical context, a factual backdrop for the fictional protagonists, and a metaphor for intra- and inter-personal conflicts. If war is ubiquitous in Nothomb's works, Chevillot explains that this is because:

> devant l'échec de la diplomatie et de la littérature à empêcher la guerre, et devant la triste réussite de l'image médiatique à la banaliser en la vulgarisant, Amélie Nothomb cherche quand même à travers l'écriture à *faire quelque chose* de ce triple échec. Faire la guerre à la guerre en l'écrivant, c'est par l'absurde tenter d'en anéantir la trop fascinante réalité. ("Guerre" 106-07, emphasis in original)

Indeed, Nothomb writes about armed combat in order to denounce it by revealing its monstrosity. This is especially true for Nothomb's only play, *Les Combustibles* (1994).

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[12] French public opinion polls attest to the belief that the second U.S.-led gulf war was pretext for America to enforce its will around the world more than it was to protect itself (Kuisel "Deteriorating Images" 97, 112). Prétextat also refers to a genre of Roman tragedy, and therefore, as Shirley Ann Jordan has said, it is "indicative of theatricality" (101).

[13] Perhaps the only other mention of America's action in a war occurs in *Métaphysique des tubes*, when a young Amélie asks her Japanese nanny to describe the 1945 American bombing of Okinawa (49-52, 149-50).

The entire play takes place in the apartment of a professor in a city ravaged by airstrikes. The three characters (the professor, his assistant, Daniel, and student, Marina) refer to the enemy troops, who relentlessly bomb the city, as "les barbares," while they debate the merits of literary works, deciding in what order the books in the Professor's library should be thrown into the furnace to heat the frigid apartment. Ultimately, the play shows how war brings out the worst in humans. By the end of the play, two of the characters, the Professor and Marina, have lost every ounce of humanity they once possessed. They only care about their physical needs, no longer appreciating literature, which represents humanity, beauty, and the highest of human ideals.

In an interview with Christian Libens, Nothomb explained that, in her opinion, the majority of books have failed (in that they have never prevented war) because "peu de gens s'investissent assez dans leurs lectures; ils ne veulent pas accepter d'être changés par leurs lectures" and thus she said, "Moi, j'essaie de m'attaquer au lecteur, directement" ("Chère Amélie" 92-93). Similarly, in *Les Combustibles*, she wrote: "Un livre n'est pas un bibelot que l'on contemple pour se consoler du monde [...] Un livre est un détonateur qui sert à faire réagir des gens" (83). In *Une forme de vie*, Nothomb attempts to persuade the reader that the only warfare one should wage is a war of words to promote peace. In other words, besides deriding the invasion of Iraq, she venerates and demonstrates diplomacy.

Indeed, the war versus diplomacy dialectic, which divided France and America during the Iraq crisis, is a structuring principle in *Une forme de vie*. Generally, when one thinks of diplomacy, one thinks of it as it happens on the state level, namely as, "The management of international relations by negotiation; the method by which these relations are adjusted and managed by ambassadors and envoys; the business or art of

the diplomatist; skill or address in the conduct of international intercourse and negotiations," according to *OED's* first definition. Diplomacy of that nature was a major issue in the Iraq crisis because France, along with several other European nations, was advocating for more diplomacy and less military action. In *Une forme de vie* Nothomb clearly aligns herself with the French view, favoring more diplomacy on the state-level. She also depicts diplomacy on an individual level (*OED's* third definition: "Skill or address in the management of relations of any kind; artful management in dealing with others") through her letter writing, as we will see later in greater detail.

Anti-war, but not necessarily anti-American

Thus, if *Une forme de vie* initially seems anti-American, it is because Nothomb clearly does not support war, in general, and the American-led campaign in Iraq, in particular. Criticizing the military conflict does not make her automatically anti-American, however. Tzvetan Todorov also wrote a book critical of the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq entitled *Le Nouveau désordre mondial* (2003), but he explained in an interview that:

> I do not see any trace of anti-Americanism in my own reaction to the war—rather the opposite. Because I am fond of the United States and care about its future, I criticise the current policies of its government, which, in my opinion, are likely to produce negative results for it in the medium and long term. Besides, half of the American electorate currently shares this view—I hope they are not being accused of anti-Americanism. (Golsan, "Questions" 317)

Similarly, if Nothomb criticizes the war in Iraq, one understands that it is because she, too, cares for the future of America, a place with which she had a strong connection in the past. She writes to understand and to promote change. While Nothomb clearly condemns war and celebrates diplomacy, she, like Todorov, realizes that, "the United States cannot be reduced to one simple characteristic" (Golsan, "Questions" 317). In

other words, she does not measure all of America based on its foreign policy alone. Thus, one should not misconstrue her criticism of the war as evidence of anti-American sentiment.[14] Nothomb depicts a nuanced portrait of the U.S. that demonstrates the complexities and volatility characteristic of the Franco-American relationship. Despite her criticism of war and promotion of diplomacy, Nothomb also presents several positive aspects of the United States as exemplified by her praise of President Obama, and most importantly, her portrayal of a close fictional relationship between her avatar and Melvin Mapple, as we will see shortly. This is not entirely unexpected, as Nothomb has painted a rather favorable image of America in the past.

After all, one must remember that Nothomb spent three years of her childhood in New York City while her father represented Belgium in the U.N. In *Biographie de la faim* (2004), she portrayed her life there as a time of jubilation and excess. The words *délire*, *liesse*, *ivresse*, and *grandeur* reappear again and again as she describes this time in her life. From the moment she set foot in New York, she let out a cry of joy as she first caught sight of the vertical city which, in all appearances, reached the sky (*BF* 80-81). For a girl affected with a so-called "surfaim," who was never satisfied, but always desiring more, New York was the ideal place. After three years of "incarcération maoïste" in Peking, China, young Amélie and her family embraced the "exubérances capitalistes" in the U.S. (*BF* 86). They lived a life of extravagance. They went to musicals, ballets, concerts, and dined lavishly at New York's finest restaurants. Amélie took up

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[14] Nothomb insisted upon this in personal correspondence. When asked what she thought of the Todorov quotation cited above, she replied: "Je ne sais pas si cette guerre est une bonne idée, même si je suis sûre de sa bonne intention. Mais elle ne m'a absolument pas rendue anti-américaine" (Letter to the Author). This is similar to what Tom Bishop said about Régis Debray with regard to the latter's disapproval of the first Gulf War: "Long-time critic of American policies, Régis Debray, was right in refusing the label 'anti-American' just because he decried American policy in the Gulf" (28).

ballet, and each night, after returning home from ballet class, she would watch the sunset while swimming in the rooftop pool of her building. Her three-year stint in New York was a time when she excelled in school and never lacked for affection and admiration. What's more, on several occasions when her family ventured out of the city, she discovered the grandeur of America while staying in the woods of New York state (*BF* 97-99) or while taking a road trip across the country through "des déserts infinis, des champs si énormes qu'ils semblaient n'être cultivés par personne, des prairies à perte de vue, des montagnes à perte d'altitude, des bleds à perte d'humanité" (*BF* 126). At the end of the three years of such splendor, Amélie hated to think about the "misère extrême" of the country her family would live in after the U.S. Through it all, she says, "J'exultai" (*BF* 84).[15] It is no surprise that New York had appeared, albeit in brief, in several of Nothomb's works prior to *Biographie de la faim*. In her 1998 novel *Mercure*, Hazel and Françoise flee to New York in the first, fairy tale ending, before its second more sinister conclusion. *Le Sabotage amoureux* (1993) also finishes in New York.

The year after *Une forme de vie*, Nothomb returned to America again in *Tuer le père* (2011), revisiting the "déserts infinis" she had seen as a child. Save for the exceptionally brief opening and closing frame sequences which take place in Paris, the novel is set entirely in the United States, specifically in Nevada (Reno, Las Vegas, and the ephemeral Black Rock City). Fabien Dabert has said that the novel is like a "western moderne, avec cactus, parties de poker, figures charismatiques et caractérielles. L'histoire d'un règlement de compte sans colts mais avec la rage et l'acharnement

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[15] Nothomb confirmed this in real life: "Ces années américaines font partie des plus heureuses de ma vie et ont immensément compter pour moi mais aussi dans la formation de ma personnalité. J'aime profondément les Etats-Unis: le pays, la culture et les personnes" (Letter to the Author).

propre à l'esprit des pionniers américains."[16] I would argue, however, that *Tuer le père* is not so much a "western moderne" as a typical Nothombian novel that just happens to take place in the West. The thematics are emblematic of Nothomb's fiction which centers on dialogic relationships (in this case, father-son), duplicity, betrayal, and illusions – the protagonists are, after all, master magicians and "Le but de la magie, c'est d'amener l'autre à douter du réel" (*TP* 27).[17] Like so many of Nothomb's novels, the plot ends in the death (in this case, a figurative death) of one character at the hands of another. If it weren't for the segments situated at the Burning Man festival, the story could have taken place in any country where one can find both casinos and magicians. Accordingly, *Tuer le père*'s U.S. setting seems to be a pretext to revisit the deserts Nothomb saw as a child, and especially, to describe the annual Burning Man Festival. A celebration of self-expression, art and community, Burning Man is, as Nothomb has described it, "une expérience incroyable, sidérante, une colossale fête du feu dans le Nevada, près de Reno. On y voit des choses folles dans un désert où le sable ressemble à du savon, où les montagnes sont noires. C'est une expérience inouïe" ("Écrire").[18]

Based on her past experiences and firsthand knowledge, Nothomb is inclined to like America. Of course, there were a few aspects of life in the U.S. that she did not cherish during her time in the Big Apple (the snobbishness of the Lycée Français de New York, the unfriendly "chacune pour soi" attitude of the girls in her ballet class, and

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[16] Bernard Babkine has also referred to *Tuer le père* as "une sorte de western au premier degré dans le désert du Névada" (Nothomb "Écrire"). See also Melissandre L.'s review of the novel where she says that, "Toujours aussi facile et rapide à lire, Amélie Nothomb n'en néglige pas pour autant la subtilité en signant un premier western moderne comme une partie de poker."

[17] Nothomb has said that, for her, magic, "est une superbe métaphore du réel et de ce que j'essaie de faire avec mes livres. Le magicien fait vaciller nos certitudes, nous fait douter de la pesanteur" ("Écrire").

[18] See Bisson who says that, "Nothomb's novels, packed with weirdos and obsessions, clearly fit right in with the radical bent of the Burning Man event" (31).

the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance at summer camp). But those aspects seemed like minor details by comparison. At one point in *Biographie de la faim*, in an example of dissonant self-narration,[19] the authorial voice of a grown Nothomb does explain that, if young Amélie did not remark the injustice, the "inégalités monstrueuses" and the "criminalité effarante" at the time, it was because she was only an 8-year-old child. In this way, the authorial Nothomb implies that she would have much to say about those things at the time of *Biographie de la faim*'s enunciation in 2003-2004.[20] Nevertheless, it is clear that Nothomb does not measure America by one criterion; she represents the good, the bad, and the ugly.

This is equally true in *Une forme de vie*. While Amélie condemns the American-led war and vilifies George W. Bush, whom she holds accountable (*FV* 34), she paints a positive portrait of his successor. It is not surprising that Amélie venerates Barack Obama given that he also denounced the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq. As they correspond, neither Amélie nor Mapple can say enough favorable things about him. In a letter to Melvin, Amélie mentions that it is Obama's inauguration day (*FV* 16). Even before he was in office, she eagerly imagined the imminent withdrawal of military troops that would surely take place (*FV* 10-11). At one point, Melvin refers to the fact that he appreciated the editorial Amélie wrote about Obama. Nothomb really did write such an editorial entitled "Liberty, Equality, Envy" that appeared in the *New York Times* on April 5, 2009. In it, she describes the envy that she and the many Europeans she speaks for harbor because of Obama's presidency, saying: "We are envious because Americans are so evidently proud of their President. What is worse, we feel that

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[19] See Cohn *Transparent* 145-53.

[20] See Nothomb's *France Today* interview where she references her return visit to the U.S. in 1998.

Americans have a kind of faith in Barack Obama. We would love to feel the same way about our presidents and our leaders." She goes on to say that, without a doubt, the fervor and support a majority of French people showed Obama during his campaign – the *Obamamania* as André Kaspi put it[21] – has not dissipated.

Amélie and her Distorted American Double: A Case Study for Dialogue and Diplomacy

Perhaps Nothomb's "anti-anti-Americanism" is most evident in her portrayal of a close connection between her fictional self and an American individual. Instead of giving in to preconceived notions, she remains open-minded and accepting. Initially, Amélie and Melvin appear to be polar opposites: Amélie is European while Melvin is American; she is a writer, he is a soldier; she is a svelte, formerly anorexic woman, he is a morbidly obese man. Frédérique Chevillot is right to remark that: "En effet, Nothomb semble avoir cherché à évoquer la relation épistolaire la plus improbable qui soit" ("Invitation" 208). At the same time, this is not surprising given Nothomb's tendency to pit opposites against one another. The correspondence between Amélie and Mapple gets off to a rough start as they struggle to overcome several misunderstandings and erroneous assumptions based on stereotypes (*FV* 13-15, 19). For example, Amélie is annoyed when Mapple asks what he should do with the novels she has sent him. In her frustration, she sends him a cuttingly sarcastic response and then proceeds to ask

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[21] In a 2009 edition of his book *Comprendre les États-Unis*, André Kaspi dedicates an entire chapter, "Barack Obama, le magicien," to the newly elected American president and analyzes the changes that had or had not taken place since his election. After detailing Obama's initial successes and failures, Kaspi writes that, "À l'étranger, l'*Obamamania* n'a pas disparu. Obama est admiré, imité, adoré dès qu'il entreprend un voyage au-delà des frontières américaines. Les journalistes écrivent qu'il a acquis le statut d'une 'rock star.' Le magicien n'a rien perdu de son aura" (317). It was no secret that the majority of French people were largely in favor of Obama. French filmmaker, Claude Miller, even made a documentary about Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. In it, he followed and interviewed students from two universities (the University of Virginia and Virginia State), asking them about their thoughts and feelings regarding the upcoming election.

herself: "Comment avais-je pu espérer une autre réaction de la part d'un militaire?" (*FV* 14). Her immediate tendency is to stereotype him as a brutish and uncultured American, when, in truth, he asks her what he should do with the books because he has already read them. In this way, from the start, she reveals in typical Nothombian fashion that stereotypes and preconceived notions are not to be trusted as she plays with notions of sameness and difference and the boundary between self and other. Indeed, despite their differences, Amélie does not ridicule her American counterpart or essentialize their differences as is all too easy to do, but demonstrates, instead, how much they have in common. In fact, Amélie and Mapple possess several fundamental similarities. Certainly, they are both against the war in Iraq, as we have seen. Most significantly, they share their biggest scourge and their biggest passion: food and fiction, respectively.

Clearly, Nothomb does not create Mapple's character to criticize the stereotypical image of fat Americans.[22] She does not mock Mapple for being obese. If anything, she implies that the U.S. Government is to blame because it did not have any – or enough – measures in place in 1999 to care for him when he was homeless and starving.[23] If there had been, he may not have ended up returning home to live with his parents (or enlisting in the Army in his fictional version of his life), living a solitary life in the virtual world of computer programming and eating unhealthy foods nonstop. Furthermore, by taking advantage of the polyphonic possibilities of the epistolary novel

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[22] In their book *50 idées reçues sur les États-Unis*, Pascal Boniface and Charlotte Lepri describe the stereotype as follows: "Manque d'activité, nourriture trop riche et trop déséquilibrée, chaînes de restaurant où la nourriture et la boisson sont à volonté, aucun repas fixe, des portions gigantesques sont les fléaux d'une Amérique où le surpoids atteint des proportions alarmantes dans les couches les plus pauvres de la population" (204).

[23] This view lines up with many French opinion polls that show they dislike the way the United States deals with social issues. See Kuisel, "Deteriorating Image" 97-99.

and giving Mapple his own voice, Nothomb lets the reader see things from his perspective as he asserts that *au fond* he is a victim of the system: "L'obésité, elle, n'est pas bizarre en Amérique, elle est seulement ridicule. Même si elle est une maladie, elle est rarement perçue comme telle par les gens ordinaires qui parlent encore de nous en termes de trop bien portants" (*FV* 36). No one understands his problem or the severity of his addiction. Amélie, who struggled with anorexia in the past, can relate, however. She identifies with Mapple's belief that his suffering is incommunicable (*FV* 56), as well as his corresponding, yet ostensibly paradoxical, need to have someone acknowledge and understand his struggle. Just as Nothomb believes that "Les anorexiques ont besoin que leur mal soit non pas condamné, mais constaté" (*FV* 68), she recognizes that Mapple desires and deserves nothing less.

As one considers Mapple's struggles with obesity, one is reminded of Nothomb's own struggles with anorexia, which she relayed in *Biographie de la faim*.[24] Even though they fall at opposite ends of the spectrum, each struggles – or has struggled – with an eating disorder. At times, one almost forgets their differences. In fact, based on a comparison of Nothomb's self-portrayal in *Biographie de la faim* and Mapple's story in *Une forme de vie*, I would argue that Melvin is a distorted adult double of an adolescent Nothomb. Mapple's struggles with an eating disorder, his life of isolation cut off from the world, and even his ability to transform his seemingly incommunicable suffering into his *oeuvre* recall Nothomb's depiction of her adolescence in *Biographie de la faim* (2004). In that autobiographical novel, as we have seen, Nothomb portrays the three years she spent in New York as a time of jubilation and excess. She also describes how, shortly after leaving New York, she underwent several traumatic experiences – namely,

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[24] *Biographie de la faim* is Nothomb's only work which does not indicate in the paratext that it is a novel.

losing contact with her friends from New York (*BF* 141), witnessing extreme poverty and starvation in Bangladesh (*BF* 134-37), and being raped while swimming at a beach there (*BF* 151-52). According to *Biographie de la faim*, these experiences would forever mark her. After that point, "tout devint fragment, puzzle dont il manquait de plus en plus de pièces" (*BF* 159). She describes how she grew to hate her adolescent body and became anorexic; how she felt a void open up inside her that nothing could fill; and how she detached herself from reality and entered into a world of fiction (*BF* 136, 144-45, 148-49, 160-63, 168-69, 171, 174, 176-77). She began reading ceaselessly, and eventually turned to writing. She wrote in order to "mettre en *forme* une incompréhension qui croissait," and as a result, her writing formed "une sorte de tissu qui devint [son] corps" (*BF* 179 my emphasis). In other words, it was writing that revitalized her, by giving shape and substance to her life.

When one considers Mapple's "true" story in *Une forme de vie*, one recognizes the parallels. At 30 years of age, Melvin Mapple was homeless and starving, wandering the streets, dreaming of becoming the next Jack Kerouac or Charles Bukowski. When all of his dreams fell short, however, he returned home, humiliated, to his parents' gas station and tire warehouse on the outskirts of Baltimore. His mother bought him a computer, and he began to work as a computer programmer creating websites for local businesses. The transition was as abrupt as Nothomb's transition from New York to Bangladesh. Although, while Nothomb went from a place of abundance to a place of penury, Mapple's transition was the inverse. He describes it in the following way:

> En vérité, c'est ce qui m'a perdu. Moi qui venais de passer dix ans à marcher en mangeant à peine, j'inversai ces verbes: j'adoptai le mode de vie du programmateur, qui consiste à ne jamais se servir de ses jambes et à grignoter sans cesse. J'avais tellement l'impression que ma mère m'avait offert cet ordinateur pour que je me rachète, aussi ne quittai-je pas l'écran pendant un an. (*FV* 150)

Whereas Nothomb went on a hunger strike because she felt guilty for being affluent in poverty stricken Bangladesh and because she did not want to leave her childhood body, Mapple never stopped eating because he never stopped working, and he never stopped working because he felt the need to redeem himself in the eyes of his parents. By the time he realized he was obese, it was too late. His parents, who had welcomed their prodigal son home with open arms not long before, gave him an ultimatum: lose weight or don't eat at our dinner table. He refused to comply and thus became an "obèse solitaire" whose only human contact was with the deliveryman who brought the food he ordered by phone or Internet (*FV* 153).

Mapple describes to Amélie how, in the fall of 2008, when he happened upon an article about the growing problem of obesity for the American soldiers stationed in Iraq, he realized he was jealous of them.[25] His jealousy was not because he had been turned away from the Army for being overweight, but because the overweight soldiers had a "motif sérieux" for their weight gain. In other words, they were victims, and their obesity had a story, whereas he felt he had none. Mapple explains:

> Dans les faits, mon obésité avait une cause et pourtant, dans mon esprit, il y avait eu comme une rupture des lois de la causalité. Vivre à temps plein sur internet crée une telle sensation d'irréalité que cette nourriture dévorée pendant des mois n'avait jamais existé. J'étais un gros privé d'histoire et en tant que tel, je jalousais ceux incorporés dans la grande Histoire. (*FV* 154)

After reading the article about the obese soldiers, Melvin also discovered Nothomb's writing (at least her works translated into English) which spoke to him. The combination of the two discoveries – the article and Nothomb's writing (especially

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[25] In reality, Nothomb has referred to the fact that an article served as inspiration for *Une forme de vie*. Based on the date Melvin provides, he is most likely referring to an article entitled "Other battle in Iraq: Weight Gain" that appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* on November 27, 2008. There was also an article in *USA Today*, "Pentagon Reports U.S. Troop Obesity Doubles since 2003," on February 9, 2009.

Antéchrista) – inspired him to lie and rewrite his story (*FV* 155). His body had become his prison just as it had for Amélie in *Biographie de la faim*. Yet his mind was free to roam, free to create imaginary worlds. His new story helped him to cope with his lonely, virtual life, just as stories had helped Nothomb to cope with the misery of her adolescence.

Clearly, Melvin was not lying early on in *Une forme de vie* when he said: “Je vous confie mon secret: c’est grâce à la fiction de Schéhérazade que je supporte mon obésité” (*FV* 30). Playing upon the polyvalence of the word “fiction” in the phrase “la fiction de Schéhérazade,” he divulges his secret, without overtly revealing the truth.[26] Knowing that Melvin has named his excess fat Schéhérazade, the reader initially takes “la fiction de Schéhérazade” to mean the stories which Melvin imagines his personified excess fat telling him every night he spends in Iraq. Once Melvin’s lie is exposed, however, the reader realizes that “la fiction de Schéhérazade” actually refers to the fictitious reality Melvin has created and the false story he has told about his life as a soldier in Iraq. Melvin’s “fiction de Schéhérazade” in this second sense is a palimpsest that attempts to efface and cover over the original story. In his narrative, it is not insignificant that he refers to his excess weight as Schéhérazade. After all, Schéhérazade is a legendary Persian queen and storyteller and the narrator of *Mille et une nuits*. Her gift of storytelling saves her from most certain death at the hands of the king, as she enthralls him in an epic tale night after night. In other words, her story is her means of survival. The same can be said of Mapple. His story does not save him from a malevolent king, to be sure, but rather, from his empty existence. The fiction he creates and the correspondence with Amélie that ensues gives Mapple the understanding he desired

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[26] See Cohn’s chapter “Focus on Fiction” for a clear description of the multiple ways the word fiction is used today (*Distinction* 1-17).

(*FV* 138-42). It allows him acceptance into an alternate reality in fiction that is more viable than reality itself (*FV* 153-58). It gives shape and meaning to his existence, just as it does for Amélie Nothomb. Writing, or storytelling, is vital for him. It sustains him; it gives him *une forme de vie*.[27]

Thus, we see that, despite Amélie's and Mapple's very apparent physical and cultural differences, they have more in common than meets the eye. The fact that Nothomb depicts such a positive, mutually beneficial relationship between a European and an American individual at a time when there was historically a great deal of division is telling. It reinforces the idea that there may be just as much similarity between different groups (nationality, race, ethnicity, etc.) as there may be differences between those of the same group. It is consistent with her tendency to defy stereotypes. It depicts one individual's struggle not to let anti-war sentiments automatically become synonymous with anti-American sentiments. Through the depiction of the relationship between Amélie and Melvin, one sees a nuanced picture of the Franco-American relationship. As Nothomb has explained, "Mon rapport avec l'Amérique est celui que j'ai avec Melvin: je t'aime, j'ai conscience de nos différences, je t'aime aussi pour cela mais je sais que je ne deviendrai pas tout à fait comme toi" (Letter to the Author). The epistolary exchange also illustrates a diplomatic approach to dealing with the Other.

Without a doubt, the epistolary form is well suited to the content, allowing Nothomb to present realistically two distinct points of view as Amélie and Melvin engage in a diplomatic dialogue concerning the war in Iraq, eating disorders, and an artist's need to create. After all, as Amélie reflects between two letters: "La diplomatie a

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[27] In the text, Melvin describes how he compiled all of the letters and called the collection "Une forme de vie" (*FV* 156). With regard to novel's title, Nothomb has affirmed that, "Il reli[e] toutes les interprétations possibles: la forme au sens de 'good shape,' la forme au sens de l'écriture, et la forme de vie au sens de 'organisme élémentaire'" (Letter to the Author).

commencé par la correspondance. La lettre peut en effet être un moyen de dire aimablement les choses" (*FV* 74). Thus, in her estimation, it is not surprising that there is, "une contamination historique de ces deux pratiques: un diplomate écrit souvent beaucoup de missives et le genre épistolaire prend souvent des manières diplomatiques" (*FV* 74). Amélie, who was a letter writer long before she ever became a novelist, paints herself as a seasoned diplomat exercising diplomacy as she religiously responds to her fan mail, and in particular as she corresponds with Melvin Mapple (*FV* 91-93; cf. *BF* 139). After all, as Amélie remarks with regard to the challenges of interpersonal relationships: "Les gens sont des pays [...] Il n'y a que deux solutions: la guerre ou la diplomatie. J'ai tendance à privilégier cette dernière" (*FV* 73). Even when Mapple begins to exasperate her, Amélie always opts for the diplomatic expression, "le ton juste, la distance idéale entre la froideur et la ferveur" (*FV* 86), when interacting with her transatlantic Other. The dialogue Amélie and Mapple exchange through their letter writing is not combative, but congenial, unlike many of Nothomb's other works.

Ordinarily, however, Nothomb pits one character against another as they engage in debates about "large perennial questions – questions about moral choices and responsibilities, about the uses of literature, the nature of language and about abstract concepts we can capitalize such as Truth, Power, Beauty and so on" (Jordan 95). For example, in *Les Combustibles*, the characters discuss the value of literature as they decide in what order to burn the books; in *Péplum*, A.N. and Celsius debate issues regarding science, ethics, politics, and philosophy, and in *Stupeur et tremblements*, Amélie-san and Fubuki Mori clash over their vastly different perspectives on work ethic and proper workplace comportment. There is no denying that Nothomb generally "elects characters calculated to irritate, wound, provoke or torture each other," such

that, "The dialogic relationships in which protagonists become enmeshed [...] tend, ultimately, towards the destruction of one party by another, [reminding] us of our existential dependency on our interlocutors" (Jordan 96-97).[28] In fact, based on Nothomb's typical dialogic strategy, Jordan asserts that the "notion of dialogue as conflict rather than collaboration [...] place[s] Nothomb in the framework of a Bakhtinian endeavor" wherein "every utterance is a dialogic struggle" (95).[29]

None of that seems to hold true for *Une forme de vie*, however. This text illustrates the idea that one should choose diplomacy over war, not just on the state level, but also on a personal level. Amélie and Mapple appear to be on the same side of the debate with regard to the contemporary foreign policy issues and they both share the belief that fiction is necessary for their survival. In this way, their exchange seems to illustrate, instead, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "definition of dialogue [which] stresses common ground, collaboration and co-existence" (Jordan 95).[30] Nothomb's trademark

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[28] Similarly, Martine Guyot Bender states that, "Many of her novels have the feel of Socrates' knotted dialogues, in which foes use sophisticated, spiraling arguments (or silence) as weapons to justify their positions and dominate their opponents. Only one outcome is possible: one will win, the other one will lose" (127).

[29] Jordan explains further that: "Mikhail Bakhtin stresses the struggle against the other. In fact, for Bakhtin every utterance is a dialogic struggle since every utterance involves language and language involves the appropriation of words which have been given layers of meaning by previous owners. Bakhtin speaks of words being 'saturated' or 'contaminated', and this perception of reappropriation applies not only to language but also to traditional literary genres. These too are permeable, porous and susceptible to 'carnivalization' or 'contamination' by the popular. Clearly Nothomb's dialogues can be placed in such a perspective, and equally clearly, the contaminating factors are numerous. For example, Nothomb's overriding purpose is less to explore philosophical concepts than to generate entertaining and intellectually impressive confrontations. Arm wrestling often seems to be more important than any arrival at the 'truth' of a proposition: power games, humiliating the opponent and the imposition of will seem to be what really matter. The dialogues are not seriously or usefully polemical, and the sustained didactic apparatus of the classical dialogue keeps dissolving. [...] In addition, the dialogue paradigm is usually overlaid with borrowings from other lesson-imparting genres such as the fable, the allegory, the satire, the fairy tale or the science fiction fantasy" (95).

[30] In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty says that, "In the experience of dialogue, there is constituted between the other person and myself a common ground; my thought and his are interwoven into a single fabric, my words and those of my interlocutor are called forth by the state of the discussion, and they are inserted into a shared operation of which neither of us is the creator. We have here a dual being, where the other is for me no longer a mere bit of behavior in my

dark humor and narrative violence are conspicuously absent. The diplomatic Amélie even acts as Mapple's guide and inspires him to turn his painful life experiences into a work of art (specifically body art), just as Rainer Maria Rilke – the very writer who inspired Nothomb to write – encourages a young poet, Franz Xaver Kappus, to choose a career as a poet instead of a career in the military in *Lettres à un jeune poète*.[31] By encouraging Mapple to write and by not ridiculing him for inventing a false story, Amélie gives him back his humanity and the dignity he never had (*FV* 155-56). This is the opposite of what happens in *Les Combustibles*. The characters in that play lose their love of literature and ultimately their humanity; Mapple gains it when Amélie helps him in his quest to find meaning in his life.[32] Chevillot explains: "c'est justement à travers des échanges de lecture que Nothomb redonne à ce personnage aux apparences monstrueuses toute l'humanité qu'une société occidentale obsédée par l'obtention de diplômes et la perte de poids ne sait plus octroyer à ceux et celles qu'elle abandonne" ("Invitation" 208). This corresponds with the view Amélie espouses about the purpose of the epistolary genre: "c'était un écrit voué à l'autre [qui] n'existait pas sans l'autre et avait pour sens et pour mission l'épiphanie du destinataire" (*FV* 92). Thus, a work which places the reader-writer relationship at the center demonstrates that literature can cross borders and break down barriers. Nothomb and Melvin are defined not so much by nationality, gender, or physique, but by their shared humanity and their status as

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transcendental field, nor I in his; we are collaborators for each other in consummate reciprocity. Our perspectives merge into each other and we co-exist through a common world" (354 in 1962 edition; qtd. in Jordan 103n).

[31] In an interview with Mark D. Lee, Nothomb said, "Je dois aussi préciser que la dernière lecture que j'ai faite avant de commencer à écrire et qui m'y a probablement poussée est *Lettres à un jeune poète* de Rilke, qui m'a montré que pour une fois je me posais la question de la mauvaise façon. La question n'était pas 'est-ce que je peux me mesurer à Stendhal?' parce que bien évidemment la réponse est 'non'. La question était 'est-ce que je peux vivre *sans*? " (562-563).

[32] The implication in both texts is, of course, that literature enriches humanity; war destroys it.

readers and writers. The letters they exchange concretely represent the "common ground" which Merleau-Ponty said connects the thoughts of two people engaged in a dialogic experience. Their words are "interwoven into a single fabric," and they become "collaborators for each other in consummate reciprocity. [Their] perspectives merge into each other and [they] co-exist through a common world" (354 in 1962 edition; qtd. in Jordan 103n).[33] Consequently, one wants to conclude that *Une forme de vie* is a celebration of the transnational power and possibility of fiction which can connect people, even those who seem completely opposite.

Things Fall Apart, or "L'Ange fait la bête"

Nevertheless, anyone familiar with Nothomb's writing senses that such a conclusion is too good to be true. Nothomb is known for shocking reversals wherein the victim becomes the villain and vice versa. A prime example of this would be how, at the end of *Hygiène de l'assassin*, Nina strangles Prétextat Tach, just as he had once strangled Léopoldine. As Martine Guyot-Bender explains, Nothomb "exposes the weakness of theory in the face of practice," when, "with obvious perversity [...] [she] imposes the strictest boundaries between [the diametrically opposed categories of the beautiful and the ugly or the exaggerated sublime and grotesque], only to make the levees that divide societies into safe categories collapse miserably and let the flood of doubt creep in" (123). The frequent Nothombian role reversals are not just based on contrasts between physical beauty and ugliness, but also on contrasts between psychological charm and cruelty. This would be the case, in the second and final ending of *Mercure*, when Françoise opts not to free Hazel, but rather, decides to take over the role of captor from

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[33] In this way, Amélie and Melvin's correspondence illustrates Merleau-Ponty's conviction that works of art "mediate between [human consciousness and the stuff of reality]" (Delacampagne 621).

le Capitaine Loncours. This is also the case when Joe Whip metamorphoses from a grateful teenager and apprentice magician into a world-class magician who cruelly spurns his mentor's fatherly love in *Tuer le père*.

In that regard, *Une forme de vie* is no different. Indeed, with a surprising twist, the conclusion calls into question virtually everything that has come before. In the end, things are doubly deceptive. Melvin is not a soldier, and Amélie is not a sincere friend. Midway over the Atlantic, on her flight to go visit her American correspondent, Amélie begins to have second thoughts about her plan to meet him. Her inner voice, her self-proclaimed "ennemi intérieur" berates her with a barrage of questions:

> Amélie Nothomb, peux-tu me dire ce que tu es en train de faire [...] où veux-tu en venir avec ce voyage ? Pourquoi t'imagines-tu que ta présence miraculeuse va aider ce pauvre fou? S'il veut s'en sortir, ce qui n'est pas sûr, ce n'est pas toi qui peux l'extraire de sa situation. Si tu te contentais de perdre ton temps, ce ne serait pas grave. Mais as-tu pensé au malaise que tu vas éprouver avec lui? Vous aviez de quoi vous écrire, soit; qu'aurez-vous à vous dire? Tu vas affronter des heures de silence avec cet obèse, à l'aéroport, puis pendant un long trajet en train, puis dans un taxi, enfin chez lui. Ça va être l'enfer. Vu l'absence de conversation, tu ne pourras éviter de regarder sa graisse, il s'en rendra compte, vous souffrirez l'un et l'autre. Pourquoi t'infliges-tu ça et pourquoi lui infliges-tu ça? (164-66)

As Amélie contemplates the difference between long-distance correspondence and face-to-face interaction, she questions her noble intentions, wondering if, perhaps, they will do more harm than good. Almost immediately, she caves under her inner voice's verbal assault. At that point, the plane is already midway over the Atlantic, and she quickly realizes that there will be no chance for her to escape before her rendez-vous point with Mapple at the airport. Nevertheless, she decides that anything would be better than going through with her plans to meet the "obèse mythomane" – even trouble with the American border patrol:

> Ma décision était prise, c'était au-delà de la réflexion. Habitée par l'extase, je commis l'action démente. À la question: 'Appartenez-vous à un groupe terroriste?', je cochai le oui. Impression chavirante. À la question: 'Possédez-vous des armes chimiques ou nucléaires?', je cochai le oui. Abasourdissement profond. Et ainsi de suite. En état second, l'esprit écarquillé, je cochai des oui plus suicidaires les uns que les autres. Je signai un acte d'autoaccusation qui me transformait en ennemi public n°1 de la planète et le glissai dans mon passeport. (*FV* 168)

In an altered state of mind, indicated by the words *extase*, *démente*, *impression chavirante*, *en état second*, and *l'esprit écarquillé*, Amélie takes drastic measures and decides to check "yes" to the questions on the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol form to which everyone in their right mind would check "no." Such questions do not, of course, figure on the form in real life. Nothomb's dark humor makes its appearance, as she mocks the U.S. Customs' strict procedures and simultaneously underlines the implausibility of what is transpiring.[34] Instead of carrying out her plans to meet her American correspondent, Amélie chooses to pass herself off as a terrorist, knowing full well that Guantanamo awaits (*FV* 168-69). The shocked reader can only imagine the devastation Melvin will experience the moment he realizes that Amélie, the only one he thought understood him, has abandoned him. Since it was Amélie's recognition of his existence that gave meaning to his life, one can imagine that her rejection of him would destroy the "petit bouillon de culture" and the "illusion d'avoir du sens" that their correspondence created (*FV* 157).

Finding herself trapped in a relationship she is not sure she wants to be a part of, Amélie rejects her transatlantic Other, no doubt provoking untold pain. Amélie, who had portrayed herself as Mapple's selfless and caring guide and confidant, ends up the villain. In the end, just like in *Attentat*, "the relationship [...] that apparently overturned

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[34] This passage creates an intertext with a similar, ironic passage about U.S. Immigration forms in Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World* (201-02).

clichés and allowed the utterly ugly to reach the utterly beautiful, remained pure fiction" (Guyot-Bender 125). *Une forme de vie*, like *Attentat*, proposes "no ethical inversion of values, no newly found or long-forgotten harmony that would integrate extremes. Rather, it thrusts the reader into deeper disarray" (Guyot-Bender 125). The reader realizes that, like Melvin's veiled admission that his life story is a lie (*FV* 30), this unsavory reality was lurking beneath the surface all along when Amélie referenced one of Pascal's *pensées* early on in the novel. Amélie does not cite it verbatim, but actually says, "'Qui veut faire l'ange fait la bête', on le sait depuis Pascal. Melvin Mapple ajoutait sa version: qui veut faire la bête fait l'ange. Certes, il n'y avait pas que de l'angélisme dans son récit, loin de là. Mais la puissance de la vision qui permettait à mon correspondant de survivre à l'intolérable forçait le respect" (*FV* 34). Amélie puts the emphasis on Melvin, but her unspoken role is also implied. If Melvin represents "qui veut faire la bête fait l'ange," then she represents the other half of Pascal's adage, namely the notion that "le malheur veut que qui veut faire l'ange fait la bête" (*Pensées* 370). The fact that she references this maxim immediately after describing the terrifying images of the war in Iraq that have assailed her in the media (*FV* 33) suggests to the reader that she is drawing a parallel between her relationship to Melvin and the United States' relationship to Iraq: if she intervenes in Melvin's life beyond the diplomatic words she has shared with him, she will be to him what the U.S. is to Iraq.

The parallel is clear, but very little else is certain in the end. Amélie's drastic decision exemplifies narratorial unreliability.[35] It calls into question her sincerity and

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[35] In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth defines a narrator as reliable if he "speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author's norms)" (158) and unreliable if he does not. See also Prince *Dictionary*: "A narrator whose norms and behavior are not in accordance with the implied author's norms; a narrator whose values (tastes, judgments, moral sense) diverge from those of the implied author's; a narrator the reliability of whose account is

the veracity of all that has transpired. Ultimately, the only real remnant of Amélie's and Mapple's ostensibly mutually therapeutic exchange is the novel itself. Any cohesive reading of the text is destabilized such that multiple readings are possible and meanings proliferate. From one perspective, one might wonder if the ending calls into question the feasibility of Franco-American relationships.[36] From another perspective, given Nothomb's musings about the challenges of interpersonal relationships and the "problème de la frontière," one thinks it is a display of the fickleness of friends more generally (*FV* 71-72, 124).[37] As Nothomb has said in an interview with Isabelle Grégoire,

> Mes livres ne parlent que d'une chose: le rapport à l'autre. Qui est à la fois l'essentiel de la vie et son principal problème. Entrer en communication avec l'autre est terriblement difficile, on n'a jamais fini d'explorer ça. D'autant que parmi ces autres, il y a soi-même. On est un autre pour soi, et non le moindre! J'habite avec un autre qui est mon ennemi intérieur, auquel je me butte depuis mes 12 ans. Il me répète que je suis un être nuisible, épouvantable, nul. ("Mes livres")

This comment and the fact that Amélie caves under the assault of her "ennemi intérieur" in the novel suggests that the ending is as much about the difficulty of understanding oneself as it is about the difficulty of understanding one's Other.[38] Perhaps the ending

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undermined by various features of that account" (103). According to Cohn, "when a narratorial interpretation appears to be faulty in a fictional text [...] we are free to attribute it to the narrator, now conceived, not as the author's mouthpiece, but as an artfully created vocal organ – whose author is meanwhile tacitly communicating the correct interpretation to us behind the narrator's back" (Cohn *Distinction* 73).

[36] This is a reading with which Nothomb would passionately disagree: "Mais je n'y vois rien de négatif pour les relations franco-américaines! C'est plutôt un problème personnel" (Letter to the Author).

[37] In *Une forme de vie*, Nothomb details the ups-and-downs of any relationship, which she considers "le problème de la frontière." First, one remarks the other's existence, astonished and delighted that there exists "un autre aussi autre et aussi proche à la fois" (71). The alternation between similarity and alterity ("C'est tout comme moi! C'est le contraire de moi!" (71)) lulls one into a stupor so that he/she does not see the danger coming. Then, suddenly, the other crosses a line and is standing at the door, trying to draw closer. Nothomb explains the dilemma: "Ce n'est pas qu'on ne l'aime plus, c'est qu'on aime qu'il soit un autre, c'est-à-dire quelqu'un qui n'est pas soi. Or l'autre se rapproche comme s'il voulait vous assimiler ou s'assimiler à vous" (72). That is when things become difficult and one must figure out how to proceed through "un passage épineux" where "[s]'installent alors l'inimité, le malentendu, le silence, parfois la haine" (72).

[38] Nothomb talks about this in interview with Isabelle Grégoire. See also Mark D. Lee 574.

also illustrates the failure of "weapons of mass diplomacy." Or perhaps, coming from this author who constantly rewrites fairytales, this is a reminder that happy endings are for fables. The conclusions one could draw are seemingly endless. There is no one single definitive reading. That is, it seems, the way Nothomb would have it in her polyphonic, protean, and polyvalent Bakhtinian novel[39]: "La fin est comme un koan: une ouverture vers l'inconnu, une tension poétique, quelque chose d'impossible à résoudre" (Letter to the Author). One thing is quite clear, though: this shocking ending breaks the mimetic illusion, reminding the reader, once and for all, that this is merely a work of fiction.

Between Fiction and Reality

Prior to the surprising dénouement, however, there are no overt "signposts of fictionality" or "fiction-specific signals" *within* the text (Cohn "Signposts" 779).[40] Of course, before one even opens the book, there is paratextual evidence on the cover of *Une forme de vie* which indicates that the work in question is a novel. If there were no paratextual evidence to the contrary, one could easily read this text as a historical document that is autobiographical in nature. Though this is obviously not the case, it is worth examining the narrative elements that suggest the possibility of a referential reading of the text in order to highlight how essential – and dare I say, intentional – this play between fiction and reality is in *Une forme de vie*. For one, the narrative situation is plausible (not probable, but plausible). The epistolary exchange justifies the existence of

[39] In her chapter on "Proust's Generic Ambiguity," Cohn refers to the fact that *À la recherche du temps perdu* is often called an autobiography at the same time that it is considered to be "the prototypical novel, in the Bakhtinian sense of the word – i.e., in the sense of a dialogic, 'protean,' incomparably polyvalent narrative genre" (*Distinction* 58). I think this definition of the novel certainly applies to *Une forme de vie*.

[40] As Cohn defines them, the three signposts of fictionality are: "adherence to a bi-level story/discourse model that assumes emancipation from the enforcement of a referential data base, employment of narrative situations that open to inside views of the character's minds; and articulation of narrative voices that can be detached from their authorial origin" (*Distinction* viii; cf. "Signposts 777, 800).

this work. Amélie does not need to resort to fictional modes of representing Melvin's thoughts, because his letters speak for themselves. One could easily envisage an explanation for Amélie's commentary on the correspondence: since she is an author, who has said that "[le] seul moyen de régler une difficulté d'écriture, c'est d'écrire" (FV 132), it is logical that she wrote down her reflections on this unusual exchange, after the fact, in an effort to make sense of it. Given her frequent asides regarding the traits of ideal letter-writers and what Melvin did that made him an exemplary correspondent, one could reasonably infer that she also saw this as an occasion to instruct her other correspondents about what they should or should not say if they do not want their letters to be thrown in the trash (*FV* 135, 146-47). As the editor of the collection of letters, Amélie also has realistic human limitations, or modal restrictions. In other words, she never "inexplicably manifests narrative omniscience" (Cohn *Distinction* 60; cf. "Signposts" 785-91). When Melvin does not write for one year, she does not know what has happened to him and is forced to wonder and worry about his whereabouts and well being (*FV* 121-25, 127-30).

What's more, referential documents and statements appear to justify further the "reality" of Amélie and Melvin's exchange. Their presence in the text seems to promote a historical or autobiographical reading based on the "tri-level model – *reference*/story/discourse" (Cohn "Signposts" 779, my emphasis). Melvin references the op-ed Amélie wrote for the *New York Times* about Obama's election. He also alludes to seeing an article about the problem of obesity in the U.S. Army. At least two such articles exist: the *Chicago Tribune* ran an article entitled "Other battle in Iraq: Weight Gain" on November 27, 2008, and *USA Today* printed a similar piece, "Pentagon Reports U.S. Troop Obesity Doubles since 2003," on February 9, 2009. Furthermore, throughout the

novel, both Amélie and Melvin mention novels that Nothomb has written, including the titles or publication dates (*FV* 8-10, 13-17, 142, 155). At one point, Amélie relates how she returns to Brussels "qui fut ma ville et que je ne fréquente plus assez" (*FV* 121) in order to vote. Given the onomastic identity between author and narrator protagonist, the reader is seemingly invited to read such autobiographical elements about Amélie as also applying to the author, especially because they are commonly known, verifiable facts. After all, according to Cohn, "the principal criterion for differentiating between real and fictional self-narration […] hinges quite simply on the ontological status of its speaker […] [her] identity or nonidentity with the author in whose name the narrative has been published" (31-32).[41] Outside the text, Nothomb has even confirmed that certain elements of the diegesis are factual. For example, in an interview she has referred to the newspaper articles to which Melvin also refers. She has also long-established that she maintains correspondence with her readers.

In addition to the referential elements, the realistic content also does not detract from an autobiographical reading. Amélie refers to real geographic locations (Paris, Baghdad, Baltimore), real historical events (Obama's election, the war in Iraq), and real artists (Kerouac and Bukowski). If the Belgian art gallery owners's identity cannot be verified, it is because Amélie has invented it, as she confesses to the reader, but not to Melvin: Albert Cullus is based off of the real-life Parisian art gallery owner Emmanuel Perrotin (*FV* 103). Furthermore, unlike many of Nothomb's other novels, the narrative does not include fantastic, fairy tale elements or futuristic, science fiction elements which, as Cohn would remind us, immediately serve as touchstones of fictionality (*Distinction* 60). Of course, one must admit that Melvin's initial story does seem

[41] See also Cohn *Distinction* 59.

unrealistic. Even Amélie initially questions the authenticity of Melvin's first letter: "Je crus d'abord à un canular" (*FV* 8). After all, if he were truly in the Army, his excessive obesity and the subversive intent of his overeating would realistically lead to a medical – if not, a general – discharge. But when Amélie accepts his story, her readers are encouraged to suspend their disbelief, as well. Suspicions are raised again when Amélie discovers that, "Melvin Mapple is unknown in U.S. Army" (*FV* 128, English in original). These qualms are quickly assuaged when Melvin reveals that his story was nothing more than a lie. In fact, the fictitious story makes Melvin's "real" story seem all the more authentic. After all, even Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical pact allows for lying and fantasizing. Though Melvin's weight gain is extreme, no one would deny that obesity is a prevalent problem in America. Amélie accepts Melvin's lying and fantasizing and reassures him accordingly:

> Ce que vous m'avez montré dans vos courriers disait seulement la réalité d'une autre façon. De votre enfer, vous avez fait un autre enfer. Peu m'importent les cris d'orfraie de ceux qui affirment qu'on ne peut comparer l'horreur du front irakien à l'horreur d'un corps obèse [...]. Cette métaphore a eu du sens pour vous puisqu'elle s'est imposée à vous et vous avez eu besoin de prendre à témoin une personne dont la pratique assidue du courrier papier vous a frappé. Voir votre histoire écrite à l'encre par un tiers était le seul moyen pour vous de lui donner la réalité qui vous manque de si insoutenable manière. [...] Votre métaphore assez gonflée a le mérite de me révéler avec éloquence l'ignominie de votre existence. Si vous me l'aviez écrit cash, aurais-je compris ? Je l'espère. (*FV* 144)

Melvin's misrepresentation of himself, Amélie understands, is merely an attempt to metaphorically represent his more painful reality. As Cohn would say, "self-representation always involves a measure of misrepresentation" (*Distinction* 31).

As these examples illustrate, the only unquestionable "signpost of fiction" *within* the text is the ending, when Amélie's radical choice makes her an unreliable narrator and makes clear, once and for all, that this is a novel and not an autobiographical work.

If this were autobiographical, it would necessarily imply that Amélie assembled the letters and wrote the commentary on this epistolary exchange in prison after her inevitable arrest for terroristic threats. This would prove impossible for a number of reasons. First, Amélie would have access to her letters only if she had made copies of them (and if even she had made copies, we can be sure the guards at Guantanamo would have confiscated them). We do know that Melvin had organized their correspondence into a dossier entitled "Une forme de vie" (*FV* 156). But if Amélie never met him, there is no way she could have seen it or recuperated her letters from him. Most of all, it would prove impossible because Amélie Nothomb, the author, never went to Guantanamo Bay.

Of course, all along, paratextual evidence on the cover and the title page pointed to this work's status as a novel, as I have mentioned. Nevertheless, I hope that my ironic, referential reading of the text has illustrated how Nothomb plays upon generic ambiguity as she makes both a fictional pact and an autobiographical pact. Accordingly, *Une forme de vie* is what Lejeune terms a "contradictory" text. "Contradictory" texts are: "crossbreeds that present themselves as 'novels,' even though their narrators bear their authors' names" (Cohn "Signposts" 793-94; cf. *Distinction* 60, 94).[42] In other words, *Une forme de vie* is a work of autofiction, which according to Marie Darrieussecq's commonly accepted contemporary definition, is a: "Récit à la première personne se donnant pour fictif mais où l'auteur apparaît homodiégétiquement sous son nom propre et où la vraisemblance est un enjeu maintenu par de multiples 'effets de vie'" ("L'autofiction, un genre pas sérieux" qtd. in Genon). It troubles neat narratological typologies, challenging

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[42] This is not to be confused with "indeterminate" texts where the narrator is nameless and where there are no paratextual signals. See Cohn's chapter on "Proust's Generic Ambiguity" in *Distinction* 58-78.

Cohn's assumption that "first-person narratives are not as a rule either written or read as semi-autobiographies or demi-novels [but rather] are given and taken as one or the other" (*Distinction* 35).[43] It successfully conveys the "indépassable entre-deux du récit référentiel et de la narration fictive, cette intertextualité constitutive et sans cesse oscillante" (Doubrovsky "Pourquoi l'autofiction?"). *Une forme de vie* exists in an intermediary world between fiction and reality.

Amélie Nothomb has written a novel that thematically and formally interpellates the boundary between truth and lie, fact and fiction. For Nothomb, it seems, the goal of writing, like that of magic, "c'est d'amener l'autre à douter du réel" (*TP* 27). It is not very surprising, then, that Amélie applauds Melvin's charade saying: "Bravo. Tout écrivain contient un escroc, c'est donc en tant que collègue que je vous tire mon chapeau. [...] L'escroquerie, comme le violon, exige la perfection: pour présenter un récital, le violoniste ne se contente pas d'être bon. Le sublime ou rien. En vous, je salue un maître" (145-46). Nothomb intentionally tries to trick the reader and lead her astray.[44] In a narrative that is based on lies and insincerity, Nothomb "defies any reader and the public to determine what she holds true or not in her written stories, and maybe too in her life story" (Guyot-Bender 129). Indeed, throughout the novel Nothomb has problematized the distinction of fiction. Dorrit Cohn may say that the difference between autobiography and fictional autobiography is one of kind, not of degree

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[43] This would also contradict Cohn's view that the distinction of fiction in homodiegetic narratives is immediately apparent based on the paratextual evidence or nominal identity or nonidentity of author, narrator, and protagonist, as well as her argument that "[The] exceptions to the onomastic distinction between narrator and author, no less than this distinction itself, prove the rule" ("Signposts" 794).

[44] Though it is not customary to speak of authorial intentionality, I believe one can infer intentionality here. As Cohn has said, when the author provides the narrator's name, "its distinction from the author's name conveys fictional intentionality, its identity with the author's name autobiographical intentionality" (*Distinction* 59).

(*Distinction* 35), but I believe that Nothomb would disagree. *Une forme de vie* demonstrates that the distinction between fact and fiction can be just as difficult to delineate as it is to decipher the koan at the end of this novel.

The "illusion of reality"[45] in this novel is particularly illusive in this work, raising questions that are epistemological and ontological in nature. For one, *Une forme de vie* poses questions about how one can know another person and how one experiences reality. Both Amélie and Melvin are progressively confronted with the fact that the person they thought they knew is not, in fact, the person they had imagined. If Melvin was able to fool Amélie for so long and maintain the illusion that he was an American soldier, it is thanks, in large part, to intermediary figures and technologies. In the passage where he confesses his charade to Amélie, he explains that he would email his letters to his brother, Howard, an actual soldier in Baghdad. His brother, who owed him a debt, would then recopy them and send them on to Amélie (*FV* 138). Then, Howard would scan Amélie's replies and email them to Melvin (*FV* 156). Throughout this passage, the words *réel*, *vrai*, and *réalité* are incessantly juxtaposed with the words *irréalité*, *virtualité*, *électronique*, *informatique*, *scannées*, *recopiées*, and *mensonge* (*FV* 138-58). We can read his words as Nothomb's commentary on contemporary society. The juxtaposition of these lexical fields of reality and virtuality illustrates that Melvin's skewed relationship to reality is ultimately to blame for what he has become. The virtual reality Melvin's work as a computer programmer afforded him allowed him to ignore his real problems.

Nothomb calls into questions conceptions of what is real and what is fake. In the age of the Internet and information technologies, what does it say about our experience

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[45] See Cohn *Distinction* 6.

of reality if many of our daily interactions are virtual? Are they truly real? At the same time, she acknowledges that literature – and in particular fiction – acts as an intermediary which also has the capacity to trouble the relationship between reality and virtuality. If Amélie is not as Melvin expected her to be, it is because his imagined construction of her was predicated on his readings of her novels:

> À travers vos livres, je vous supposais intraitable, cynique, celle à qui on ne la fait pas. Au fond, vous êtes quelqu'un de simple et de gentil, vous ne vous mettez pas en avant. C'est pourquoi je m'en veux profondément. Je me suis très mal conduit envers vous. Je vous mens depuis le début. […] Cette supercherie n'était pas censée prendre une telle ampleur. J'avais pensé vous envoyer une ou deux lettres, pas plus. Je ne m'attendais pas à votre enthousiasme, ni au mien. […] C'est ce que je me reproche le plus: je vous ai sous-estimée. (*FV* 138-42).

Through Melvin's misreading of Amélie, Nothomb asks what one can really know about an author through her works.

At the same time, Nothomb also challenges Cohn's idea that fiction is "severed from the actual world" (Cohn 13-14) and Paul De Man's notion that, "The self-reflecting mirror-effect […] of fiction asserts […] its separation from empirical reality" (*Blindness and Insight* 17, qtd. in Cohn *Distinction* 7). Fiction, like the Internet, may allow one to dissimulate one's identity, but both Amélie and Melvin are in agreement that one's experience of fiction can seem more real than real life, especially when one's real life is full of virtual interactions. Amélie's comment that "le langage est pour moi le plus haut degré de réalité" (*FV* 165) echoes Melvin's claim that, "ce que j'ai vécu de plus intense, je le dois au partage d'une fiction" (*FV* 158). In fact, both of their declarations recall a statement that Nothomb made in an interview with Christian Libens. She said: "[Il] n'y a pas de dichotomie entre la littérature et la vie, comme on le croit trop souvent. Je suis d'autant plus vivante que je vis dans la littérature, et je suis d'autant plus dans la littérature que je suis un être pleinement vivant!" ("Chère Amélie" 91). For someone

who professes to spend her mornings writing novels and epistles and who purports to pass her afternoons reading,[46] one sees how this rings true. Both Nothomb's life and work challenge the neat delineation of fiction and reality, imaginary world and empirical world. The fact that Nothomb's given name and birthdate have recently been revealed to be fictitious only reinforces this point: it is impossible to delineate the boundary between Nothomb's fictional self and her real self.[47] Nothomb's media presence in France has erroneously made people feel like they know her (Lee 572), but all anyone really knows is the media personality she has created.

Une forme de vie's epistolary form highlights even further the ontological "in-betweenness" of Nothomb's life and work. The reader witnesses the reading and writing process, and actually takes part in the reading process as letter-reader.[48] This metafictional "process mimesis" proves, as Linda Hutcheon would argue, that life and art are inseparable:

> Reading and writing belong to the processes of 'life' as much as they do to those of 'art.' It is this realization that constitutes one side of the paradox of metafiction for the reader. On the one hand, he is forced to acknowledge the artifice, the 'art,' of what he is reading; on the other, explicit demands are made upon him, as a co-creator, for intellectual and affective responses comparable in scope and intensity to those of his life experience. In fact, these responses are shown to be *part* of his life experience. (Hutcheon 5)

If reading and writing, and thus art, belong to life, this explains why, once Melvin's fiction is dismantled, he implores Amélie: "que me reste-t-il à vivre?" (*FV* 158). For Melvin and for Amélie Nothomb, fiction is not just part of life; it is a way of life.

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[46] See Nothomb's interview with Libens,"Chère Amélie" 91, and Nothomb's interview with Babkine, "Écrire."

[47] The name Nothomb goes by in public, Amélie, is actually her nickname; her real name is Fabienne. The birthdate she cites publicly (Aug. 13, 1967) is not her real birthdate; it is actually July 9, 1966. See "Baron" 340. In her interview with Isabelle Grégoire, Nothomb maintains, however, that, "Rien n'est inventé" ("Mes livres").

[48] See Hutcheon 27.

Conclusion

With regard to her tendency to conclude her novels with surprising reversals, Nothomb "has argued that the excessive, almost comedic violence of parts of her novels offers a relief from the potentially unassimilable horror of real-life suffering, while leaving space to think through actual conflicts" ("Amélie Nothomb: Biography"). By shocking the reader in this *roman américain* that explores the nuances of the Franco-American relationship and the complexities of contemporary geopolitical issues in an era of terrorism, she challenges her to reconsider the situations and the various aspects of human nature she has just depicted. She encourages her to consider how literature can interact with – or even influence – real life. So while *Une forme de vie* is very much about Franco-American relations and the war in Iraq, it is equally, if not more so, concerned with questions about reading and writing, fiction and reality in the 21st Century. Nothomb invites the reader to consider what purpose this book serves, just as Marina asks the Professor at the end of *Les Combustibles*: "Depuis des millénaires, les plus beaux esprits ont écrit les plus nobles visions du monde dans les livres les plus admirables. Avez-vous l'impression que leurs idées ont servi à quelque chose?" (74). Have her ideas served any purpose? How does art alter or affect reality? What does one honestly think of this transatlantic relationship which defies stereotypes, especially at a time when many feared the U.S. and Europe were drifting apart? How does the reader respond to her political argument that pits war against diplomacy, in favor of the latter?

For some, books like Amélie Nothomb's *Une forme de vie* will have a great effect, successfully conveying Nothomb's message that words are more powerful than wars. For others, perhaps not. In the aftermath of the recent terrorist attacks in Paris on January 7, 8, and 9, 2015, a video surfaced of Amedy Coulibaly attempting to justify his

attack on the kosher supermarket. A copy of Nothomb's *Hygiène de l'assassin* is clearly visible on a shelf in the background of the shot. Some people reportedly attempted to draw a connection between the title of her book and Coulibaly's actions. Nothomb addressed these people directly in her response to a special segment of *Le Monde des livres* entitled "Que peut la littérature face à la barbarie." She said: "Ceux qui verraient un buzz dans une coïncidence aussi méphitique se tromperaient grandement. Coulibaly ne sais sûrement pas lire" (Birnbaum). If Nothomb says Coulibaly did not know how to read, that is because reading, as Nothomb and many of the other respondents envisage it is: "une arme de résistance au fanatisme […] [une] pratique d'interprétation, [une] ouverture à l'autre, bref [une] geste de vie" (Birnbaum).

Cartoon by Jean Jullien, Jan. 7, 2015

Jean Rolin's Take on the Hollywood Novel, *Le Ravissement de Britney Spears*

"Hollywood, c'est toutes sortes de choses. Personne ne semble connaître la définition de Hollywood. Ça varie."
Jean Rolin, France Culture Interview

"Los Angeles restera la ville où l'on brûle, où l'on flambe, où le soleil accable tout de sa lumière droite et terrible, et fait des rues et des maisons un miroitement plat de mirage [...] Comme l'idée de l'éternité ôte le sommeil à celui qui s'en obsède, le ciel californien donne trop de lumière aux paysages urbains, et trop peu d'ombre aux âmes qui voudraient y errer."
Michel Schneider, *Marilyn, dernières séances*

In Jean Rolin's 2011 novel, *Le Ravissement de Britney Spears*, the narrator recounts a covert mission to protect American pop star Britney Spears from an Islamic group's threat to abduct and assassinate her. His job as an agent for the French secret services is to gather information about Britney and the places she frequents (42-44). Thus, he spends hours trolling the Internet in search of the latest news items and gossip about her, from what she eats to where she shops and gets her hair done, to the rumors about her tumultuous romantic life. He then attempts to retrace her steps. From the outset, however, the narrator highlights the dubious nature of his mission and continues to do so throughout this unconventional pastiche of a spy novel.

In and of itself, the plot to abduct Britney Spears, while outlandish, is not entirely unrealistic in this post-9/11 era of terrorism. After all, on his second day in Los Angeles (April 2, 2010), the narrator reports reading an article in the *Los Angeles Times* entitled "Colorado Mom Arrested in 'Jihad Jane' Terror Case." The article relates the arrest of an American expatriate woman who, after converting to Islam and becoming radicalized, was implicated in the attempted murder of Swedish artist, Lars Vilks (27).[1]

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[1] The article to which Rolin refers truly did appear in the *Los Angeles Times* on April 2, 2010 and the Colorado mom's co-conspirator, Jihad Jane, was sentenced to ten years in prison on January 6, 2014. See Riccardi and Shiffman.

The narrator's reference to the "Jihad Jane" case, a case which exhibits undeniable similarities with the alleged Islamic terrorist group's abduction and assassination plot, increases the plausibility of the latter.[2] In addition, the narrator compares an attack on Britney Spears to the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center in a further attempt to defend the verisimilitude of the plot (and by extension his mission) to any doubters by insisting upon its potentially symbolic meaning. He asserts that:

> il n'est guère plus absurde – et plutôt plus facile – de s'en prendre à Britney Spears qu'aux tours du World Trade Center, et que la valeur symbolique de la première, aux yeux du public américain, est à peine moindre que celle des secondes. De surcroît, du point de vue de ses instigateurs, un attentat contre Britney Spears, ou contre toute autre star hollywoodienne, présentait sur la destruction des tours l'avantage de mettre à genoux, durablement, toute l'industrie américaine du spectacle. (43-44)

While somewhat exaggerated in his claim, the narrator has a point, though it is surely not without some irony on Rolin's part. The 9/11 terrorists chose the World Trade Center precisely because it would give the attack a symbolic meaning. After all, "As two of the tallest buildings in the world," the World Trade Center represented more than itself. The Twin Towers "stood for American power and commerce, and for capitalism more generally" (Keniston 1).[3] In an analogous way, an attack on a Hollywood star would have a symbolic impact because, as Graeme Turner has said in *Understanding*

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[2] The narrator also claims that the 2010 attempted bombing in Times Square substantiates the credibility of the threat against Britney Spears and the "bien-fondé" of his mission based on the fact that the man responsible for the attempt worked for Elizabeth Arden, the company that fabricates Britney's perfume line (151). Clearly, this assumption is more of a stretch demonstrating irony on Rolin's part.

[3] Similarly, Richard Doran said that, "the attacks appeared to have been aimed not just at the United States but at the Western world itself, with New York as its symbolic capital" (3). According to David Bell, the hijackers chose their targets because of the symbolic investment: "If the hijackers had crashed into one of the three plants at [the Indian Point nuclear power stations 40 miles from New York City], they could have provoked an accident that might have left large parts of metropolitan New York uninhabitable for thousands of years. Yet it was the symbolic nature of the eventual targets, their potential to create a national *psychic* scar – and not their potential for creating widespread material damage – that made them ideal targets" (Bell and Schuerewegen iv).

Celebrity, "the celebrity [is] a key site of media attention and personal aspiration, as well as one of the key places where cultural meanings are negotiated and organized" (6). If one believes that a celebrity like Britney Spears could represent all of Hollywood, which, in turn, iconically projects an image of America – especially of the American Dream and the American way of life – to millions of people around the world, then an attack on that star could have devastating and far-reaching symbolic consequences.

Despite the reasonable verisimilitude of the abduction plot, and though the narrator attempts, at first, to convince himself of this fact, his narrative increasingly calls into question the authenticity of the very story he tells. For one, he highlights the fact that his mission begins on April 1st and that it is officially referred to by the codename "Poisson d'avril" (21). In addition, the narrator considers the irony of the fact that the French Services sent an operative who does not know how to drive to Los Angeles, the city that epitomizes car culture, and whose freeways are the site of what Baudrillard once described as a "gigantesque spectacle spontané de la circulation automobile" (*Amérique* 54). This irony leads him to doubt the "véritables intentions des services, que pour s'acquitter d'une telle mission, déjà passablement obscure dans ses objectifs, et vague quant aux moyens de les atteindre, ils aient choisi d'envoyer à Los Angeles un agent notoirement ignorant de la conduite" (15). The absurdity of this choice manifests itself, in particular, when the narrator pictures how he could flee Los Angeles by city bus should the mission fail. He is, without a doubt, the most ill-equipped spy there ever was. But for a secret agent who fears decapitation by a ceiling fan (241) and who has spent most of his career attempting to model himself after a movie

character (specifically the callous and corrupt police captain Orson Welles incarnates in *Touch of Evil*) (9), perhaps one should not expect much more.[4]

Furthermore, according to the narrator, the success of the mission depends mostly upon the quality of the information furnished by "le chef suprême" of the paparazzi in Los Angeles, a man whose nickname is Fuck (14). While the narrator is quick to add that Fuck is a sobriquet formed by the first initials of his first and last names (François-Ursule de Curson-Karageorges), the unconventional and uncouth epithet makes the mission seem even more laughable. Aside from his unusual nickname, Fuck's participation is questionable because he is unpaid ("motivé plutôt par l'aura d'exotisme qui nimbe depuis toujours les activités de renseignement" (44)), and even more so because, when he meets with the narrator, he provides the latter with no new information beyond what the narrator, himself, is generally able to unearth on the Internet (113-114).

As if that were not enough, when the narrator's commander, Col. Otchakov[5] does assign him a specific mission-related task, it is rather farcical: the narrator must attend the former Los Angeles police chief Daryl Gates' funeral and identify members of the antiterrorist section "afin de pouvoir les reconnaître s'[il] étai[t] amené à les rencontrer de nouveau" (130). Unfortunately, upon arriving at the funeral procession, the narrator recognizes the futility of his assignment: "jamais je n'avais vu autant de flics, et de

[4] Orson Welles' character, Captain Hank Quinlan, operates on hunches rather than evidence-based investigations and has a history of planting false evidence to frame suspects. In the film, he murders a man so as to frame the protagonist Mike Vargas' wife, and thereby discredit Vargas himself. He even shoots his longtime friend and partner, Sergeant Menzies. Though the narrator of *Le Ravissement* admits that he has failed in his attempt to emulate Quinlan (physically, his frail frame is nothing like Quinlan's corpulence; morally, he cannot equal the latter's cruel abjection), the fact that he aspired to do so undermines his credibility.

[5] Otchakov is the name of a town in Ukraine and a warship of the Russian navy, but perhaps more importantly, it is the name of the founder of Éditions P.O.L, Paul Otchakovsky-Laurens. The contact information on the website lists the email address for the *direction littéraire* as otchakov@pol-editeur.fr.

toutes sortes, vêtues d'un si grande variété d'uniformes que toute tentative pour les distinguer les uns des autres, et déterminer leurs spécialités respectives, semblait d'avance vouée à l'échec" (131). Ostensibly, it is not just the secret agent and his handler who are ill-equipped spies, but the mission commander, as well. Either that or the mission is a charade. This becomes even more apparent when Col. Otchakov immediately dismisses the narrator's suspicions about Sheeraz Hasan's potential connection to the Islamic group threatening Britney Spears (163, 217-20)[6] or when he fails to send the promised contact to meet the narrator at the extraction point (the Port of Los Angeles) after calling off the mission (272-73).

It is at such moments especially that the narrator second guesses the *bien-fondé* (44, 151), of the mission and wonders if it is not *un gag* (21), *un leurre* (41), or *un piège* (113). In the end, he wonders if the real mission was to target Fuck (who mysteriously turns up dead on the platform of a subway station), and if he was sent to Los Angeles merely to serve as a cover (257-263). All of this, combined with the fact that the narrator explains, at the outset, that he is recounting this nonlinear narrative ex-post-facto while in Murgab, Tajikistan where he has been reassigned following the dismal failure of the mission – "sous le futile prétexte, peu susceptible de dissimuler le caractère punitif de cette affectation, d'y relever les numéros d'immatriculation de tous les véhicules franchissant dans un sens ou dans l'autre la frontière chinoise" (10) –

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[6] Sheerez Hasan is the owner of a milkshake bar (Millions of Milkshakes) in West Hollywood, CA and "un véritable titan de la presse électronique" (218). He came to Hollywood in 1991. In his 2006 autobiography, *Sheeraz, le rêve américain musulman*, he describes how, after praying at the Hollywood sign, his career took off with a television show called "Tinseltown TV which diffuses "un message de spiritualité" (218-19). According to the narrator, "Tout cela – son babillage islamique, sa proximité avec les stars et la multiplicité apparemment infinie de ses connexions – faisait de lui, à mon avis, un suspect de première grandeur dans ce complot dont nous présumions l'existence" (219-20).

completes an incredibly farfetched mission which comes to a close as he realizes that his new supervisor, Shotemur, is preparing to kill him (284-285).[7]

Certainly, it is an unconventional spy thriller that reveals the failure of its mission from the start and then proceeds to retell the mission anyway, pointing out all of the signs of its imminent failure – and even its inauthenticity – along the way. Indeed, how different *Le Ravissement* is not just from Brian De Palma's *Mission: Impossible* (1996), but also from the James Bond or Jason Bourne spy film series. How different it is from *Taken* (2008), a French action thriller directed by Pierre Morel which seems, in many ways, to be the exact opposite of *Le Ravissement*. In *Taken* (*L'Enlèvement* in Quebec), a former CIA agent leaves Los Angeles and goes to Paris to rescue his daughter who has been abducted by a ring of Albanians that specializes in human trafficking. A true spy hero, Bryan Mills (incarnated by Liam Neeson), never lacks for a plan or the necessary equipment to carry out that plan. He is always one step ahead of his adversaries. After successfully saving his daughter, though one never really doubts the

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[7] Shotemur is the name of a real-life Tajik politician who played a significant role in the communist party and Soviet Tajikistan government. He was assassinated on October 27, 1937, however, after he was accused of participating in an anti-Soviet organization. It is also interesting to note that his name sounds similar to "shot me." What's more, once the reader reaches the ending of *Le Ravissement*, she realizes that, all along, there was dramatic foreshadowing of this moment in the scenes in which Shotemur appears: Shotemur is the head of the Kismati-I Amniyat-I Milli "le service de sécurité que tout le monde ici persiste à désigner sous son ancien nom de KGB" (10); he fought in the Tajik civil war and committed war crimes (14); he illegally hunts a rare bighorn mountain sheep and then proceeds to skin, gut, and behead it in front of the narrator in a courtyard which runs with blood "comme si nous venions d'y massacrer des prisonniers" (77-79); there is a bombing at a night club in Dushanbe while Shotemur is there (160); Shotemur insists that three men found dead were smugglers and eludes the narrator's suspicion that border patrol agents under Shotemur's direction did not discover the corpses, but actually shot and killed the men (227-30). The implication of the narrator's impending death at the end of *Le Ravissement* also reminds us that this is a work of fiction, even though, at times, the narrator and Rolin seem identical. In many of Rolin's works (especially *Zones* and *La Clôture*) one could argue that the Rolinian narrator often seems to be one and the same as the author, himself. But, Rolin has claimed that he does not write autofiction and that, "Il y a quand même un léger décalage entre ce que je suis et le narrateur. Je ne raconte en général que des choses qui m'arrivent dans le contexte de la recherche" (Flamerion). The distinction between author and narrator is much clearer in *Le Ravissement* where the fictional status of much of the narrative is more evident. Nevertheless, at times, it is hard not to conflate the two. See also Motte 125-26.

inevitability of this denouement, he takes her to meet the twenty-something pop star he had shielded from a violent attack while working security detail at her concert.[8] Without question, *Le Ravissement de Britney Spears* is the antithesis of *Taken*. If it were being judged solely according to its adherence to the conventions of the spy genre, Rolin's novel deserves, at best, to be counted among comedic spy films such as John Landis' *Spies Like Us* (1985) – although, even the bumbling protagonists of Landis' film surpass expectations and succeed, in the end, at completing their mission.

Yet, for any reader familiar with Rolin's work, it is quite clear that he did not set out to write a great work of spy fiction only to fall far short of the mark. On the contrary, this novel is a successful pastiche in which Rolin upholds *OED*'s definition 2a as he sets forth "A work, esp. of literature, created in the style *of* someone or something else; a work that humorously exaggerates or parodies a particular style." Rolin is not afraid to disappoint readers' expectations or depart from generic conventions. He is known for blending genres in his hybrid novels, and the Rolinian narrator is often a composite character serving alternately as a spy, journalist, investigator, and ethnographer (Motte 123, 126-27). The fact that the reader knows all along that the mission will end in failure as she reads about the narrator's ill-equipped attempts to carry it out, establishes a ludic and lighthearted tone throughout.

Rolin is master of the failed project.[9] Where the narrator's mission fails, the author's novel succeeds. The mission is not the center in this Rolinian pastiche of a spy

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[8] Other intertexts between *Taken* and *Le Ravissement* include: the reference to fact that, while he was still serving in the CIA Bryan Mills got reassigned to an inferior post after going M.I.A. during a mission (the narrator of Rolin's novel is also reassigned); the Albanian prostitution ring (Wendy, the Britney Spears look-a-like who has been forced into prostitution, has recently arrived from Eastern Europe); the fact that Bryan Mills rescues an Albanian prostitute and cares for her, if only to find out information (Rolin's narrator falls in love with Wendy).

[9] See also Motte, Poisson, and Veivo 301.

novel, but rather, the frame.[10] In fact, as the narrative progresses, Rolin gradually removes Britney and the related mission from the center of the text to its periphery. At a certain point, about midway through the novel, the narrator, who was initially enthralled by Britney Spears, seems incapable of even carrying out the mindless tasks of virtually following her whereabouts on the Internet. Again he is the foil of Liam Neeson's character who, with an unwavering, single-minded focus, never loses sight of his goal. Rolin's narrator becomes distracted by Lindsay Lohan, a prostitute named Wendy who spends her days working as a Britney Spears look-a-like, and the fringe spaces of Los Angeles, spending more time studying them than the subject of his mission. This evinces both the narrator's sheer inaptitude to complete his mission and Rolin's delight in experimenting with the polysemy of the word *ravissement*.[11] After all, *ravissement* can be translated as joy, delight, or perhaps most accurately for Rolin's purposes, as rapture. According to the *OED*, rapture most commonly denotes "ecstatic delight or joy" (1c). But, according to a more obsolete sense, it can also describe the forcible abduction of a woman (2a). Ultimately, according to this second sense, it is not the Islamic terrorist group, but the author, himself, who abducts – or raptures – Britney Spears. The narrator's failure to focus on his mission is the result of Rolin's creative genius.

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[10] Rolin has experimented with center and frame in this way with the role the Boulevard Ney plays in *La Clôture* and the role the radiator hose's explosion plays in *L'Explosion de la durite*. In an interview with *France Culture*, Rolin has said that the fictional mission in *Le Ravissement* serves as a narrative frame to create a cohesive whole by connecting the events that actually occurred during his trip to Los Angeles ("Jean Rolin").

[11] Rolin often plays with the polysemy of his title words, especially in *Zones* and *La Clôture*. See Kelly 28 and Welch 59-60 for more on that. The title, *Le Ravissement de Britney Spears*, also establishes an undeniable intertext with Marguerite Duras' *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*. Although Rolin has claimed in an interview only to have a vague memory of Duras' work ("Jean Rolin"), there is definite thematic overlap. In Duras' novel, Lol often goes for long walks on the periphery of the British city in which she lives. The narrator begins to follow her, one day, after exiting the cinema. In Rolin's novel, the narrator "follows" Britney as she moves about Los Angeles. In both texts, there is emphasis on the visual and the sexual; the mental stability of the eponymous character is also put into question.

As a result, it becomes clear that the secret mission in this pastiche is merely pretext to explore the ins-and-outs of Los Angeles – not just the glitz and glamour of Hollywood celebrity culture, but also the less-publicized, peripheral and marginalized spaces as is Rolin's *modus operandi* in *Zones* (1995) and *La Clôture* (2002). Celebrity culture and the marginalized may seem incongruous, but incongruity, like failure, is a motif in Rolin's texts.[12] He confronts the extraordinary and the most ordinary. In this case, he points out the banal elements in the spectacular celebrity culture, and shines the spotlight on the ordinarily invisible people and aspects of Los Angeles, a rather extraordinary act. Thus, I argue that *Le Ravissement* stands as Rolin's attempt to demystify the myth of Hollywood and explore the two sides – or realities – of Los Angeles, all in a novel about an illusory mission to protect Britney Spears from Islamic terrorists. He refuses to promote a singular discourse about Hollywood celebrity culture, as he demonstrates how superficial and artificial the media can be, yet also how fascinating and enticing. When he surveys the marginalized, hidden side of Hollywood, his descriptions of it highlight the incongruity between the mythic Hollywood and the actual geographic location that is Hollywood. As such, *Le Ravissement de Britney Spears* represents not just a pastiche of a spy novel, but more significantly, Jean Rolin's take on the Hollywood Novel. Ultimately, Rolin leaves the reader asking many questions as he ponders the fate of French literature in an era dominated by images in a work that challenges the notion of what constitutes "serious" French literature.

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[12] Indeed, he is known for playing with the theme of incongruity, writing novels composed of two or more seemingly incompatible heterogeneous parts. The best example prior to *Le Ravissement* is, perhaps, *La Clôture*, in which Rolin interweaves the story of the Maréchal Ney, a soldier who served under Napoleon, with that of the marginalized people who inhabit the peripheral zones of Paris, in particular, the Rue de la Clôture. In *L'Explosion de la durite*, the story of the narrator's failed journey to deliver a car from Paris to the Congo combines with the history of the Congo in the 20th century in another similar example of Rolinian narrative incongruity. See Motte "Jean Rolin's Explosion" 125, 136-37 and Veivo 299-300.

Before looking in detail at Rolin's investigation of Hollywood celebrity culture and his exploration of the hidden side of Hollywood, I will turn, first, to the history of Hollywood in order to elucidate how the two divergent realities developed in the City of Angels and how they have been characterized by the reality/illusion and myth/anti-myth dialects in literature about Los Angeles since the 1930s.[13] In this chapter, I will refer to the "real" Hollywood and the "reel" Hollywood in order to reference this distinction between a geographic entity inhabited by ordinary people and a representational cultural construct populated by celebrities.[14]

The History of Hollywood

Currently, the appellation Hollywood designates a 3.51 square mile quadrant that extends from Franklin Avenue (north) to Western Avenue (east) to Melrose and Fountain Avenues (south), and N. La Brea and N. Fairfax Avenues (west) ("Mapping L.A.: Hollywood"). It is a diverse and densely populated, relatively low-income neighborhood of Los Angeles.[15] Yet for most people, the term Hollywood is ubiquitously synonymous with the American film industry and all of the fame and fortune associated with it. This was not always the case, however. In 1887, before the birth of this mythic, "reel

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[13] See Fine 7.

[14] *OED*'s defines "reel" as "The flanged core around which a material serving as a recording medium is wound; *esp.* one holding magnetic tape or photographic film. Hence: a quantity of tape, film, etc., so wound. Also (*Film*): a portion of a motion picture" (7). I am using the term "reel Hollywood" to designate the alternate reality to the geographic Hollywood in the hopes that it will convey the cinematic and virtual nature of this cultural construct. I am grateful to Ari Blatt's suggestion to develop this concept.

[15] According to statistics in the "Mapping L.A.: Hollywood" report, the ethnicity breakdown of Hollywood is: 42.2% Latino, 41.0% White, 7.1% Asian, 5.2% Black, and 4.5% Other. In neighboring West Hollywood (where the narrator actually stays), the breakdown is as follows: 81.2% White, 9.0% Latino, 4.0% Asian, 3.1% Other, and 2.8% Black. With respect to diversity, West Hollywood is much more similar to Calabasas (where Britney Spears lives) than Hollywood. The breakdown in Calabasas is: 83.2% White, 8.2% Asian, 5.3% Latino, 2.3% Other, and 1.0% Black. The average income for the three communities (Hollywood, West Hollywood, and Calabasas) in 2008 was $33,694, $52,855, and $126,178 respectively. These statistics show that the "real Hollywood" is quite different from the "reel Hollywood."

Hollywood," Hollywood was merely the name of a twenty-five block (120 acres) area of land that Harvey and Daieda Wilcox purchased upon relocating from Kansas. It would be several decades before the movie industry opened up shop in Hollywood, primarily because the Wilcoxes envisioned it as an edenic "Christian temperance utopia" and advertised it accordingly (Braudy "Hollywood" 18, 25).[16] Thus, far from Tinseltown, early Hollywood was more of a tranquil countryside retreat and respectable retirement community. Around 1915, visitors connected to the film industry, like Anita Loos and Cecil B. DeMille respectively described Hollywood as "a dilapidated suburb" and a "somnolent village" (Braudy "Hollywood" 12). In 1918, Frances Marion also harped on the staid aspect of Hollywood, calling it "a drowsy little village" (Braudy "Hollywood" 12). Clearly, "there was no premeditated effort to make Hollywood the center of the West Coast film business, let alone the film business generally" (Braudy "Hollywood" 26).[17]

Nevertheless, studios began to set up shop there in the mid-1910s, and by the end of World War I, there was no turning back because, "movies meant money" (Braudy "Hollywood" 35). In 1923, the Hollywoodland sign, an advertisement for a real estate development of the same name, was constructed on Mount Lee so that it overlooked Hollywood below. Though the sign was supposed to be temporary, it became a permanent fixture (minus "–land"), as people started to assign other symbolic meanings to it when the Hollywood studio system began to operate with great success in the mid-1920s, entering its Golden Age by the late-1920s. In this way, over the years, Hollywood has come to represent, by metonymy, the film industry and celebrity culture as a whole

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[16] See also McNamara 7.

[17] Braudy explains that one of the reasons that Hollywood did not initially welcome the movie industry was because of "its socially marginalized and immigrant roots" (24-25).

(Gibbs Jr. 64-65).[18] Today, even though only one of the original "Big Six" studios, Paramount Pictures, remains in Hollywood, the association of the moniker Hollywood with the movie industry, and sometimes even the city as a whole, has become a permanent cultural construct.[19] In many ways, this "reel," mythic Hollywood has occluded the real, geographic one. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the need to distinguish between the real, authentic Los Angeles and a "reel," spectacular Hollywood has long been the subject of literature about Los Angeles. As David Ulin explains in the introduction to his anthology, *Writing Los Angeles*: "In a city where myth-making is an industry," L.A.'s writers have often "explored [...] dark territory, dismantling the glittering promises of the dream city and finding unsettling realities underneath" (xvii); they have "felt the need to resist imposed narratives, preferring to carve out their own version of reality, no matter how fragmentary" (xviii).

Though the writings of the *Californios* provide insight into the prehistory of Los Angeles, the first major wave of Los Angeles writers arrived in the 1930s at the heyday of Hollywood's golden studio era. Writers such as James M. Cain, Nathanael West, Aldous Huxley, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Theodore Dreiser, Christopher Isherwood, and William Faulkner came seeking stable jobs as screenwriters (Fine 2). These writers were not, however, the only new arrivals. Between 1910 and 1940, the population of the city increased from 300,000 to upwards of 1.5 million (McNamara 7). Thus,

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[18] In his article, "Speaking and Thinking with Metonymy," Gibbs, Jr. explains how the transformation of the word Hollywood occurred because "people use one well-understood aspect of something to stand for the thing as a whole or for some other aspect of it (Lakoff and Johnson 1980)" because of the "principle by which a place may stand for an institution located at that place" (64-65). Similar examples would be how Wall Street has come to designate America's major banks and how Washington can refer to the American government.

[19] The other five studios making up the "Big Six" are 20th Century Fox (Century City, CA), Columbia (Culver City, CA), Universal (Universal City, CA), Walt Disney Studios (Burbank, CA), and Warner Bros. (Burbank, CA). 20th Century Fox is the only other studio besides Paramount Pictures that is actually located within Los Angeles city limits.

significantly, the literature of Los Angeles, unlike much regional literature, is "chiefly the work of the outsider" (Fine 2). It is the product of writings by these travelers, tourists, and transplants. Their writing:

> gave the city its metaphoric shape, established a way of reading the Southern California landscape that would persist through successive decades into the sixties and seventies. To a large extent it was their position as outsiders, their estrangement and sense of dislocation – expressed in moods ranging from fascination to revulsion and often a combination of the two – that gave the Los Angeles novel its peculiar ambience. (Fine 2)

Newcomers to Los Angeles compared the city in which they arrived to the homes they had left in the East (whether that East be the Eastern United States or Europe). They contrasted their dreams of paradise with the reality they found. The series of race riots – the 1943 Zoot Suit Riots, the 1965 Watt Rebellion, and the 1992 Justice (Rodney King) Riots – reflect the city's struggle to adapt as the population grew increasingly diverse over the course of the 20th Century. There were numerous literary responses from the marginalized communities of the "invisible" city who lived "in a place where the golden dream is always visible but ever beyond reach" (McNamara 8). For many, the Arcadian myth Hollywood's founders had sold did not live up to expectations and "the dream […] died hard" (Fine 8). Representations of Hollywood quickly changed from the "School of Sunshine" to the "School of Noir"; it was not long before Hollywood was depicted as an industry "dedicated to the production of illusion, the negation of culture and tradition, and the repression of the human fact of tragedy" (McNamara 1-2).[20] For many writers, the myth became the anti-myth; utopia became dystopia.[21] Consequently, in the detective fiction, science fiction, Hollywood novels, literature of urban uprisings, poetry,

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[20] As Ulin says, "One of the corners of L.A. culture where noir has nestled deepest is Hollywood […] Noir provided a gritty counterweight to the dreamier aspects of the movies' fantasy life, a corrective to the endless happy endings promised by celebrity and glamour" (xvii-xviii).

[21] See Fine 7-9 for more on this.

and essays that have constituted LA writing, the city has often been portrayed as a city of sharp contrasts. Nature and artifice, ocean and desert, black and white, rich and poor are juxtaposed. It is not surprising that LA essayist, Joan Didion has depicted the City of Angels as a "bipolar city of placid beauty and random, senseless violence – Arcadia *and* the maelstrom" (McNamara 10) or that, in Mark Lee Luther's 1923 novel *The Boosters*, "Los Angeles is both the best of places and the worst of places" (Fine 6).

Though David Fine and Kevin McNamara only include articles concerning American and British writers in their collections of essays on Los Angeles literature, many French writers have also traveled to and written about the city. *Hollywood: La Mecque du cinéma* (1936), the work of journalist and writer, Blaise Cendrars, provides one example. Nearly seventy-five years before Jean Rolin, Cendrars traveled to America and chronicled what he saw, publishing his series of lyrical reports in book form. In large part, *Hollywood: La Mecque du cinéma* reflects the view of a disillusioned *cinéphile* as he describes the frivolity and artificiality of artistic production and life in the illusion factory (19), the industrial capital of cinema (18). Although, despite his disparaging tone, he is not completely immune to the pull of Hollywood. In fact, there are moments when his tones shifts entirely as he praises cinema for its potential to "achiev[e] the status of a total human art that transcends cultural distinctions" (Hollister 491).[22] Nevertheless, he evinces, by and large, a burgeoning disenchantment with Hollywood that stems from his realization – long before Baudrillard's – that Hollywood, the eponymous mecca of the movies, is an artificial paradise, a spectacle from which one cannot escape because cinema is in the streets (66, 14). The artificiality he witnessed in

[22] This reintroduction of "the dream of a metaphorical formless cinema as modern *gesamtkunstwerk*" (Hollister 491) occurs while Cendrars watches the filming of *The Great Ziegfield*, a 1936 biopic by Robert Z. Leonard about the life and works of American Broadway impresario, Florenz Ziegfield, Jr. See Cendrars 107-115.

Hollywood manifested itself throughout the rest of the country, too. In his words, "la vie américaine et ses manifestations si souvent exagérées, sinon hystériques [...] se déroulent comme dans un film et [...] ont, la plupart du temps, l'air d'avoir été réglées d'avances par un metteur en scène de cinéma" (32).[23] In his eyes, the illusory nature of the cheerful, lively streets exerts a fatal distortion which disguises the melancholic reality that the quality of life in America is absurd (35, 84).

In fact, by looking beyond the spectacle of the "reel Hollywood", Cendrars sees a country in growing pains, struggling to come out of the Great Depression (37). High unemployment rates plague the general population, which appears dejected (37). The great economic disparity Cendrars' observes in the richest country in the world is all the more striking when juxtaposed with Hollywood, "la capitale universelle d'une industrie nouvelle dont le roulement d'argent se chiffre annuellement par des milliards de dollars" (25). Most shocking for Cendrars is the fact that the police have erected blockades to prevent the poor and homeless "étrangers de l'intérieur" from entering Los Angeles (45-48). While those involved with the film industry thrive, the rest of the population ekes out its existence.

But, according to Cendrars, even the stars are not unscathed by the commercialization of the growing industry. They not only risk falling from fame from one moment to the next given its ephemeral nature, but, in the film factory that is Hollywood, they have also become commodified. Cendrars says specifically that, "dans l'organisation du cinéma américain l'individu compte pour zéro [...] même une star est une chose" (129). They are the creation of a makeup artist, an agent, and a talent scout. Their flaws are corrected, their sex appeal fabricated, and their "genre" and "type"

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[23] He also claims that trompe-l'oeil "est un des plus grands phénomènes de l'optique américaine [... qui] finit par tromper la raison elle-même" (32).

imprinted upon them (120). A star – especially a new one – is nothing unless she is very visible (163). Cendrars describes how one can watch the "beautés sensationnelles" as they shop and go about their daily activities (125). Long before, television and the Internet, celebrity gossip about scandals and secrets is already a hot topic – so much so that Cendrars claims it is too much for him to include in his "petit livre sur Hollywood" (11-13).[24] All of that only adds to the artificiality of this paradise. Because of the "multiplication d'un million de faits divers et des petits détails bien précis, taillés à facettes, qui se réfléchissent les uns les autres à l'infini et qui leurrent à force de se répéter," life itself in Hollywood becomes "irréelle, un mythe" (78).

Blaise Cendrars' *Hollywood: La Mecque du cinéma* echoes the sentiments dozens of domestic LA writers expressed in their works of that time period. It also echoes the sentiments expressed in the works of his French contemporaries such as: Luc Durtain's *Hollywood Dépassé* (1928), Kadmi-Cohen's *L'abomination américaine* (1930), Ivan Noé's *L'Épicerie Des Rêves* (1933), and Joseph Kessel's *Hollywood, ville mirage* (1936). The titles of their works alone reinforce the fact that they made no attempt to dissimulate their anti-American bias.[25] Cendrars' writing about Hollywood also prefigures Simone de Beauvoir's *L'Amérique au jour le jour* (1947), Jean Baudrillard's *Amérique* (1986), and, of course, Jean Rolin *Le Ravissement de Britney Spears*. As we shall see, the parallels between Cendrars' text and Rolin's – one written during the Great Depression, the other

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[24] Clearly, celebrity gossip is not new. Leo Baudry demonstrates this in *Frenzy of Renown*, a book that traces the phenomenon all the way back to antiquity. See also Braudy "Hollywood" 34 and Jessica Grose's article, "Before Lindsay or Paris, There was Mrs. L_fle," in Fitzgerald's volume, *Celebrity Culture in the Untied States*. They both also show how public interest in scandals of the rich and famous dates back far. But, fame has certainly become more pervasive because of post-Renaissance conceptions of the individual, and especially because of the development of photography, the film industry, television, and the Internet (Turner 10, 12).

[25] Georges Duhamel did not visit Los Angeles, but he satirized the conformity and lack of inspiration of American cinema in his famous anti-American work, *Scènes de la vie future* (1930). See Philippe Roger's discussion of these texts in chapters 4, 5, and 6 of Part Two of *L'Ennemi américain*. See also Jérôme Prieur's *Le Spectateur nocturne, les écrivains au cinéma: une anthologie*.

during the Great Recession – are uncanny. Like so many other LA writers, both demonstrate conflicting views of Hollywood, fascinated with and yet also troubled by its excesses. They each navigate the glitz and glamour of the "reel" Hollywood in order to discover the "real" Los Angeles that lies beneath it.

Rolin's Portrait of the "Reel" Hollywood

Indeed, Rolin's portrait of the superficial, artificial, and yet fascinating Hollywood celebrity culture in *Le Ravissement de Britney Spears* enters into dialogue with the LA works of writers like Cendrars and demonstrates the competing attraction and repulsion so common to anti-American French views of America, in general, and of Los Angeles, in particular. As the narrator carries out his task of trolling the Internet for the latest celebrity gossip, he draws attention to the amount of time and money the Hollywood celebrity press dedicates to hunting down celebrities and writing about their every move and fashion accessory. Insignificant details and blatant publicity stunts – or "pseudo events"[26] – become news items. While the narrator often does not provide much editorial comment on the celebrity gossip, Rolin carefully selects items that showcase its vanity and lets them speak for themselves.

On the specialized celebrity news sites that the narrator consults (TMZ, X17, The Hollywood Gossip, etc.), he can read about Britney's favorites stores (14), as well as what she wears (25), where she goes and with whom. He can look at photographs of Britney with her agent and boyfriend, Jason Trawick, and read the analysis specialists provide as they attempt to determine the health of Britney's relationship and the likelihood of a breakup (8, 59, 72, 81, 279-80). Out in the city, the narrator witnesses

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[26] According to Turner, "This is an event planned and staged entirely for the media, which accrues significance through the scale of its media coverage rather than through any more disinterested assessment of its importance"(5).

the paparazzi go crazy when Britney is caught on camera not wearing any underwear, leaving the narrator to wonder if it was "par distraction ou par vice, ou seulement pour faire parler d'elle" (18), knowing that the press, which constructs her identity, evaluates her star factor in terms of the scale and effectiveness of her media visibility.[27] As Christopher Lasch, author of *The Culture of Narcissism*, has said, "For the famous today [...] self-approval depends on public recognition and acclaim" (Fitzgerald 116).

Even though the narrator generally refrains from commenting on the items he presents (after all they are his "research"), he relays an overt critique of the celebrity media through the voice of Serge, a seasoned member of the paparazzi with whom the narrator dines at Mauro's. Serge relates his greatest professional disappointment which occurred when a magazine printed a photo they had purchased from him (namely a photo of Charlize Theron eating lunch with her mother on Mother's Day) and reframed it so as to shine the spotlight on Charlize's $4500 Fendi shoes, ignoring "l'innocence et la beauté de cette relation mère-fille, particulièrement touchante pour quiconque s'était un peu penché sur leur histoire familiale" (85). At the mere memory of the event, which showcases the privileging of the superficial over the significant (or even the sentimental) in the celebrity press, an irate Serge explodes to the narrator, lambasting the superficiality of American women:

> Il n'y a que ça qui les intéresse [...] de savoir ce [que les stars] portent et combien ça coûte! [...] Qui lit la presse people ou regarde les émissions de téléréalité? [...] les femmes! Et pourquoi? Parce qu'elles se détestent entre elles, et qu'elles n'aiment rien tant que de voir souffrir d'autres femmes! Regardez celle qui vend le mieux, aujourd'hui, c'est Rihanna. Mais c'est seulement depuis que son mec lui a foutu sur la tronche! Avant, tout le monde s'en fichait! Et Lindsay Lohan? Elles sont toutes là à attendre qu'il lui arrive quelque chose, comme le week-end dernier, à

[27] See Turner 5, 13.

> Coachella, quand elle s'est complètement éclatée! Les femmes adorent les problèmes […] elles adorent le *drama*. (85-86)

In Serge's eyes, it is not just the media that is to blame for the content of "la presse people," but also those to whom it caters. As a disillusioned Serge blows his nose, the disengaged narrator laughs at his tirade, but not because he thinks it is not true.

In his observations, the narrator, like Serge, remarks how the stars are subject to the most media attention when they are at their worst.[28] During his time in Los Angeles, Britney's apparently failing relationship with Jason Trawick receives a lot of media attention, but not as much, the narrator stresses, as the episodes in 2007 when she shaved her head and was forced to check into a mental hospital (55-56). In fact, over the course of the narrator's two month stay in Los Angeles, Lindsay Lohan eclipses Britney as the center of the media's attention precisely because she is a "*train wreck* […] vindicative et rabrouée, titubant sous l'emprise de toxiques divers, dont la chute imminente est guetté jour après jour dans de véritables transports de voluptés" (164). Thus, the media watches her every move – from debauchery at the Cannes film festival and loss of her passport (200, 205) to court appearances (164-68, 205-09), not to overlook her admittance into a rehabilitation program (8).

The superficiality of Hollywood stands out especially when compared to the more marginalized zones of Los Angeles (as we shall see shortly) and the scenes in Tajikistan at the remote outpost where the narrator writes. According to the narrator, the days he spends in Murgab are bleak and lugubrious (11). The "silence" and "obscurité" are a far cry from the constant clamor and spectacle of life and show business in Hollywood. The only things that prevent him from feeling totally cut off

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[28] According to Jim Fowles, professor of media studies at the University of Houston-Clear Lake, this is because "Celebrities […] are the sacrificial victims of our adoration" (Fitzgerald 111).

from the world are the telephone in the office and "la lumière bleutée émanant de l'écran de [l']ordinateur"(13). In many ways, Tajikistan is everything that Hollywood is not. While the film industry stands as a beacon of capitalist triumph in Hollywood, even the geography in Tajikistan (specifically two peaks known respectively as Karl Marx and Engels) testifies to its history of Marxism. Whereas Hollywood is the heart of Los Angeles and American cinema, the narrator emphasizes the fact that he constantly finds himself in limitrophe spaces while in Tajikistan, a country with a land area that is 1/7th that of the United States. For one, he is in Murgab to record the license plates of vehicles crossing the nearby border with China (10). Later, he accompanies Shotemur to an area in the mountains from which one can view the territory of three countries "d'un seul regard (pour peu qu'il fasse l'effort de tourner légèrement sur lui-même" (226). In a further display of Tajikistan's remoteness, he relates how Shotemur believes, "avec une naïveté que l'on peut excuser chez un ressortissant *d'un pays aussi excentré que le Tadjikistan* [...] qu'il suffit d'habiter Hollywood, et de consulter Internet pour accéder *réellement* à toutes ces merveilles" (31 my emphasis).[29]

What is more, in opposition to "reel" Hollywood's relative peace and prosperity, Tajikistan is an impoverished, war-torn country. While the terrorist threat against Britney Spears is somewhat plausible in Hollywood, in Tajikistan, political terrorism is an everyday reality. The very real threat of violence there manifests itself in a bombing at a nightclub in the capital city of Dushanbe (160) and in the border patrol's suspicious

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[29] Paradoxically, the picture the narrator presents of Tajikistan also shows the far-reaching influence of celebrity culture and consumerism. When the narrator introduces Shotemur to the celebrity gossip sites, the latter is attracted to Britney, Lindsay Lohan, and Katy Perry and wants to find out more about them (10, 14, 31-16, 153). In addition, when Shotemur and the narrator take a trip to Dushanbe, the narrator sees people driving the very same luxury cars the rich and famous drive in LA. So, while the images of Tajikistan provide a stark contrast for the most part, they also show that consumerism and spectacle know no bounds.

"discovery" of the bodies of three alleged smugglers (227-230). Furthermore, the Tajik citizens serve as the living memory of a vicious civil war that broke out after the dissolution of the USSR and raged from 1992-1997.[30] Shotemur and his hunting companions fought in the conflict during which, the narrator explains, "Il est également admis qu'aucun des deux camps [...] ne s'est distingué par son respect des droits de l'homme ou des lois de la guerre. Ce pourquoi, sans doute, Shotemur est aussi discret sur ses activités durant cette période" (32-33). Even though the war is over, political turmoil remains (153-60, 225-30). Clearly, life in Tajikistan is very different from the life most residents lead in Los Angeles. This juxtaposition begs the question: How can people show interest in Hollywood celebrity culture's superfluous subjects when there are much more serious matters going on in other places like Tajikistan?

Besides exposing the superficiality of the media, *Le Ravissement* calls attention to the way the modalities of its transmission blur the boundaries between real and fake, as Cendrars' novel and so many others have done. According to the narrator, Serge has become disillusioned and cynical after years spent performing "ride alongs" (which is when he follows stars in his car so as to capture images of them shopping on Robertson, Rodeo, and Melrose Avenues)[31] and especially "set ups," which he describes as:

> le coup monté, lorsque des célébrités manifestaient le désir, pour infléchir ou redresser leur image, d'être photographiées 'à l'improviste' dans des activités auxquelles en vérité elles répugnaient, et qu'elles sous-traitaient de préférence à leur domesticité, mais qui étaient supposées les rapprocher du public, comme de faire pisser le chien ou de pousser un caddie de supermarché. (83)[32]

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[30] The scenes set in Tajikistan are consistent with Rolin's tendency to construct "un espace du livre où trouvent à se croiser des morceaux de vies individuelles aussi bien que des morceaux de guerres" (André 183).

[31] This echoes perfectly what Cendrars said about watching starlets shop (125).

[32] Two examples of set-ups the narrator describes are Lindsay Lohan making milkshakes with her sister at Millions of Milkshakes (162) or Britney eating Menchie's frozen yogurt (58). The narrator

He laments the fact that the celebrity media has forever blurred the line between real and fake, such that staged images appear real and genuine images look ersatz. In the "reel" Hollywood, the fake has covered over the real just like "the map that precedes the territory" in Baudrillard's "precession of simulacra […] the desert of the real itself" ("Simulacra"). Already, in 1961, "[Daniel] Boorstin describe[d] a culture impelled by its fascination with the image, the simulation, and losing its grounding in substance or reality" (Turner 5). Then, in 1991, Andrew Wernick wrote that, "the influence of advertising and its commercial logics had resulted in the phony, the constructed and the simulated taking over the cultural landscape" (Turner 16). Now, with the progress of computer technologies, the Internet, and social media, this is truer than ever. Thus, even when Britney allows untouched photos from an advertising campaign to be released, they do not seem real because the public has come to know Britney according to airbrushed images (90-91).

Thematically, the difficulty of distinguishing reality from illusion is omnipresent throughout *Le Ravissement de Britney Spears*, on multiple levels. For one, there is the fact that it is impossible to distinguish definitively fact from fiction in this semi-fictitious novel. Then, there is the fact that, as the narrator effectuates his "research" on the Internet, he constantly questions the reality of the photographs he sees and the news items – or gossip, rather – that he reads. He is wary of images on the Internet "marquées du sceau de cette *irréalité*, ou de cette *inconsistance*, qui caractérise tout ce qui [lui] parvient par ce canal" (164, my emphasis). He must constantly verify the virtual. It is not until he has trekked through the city streets and seen the people or places with his own eyes that "s'éveille en [lui] le sentiment qu'il s'agissait d'une chose *réelle*, *tangible*"

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jokes that ice cream is the great equalizer which increases stars' relatability and thus allows fans to connect with them.

(165, my emphasis). The only way to discover something authentic is to go out and explore the city firsthand. In addition, he must constantly confront the reality he sees with the preconceived notions he holds. After all, for many people around the world, America is the sum of the images they see in Hollywood productions. In other words, America is what Hollywood tells them, or shows them. The narrator reveals this when he compares the expectations of police officers he has based on what he has seen onscreen to what he actually witnesses in reality (259). In this way, Rolin's work constantly reinforces the discrepancy between myth and reality.

In addition, like Cendrars (and also Fante, Mailer, and West), the narrator also draws attention to the fact that virtually everything in Los Angeles has a staged quality. Because of the lack of distinct seasons, the passing of time requires man-made signifiers. By the end of the two months the narrator spends in Southern California from April to May 2010, it may have started to rain a little less, the Jacaranda tree may have lost its flowers, and the snow on the summits of the San Gabriel Mountains may have melted, but the clearest sign of the coming summer is the pool party at the W Hotel (239-40).[33] Even the nature in the City of Angels is paradoxically artificial. For example, while tracking Britney down at the Calabasas mall, the narrator realizes that the "rivulet" he sees is man-made (108). Thus, on his taxi ride back home through Topanga Canyon, he is surprised, and perhaps relieved, to see "une végétation printanière" and

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[33] This lack of distinct seasons is certainly an intertext with Norman Mailer's 1955 novel *The Deer Park* (and possibly also with Alison Lurie's 1965 novel *The Nowhere City*) in which "the absence of seasons that conform to those of the East or Midwest signals the disappearance of time itself" (Fine 12).

"une rivière – une véritable rivière, cette fois," in a bucolic scene replete with hawks and butterflies, and the acoustic accompaniment of cicadas (111-112).[34]

Moreover, the narrator also notes how the artificiality and superficiality of the celebrity culture is mirrored not only in nature, but also in the general population. At the former Police chief's funeral, he describes the "mise en scène" of the ceremony, and in particular, how, at the end of the procession, the police officers are "délivrés de l'obligation de *se composer* des mines d'enterrement, se croyant sans témoins" (134, my emphasis). It is not just the Hollywood stars and starlets who play roles and put on airs. According to the picture the narrator paints, Hollywood celebrity culture breeds a population that buys into the images it sells. In fact, the images become their reality. In Los Angeles, the narrator ascertains, nearly everyone wants to be associated with the stars. For example, on his way back from a meeting with Fuck, the narrator observes a line of elegant, young people and luxury cars parked in front of the restaurant and bar of the Palli House Hotel[35] at which,

> Afin de satisfaire ses légitimes aspirations à l'exclusivité, ou à un certain degré de celle-ci, l'entrée du restaurant, libre pendant la semaine, est durant le week-end filtrée par deux malabars qui font poireauter les nouveaux venus derrière un cordon de velours rouge: un dispositif qui

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[34] According to David Fine, "Landscape in the Los Angeles novel is always weighted with symbolic meaning" (10). He explains furthermore that in both Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* (1939) and Norman Mailer's *The Deer Park* (1955) "the landscape is seen through, or disguised by, the distorting lens of the artificial. West, to return briefly to his novel, consistently presents images of the natural world in terms of the unnatural. The edges of trees in the hills 'burned with a pale violet light . . like a neon tube,' and the sky becomes a 'blue serge sky' in which the moon makes an appearance 'like an enormous bone button.' What such images suggest is a sense of an organic landscape that has been corrupted and preempted by the materialistic and inorganic, a landscape from which we stand twice removed. It is the landscape of the cinema, the movie set, one produced by technical skill, by effective lighting and the use of props. And as such it symbolically defines the point where living and performing are indistinguishable" (13-14). In McNamara's edited volume, J. Scott Bryson's article, "Surf, Sagebrush, and Cement Rivers: Reimagining Nature in Los Angeles," examines "the natural world as fact and metaphor in the work of LA novelists, poets, and essayists [and] shows us how Southern California challenges ideas of nature imported from elsewhere in the United States, and [ultimately] challenges us to rethink what we mean when we say 'nature'" (McNamara 9-10).

[35] In real life, the West Hollywood venue is spelled Palihouse.

> évoque, en plus modeste, celui des *red carpet events*, les 'événements à tapis rouge', à l'occasion des premières de films ou d'autres célébrations commerciales. (73-74)

For the narrator, the scene is a patent example of how venues cater to the superficiality of Angelenos, allowing them to mimic the stars they watch onscreen at red carpet events. The Palli House Hotel is certainly not alone in this regard. Restaurants and clubs like Mauro's, the Abbey, and the Ivy also offer their patrons the possibility of going where the stars go, eating what they eat, seeing and being seen, or at least pretending that is the case (82-85). In the desire to be associated with the glitz and glamour of Hollywood, even the dry cleaners the narrator uses, Holloway Cleaners, calls itself "le pressing des stars!," prompting the narrator to muse that, "il semblait que rien ne pût échapper à ce fléau" (90). The fact that the narrator employs the word "fléau," generally translated as scourge, plague, or curse, reinforces his bemused scorn. Furthermore, he notes that some will even resort to crime in an effort to associate themselves with the stars, as is evident when the narrator presents information from the *LA Times* about the "Bling Ring." The "Bling Ring" is the title given to a group of six adolescents who broke into celebrities' homes to steal their belongings. Seeking prestige and status by association, they stole, the narrator explains:

> moins dans le dessein de s'enrichir, semble-t-il, puisqu'ils avaient généralement négligé le matériel électronique et d'autres objets de valeur, que pour se procurer [...] des vêtements, des bijoux et d'autres colifichets ayant touché de près à des personnalités aussi considérables que Rachel Bilson, Orlando Bloom, Megan Fox ou Paris Hilton, pour ne citer que les plus connus. (197-198)

As if pilfering clothing and belongings just to be like the stars is not bad enough, the narrator also discovers that, following the incident, Alex Neiers, the ringleader of the "Bling Ring," earned a spot on her own reality TV show on E! (198-199).[36] He is

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[36] In 2013, Sophia Coppola adapted the story of the "Bling Ring" into a movie by the same name.

understandably surprised and disillusioned to learn that Hollywood rewards such superficial and illegal actions in the name of show business. Thus, Rolin's account may appear, at first, to be a critique of the superficiality and vanity of Hollywood celebrity culture.

Despite the ample evidence that Hollywood celebrity culture is superficial and artificial, one cannot take the narrator's view entirely seriously. The fact that the narrator laughs at Serge's diatribe, for example, indicates to the reader that he should not take Serge completely seriously either. Unlike some of his anti-American French predecessors, and in true Rolinian style, the author does not try to prove a point or create a coherent discourse, because he also portrays a delight in and fascination with Hollywood (another manifestation of the multiple meanings of the *le ravissement de* Britney Spears: joy, delight, rapture, ecstasy). Ultimately, the two competing views of Hollywood celebrity culture balance out and result in an essentially equivocal perspective, typical of his work.[37] Along with the comical failures, this detached demeanor helps to maintain the ludic and lighthearted tone throughout.

Indeed, the narrator is not immune to the influence of celebrity culture and even demonstrates a certain degree of appreciation for it. The volume of celebrity news he can find on the Internet, however superficial its content, enthralls him.[38] When the narrator reads Britney's life story on Wikipedia while in Tajikistan, and rehashes it in

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[37] Rolin often projects a seemingly detached or disengaged attitude into his narrators about the subjects they treat. For example, in his work on the *banlieues* of Paris, he refuses to create a coherent discourse. See Milne, Poisson, Thibault, and Viart. During his interview with *France Culture*, Rolin explained that, upon studying someone or something closely, "On découvre la complexité des choses et on devient inapte à porter jugement; à faire des choix [...] Pas des bons et des mauvais, mais des gens qui sont moins méchants que d'autres" ("Jean Rolin").

[38] Rolin admits this about his own experience in his interview with *France Culture*: "Je ne peux pas nier que j'ai pris un certain plaisir futile et en partie masochiste à consulter des revues et des sites spécialisés sur la vie des stars" ("Jean Rolin").

detail for the reader, he relays his fascination with her story, especially the fact that a girl born in McComb, Mississippi and raised in Kentwood, Louisiana – "ce qui en fait doublement une fille du Sud, et pas de ce qu'il y a de plus chic dans le Sud" (51) – could become *Forbes*' most powerful celebrity in 2002,[39] someone for whom "tout se compte en millions" (52). For the narrator, Britney is the archetypal Hollywood starlet whose novelistic life story is the epitome of the American Dream.[40] Consequently, he marvels with equal interest – yet also pity – at how quickly she fell from the top, noting her excessive partying, multiple marriages, child custody battles, head-shaving incident, and mental health treatment (52-56). He even leads Shotemur in a prayer to Britney: "We love you Britney, don't give up!" (79). As ludicrous as that is (and again, surely not lacking in irony on Rolin's part), Chris Rojek and John Frow would say that it accurately represents how "the cultural function of the celebrity today contains significant parallels with the functions normally ascribed to religion" (Turner 6, 25).

The narrator makes clear that even before he began his mission, he was not beyond Hollywood culture's global reach. In an anecdote that blurs the line between author and narrator, he relates how he first heard – or more importantly, saw – Britney Spears in 2003 during his stay with a Christian family in Palestine in the weeks leading up to the invasion of Iraq (49).[41] Cooped up inside because of the curfew, he watched Al Jazeera news with his host and his host's oldest daughter.[42] When the father left the room to answer a business-related phone call, the daughter proceeded to change the

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[39] In the book, he incorrectly states 2004.

[40] See Turner who discusses the debate about whether stardom is innate or simply luck (6) and who also depicts how stars are seen to have "American dream lifestyles" (14).

[41] Rolin also relates this scene, albeit in less detail, in his 2003 novel, *Chrétiens* (81-82). In addition, there is a passing reference to Britney Spears on page 101 in *La Clôture*.

[42] In *Chrétiens*, he refers to her as the youngest daughter.

channel to MTV on which Britney Spear's music video for her rendition of "I Love Rock'n'Roll" was airing. The narrator describes his immediate reaction:

> Personnellement, je n'avais rien à objecter à ce clip, ni musicalement – même si ce n'était pas exactement le genre de choses que j'écoutais d'habitude – ni, surtout, pour le reste, mais j'étais un peu embarrassé de me retrouver seul, dans ce contexte, avec la gamine, absorbés tous les deux, avec un ferveur égale bien que procédant certainement de stimulations différentes, dans la contemplation de ces images qu'un esprit étroit aurait pu qualifier de pornographiques. Je craignais surtout que le père, de retour au salon, ne me soupçonne d'être à l'origine de ce changement de programme. Et c'est ainsi que j'avais découvert Britney Spears dans des conditions finalement très propices, cette crainte d'un retour inopiné du père me rapprochant de la tranche d'âge où se recrutait apparemment la majeure partie de son public. (50-51)

Upon his initial "encounter" with Britney, the narrator was filled with pleasure and delight, as well as slight embarrassment, precisely because of his attraction. His anecdote reinforces the fact that, long before the narrator's top-secret mission in Los Angeles would begin, his enjoyment of and delight with Britney – this first sense of "le ravissement de Britney Spears" – had already begun.

Subsequently, it is not so surprising that, during his eventual mission to Los Angeles, the narrator takes pleasure in retracing Britney Spears' steps. For example, as part of his "sleuthing," he goes to the Moonshadows and becomes inebriated on the same drink that intoxicated her (71). He also visits Menchie's, the frozen yogurt shop she frequents (58, 109-110). Over the course of his stay in Los Angeles, it is clear that Hollywood culture is rubbing off on him and that he is adopting certain traits: he very consciously dresses his best to look the part when infiltrating a private Rotary Club dinner at the Chateau Marmont (141); he describes shoes he bought at Macy's in language that sounds like an advertisement (195-196); he also admits that pretending to be a paparazzi is fun (251); and finally, he engages in "retail therapy," going shopping and eating a nice meal in order to sooth his nerves after learning of Fuck's untimely

demise (259).[43] Even in Tajikistan, he continues to follow religiously the Hollywood gossip as evinced by the lengthy presentation in the opening pages of everything that occurred in Hollywood on August 15, 2010 (7-9).

By the end of his sojourn in Los Angeles, this French spy has monitored the celebrity news so intently that the line between public and private has become blurred. He feels increasingly connected to Britney Spears and Lindsay Lohan.[44] As time passes, he insists that Britney is just like everyone else.[45] He maintains this based on the fact that: she came from humble beginnings (51), she eats frozen yogurt at Menchie's that she prepares herself (58), she eats at Subway (236), she takes her kids to the Santa Monica Pier (68), and, most comically, she is subject to the same rainy meteorological conditions as everyone else (127). While that is innocent enough, the line between public and private, between spy and stalker blurs further. This is evident when he walks two or three kilometers to the security gate at The Oaks, Britney's residence (110-111), and when he imagines buying Britney and Lindsay Lohan t-shirts at a communist bookstore (176). It is also apparent when he dreams with "ravissement" of rescuing Lindsay Lohan from a fiery car crash (169-171). The more time he spends following Britney Spears and Lindsay Lohan, the more he seems to sympathize with or pity them, and the more he begins to imagine they share a real relationship. Many would argue

[43] Further evidence of his "Americanization" is the fact that he eats IHOP for breakfast every day while reading the *LA Times*. For dinner, on several occasions, he eats pizza and a banana accompanied by a can of Coke.

[44] In his interview about *Le Ravissement* with *France Culture*, Rolin says that it is common for a sociologist to experience difficulty remaining unbiased toward the subject of his study because it is easy to become attached to the group or person. According to Turner, this feeling of connectedness is also consistent with the effect celebrity and social media have on the public (6-8).

[45] Turner explains this effect of the celebrity and social media as follows: "The discourses in play within the media representation of celebrity are highly contradictory and ambivalent: celebrities are extraordinary or they are 'just like us' […] Our fascination with particular celebrities is on the one hand a fantastic projection, but on the other hand we *can* actually encounter them in everyday life" (8).

that this is evidence of how "para-social interactions (that is, interactions which occur across a significant social distance – with people 'we don't know'), such as those we enjoy with the celebrities we watch and admire" have created "an affective deficit in modern life" (Turner 6). The Internet and social media only exacerbate the problem. The scene where the narrator accidently clicks on a video clip of Jesse James' apology to Sandra Bullock and, short of pulling the plug on his computer, cannot get it to stop playing illustrates this point perfectly (236-37).

In fact, as the mission goes on, it seems that the narrator progressively loses his agency. The Internet and celebrity media distort his connection with reality and exercise some sort of control on him, dictating his interests. The mission fades into the background as the narrator becomes increasingly captivated by the information the media shares about Lindsay Lohan. A poor excuse for a secret agent, the narrator readily admits that he is neglecting his duty, saying: "je ne progressais qu'assez lentement, il faut en convenir, dans mes recherches relatives à Britney, et [...] je négligeais celles-ci de plus en plus, comme on le verra, au fur et à mesure que se développait mon intérêt pour Lindsay" (151). Later, he tries to justify his inattention by saying that, "ce que Lindsay fait aujourd'hui [...] Britney l'a fait dans le passé, et il se peut qu'elle y retourne dans l'avenir, de telle sorte qu'en m'intéressant à l'actualité de Lindsay je ne m'écarte qu'en apparence de la mission qui m'a été confiée. (D'ailleurs ce n'était tout de même pas de ma faute si Britney, ces temps-ci, faisait aussi peu parler d'elle)" (165).[46] The effect of such a statement within the diegesis is comedic, without a doubt. The narrator paints himself as a helpless, pathetic individual who has no sense of self-discipline to carry out his task. However, when one considers the fact that, in real

[46] See also p. 93.

life, Rolin is the one researching and reading about celebrities, the virtual disappearance of Britney from the text merely represents the mechanisms of celebrity media and the ephemeral nature of stardom wherein one star eclipses another. With all of their wealth and fame, celebrities lack autonomy and total control over their own destiny: "The celebrity is also a commodity: produced, traded and marketed by the media and publicity industries" (Turner 9). By the end, Britney has all but disappeared from the narrative because Lindsay Lohan is the star – or the commodity – of the moment. By comparison, Britney is only an afterthought. For example, after waiting endlessly outside the courthouse for Lindsay to leave, the narrator suddenly seems to remember his mission: "Et pendant ce temps, qu'avait à offrir Britney Spears?" (209). But, by that point, even when the narrator is assigned a mission to follow Britney Spears to dinner at the Mondrian Hotel, he does so begrudgingly. He would rather stay in his hotel room and eat pizza from 7/11 while watching *Deadliest Catch* or the Mexican version of *King Kong* on TV (211). As I have previously suggested, it is also Jean Rolin creatively toying with the polysemy of the word *ravissement*. Therefore, when the narrator is finally within reach of Britney at a Johnny Rockets hamburger restaurant, it is no surprise that he does nothing to attract her attention or engage her (254-256).

Fringe Spaces, or the Hidden, "Real" Side of Hollywood

It is not just Lindsay Lohan and the mechanisms of celebrity culture that draw the narrator's attention away from Britney Spears and his mission to protect her, however. As the narrative progresses, the narrator dedicates more time and energy to exploring fringe spaces around Los Angeles which stand in stark contrast to the glitz and glamour typically associated with Hollywood. At first he does so at Fuck's bidding, wondering if Fuck's "prédilection pour des lieux impossibles participait-elle de quelque

chose de plus grave et de plus subtil, d'une sorte d'enseignement au sujet de cette ville, que Fuck aurait à cœur de me délivrer" (99-100). But, as the narrator increasingly deviates from his mission and explores the "lieux impossibles" of his own accord, it is clear that it is merely Rolin's typical narrator taking over. Indeed, his exploration of this "hidden side of Hollywood" recalls the *modus operandi* of Rolin's idiosyncratic narrator whom scholars have described as "un ethnologue dans la banlieue" (Rubino 63), "un écrivain vagabond épris de zones incertaines et de régions frontalières" (Thibault 71), and as "[un] traducteur des petits faits de la ville" (Poisson 22).[47] His exploration of these interstitial spaces also serves to elucidate further the incongruities between the mythic "reel" Hollywood and the "real" Hollywood.

In the city that epitomizes car culture, the narrator moves around on foot and by public transportation just as Rolin does in *Zones* and *La Clôture*. The difference is that, whereas Paris favors such modes of transportation, Los Angeles does not. In fact, mass transit in Los Angeles is not exactly for the masses, Rolin concludes, but for the marginalized, the subaltern. The city is "dédiée à la voiture" (24) to the point that the incessant hum of cars navigating the maze of freeways and city streets – a hum which is "aussi ample et régulière que celle de la mer" (35) – serves as a soundtrack for the narrator's mission in Los Angeles.[48] The narrator of *Le Ravissement de Britney Spears* admits that his inability to drive does not make his life any easier (105). Reyner Benham, a British architectural critic, once "noted that he had to learn how to drive to

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[47] See also André who has also described Rolin's work as "écriture de vagabondage [...] un pur carrefour d'expériences, d'images, et de souvenirs" (177), where "[le] déplacement dans l'espace constitue un mode d'être au monde" (182-183).

[48] Besides likening the traffic noise to the constant drone of the sea, the narrator describes the moving ribbons of light traffic creates in the dark. He even attributes Fuck's death to the anesthetizing affect of the traffic noise which may have dulled his senses. Indeed, traffic and traffic noise are a constant motif in *Le Ravissement*. See also 21, 24, 35, 63, 68, 73, 101, 131, 138, 261-262.

'read' the city 'in the original'" (Fine 10). The narrator's inability to drive does not, however, prevent him from "micro-mapping" the spaces he explores, just as the Rolinian narrator "micro-maps" the "peri-urban" spaces of the Parisian periphery in *Zones* and *La Clôture* (Welch 59, 62).[49] As in those works, traveling off the beaten path allows him to discover lesser known and viewed sections of the city.

Indeed, the Rolinian narrator describes, in detail, how he navigates the public transportation network to get to various destinations such as Santa Monica, Malibu, Calabasas, MacArthur Park, and the Downtown area. During the hours he spends crisscrossing the city, he passes his time reading the *LA Times*,[50] answering trivia questions on the buses' onboard TVs, and observing the people around him. He notes that the other riders are mostly Latina women, the elderly, the disabled, the homeless, and the mentally unstable (107-108). When Bus 750 must lower its wheelchair accessible ramp to allow a disabled person onboard, he finds himself wondering if the "caractère encore guerrier de l'Amérique, par comparaison avec l'Europe, est à l'origine de cette particularité" (107-108), "cette particularité" being the apparently elevated number of disabled people. Later, while riding the 704 Express Bus east toward downtown early in the morning, he notices that the buses heading west are mostly full with Latina women, while the buses heading east are three-quarters empty (130); the

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[49] Rolin's method of mapping can be described as "micro" for several reasons. For one, the fact that he travels on foot and by public transportation limits the scope of his mapping. Secondly, given the reduced scope and the slower pace of travel, Rolin is able to record in minute detail his observations about the spaces he does encounter. While Rolin enjoys the challenge of traversing the immensity of LA using public transit, he does resort to traveling by car (taxi or paparazzi) on several occasions. What he gains in speed on those few occasions, he loses in observation of details. Whereas he can count the exact number of palm trees as he walks near his hotel (73), he cannot make out individual trees, but only perceive, "des zones où la végétation était si touffue, et si obscure, que l'on aurait pu aussi bien se trouver au fond d'un bois" (73). In addition, he has less time to note the proliferation of signs which he sees while traversing LA by bus, by subway, and on foot (126, 139, 285-286). The term "peri-urban" is a translation of Martin-Achard's term "périurbain."

[50] Perhaps this explains why Rolin refers to so many news articles throughout *Le Ravissement*.

phenomenon reverses, however, after the bus crosses over the "*one o one*" freeway "comme si les femmes hispaniques allaient toutes faire le ménage, ou vaquer à d'autres soins, chez les gens qui à la même heure se hâtaient en voiture vers leurs bureaux de Downtown" (131). Such observations lead Rolin to presume that riding the bus in Los Angeles is truly a class affair of the proletariat ("Jean Rolin"). The fact that only a specific sector of the population rides the bus renders his perspective even more unique. It is while taking unconventional routes and modes of transportation, that the narrator has the time to see beyond the mythic, "reel" Hollywood, to notice details and draw inferences about the character of America and the shape of this "mythological" and "metaphoric" American city which represents hopes and fears about "the American, the Western, or even the global future" (McNamara 6-7).

In this case, Rolin's "micro-mapping" reveals what is local, or very particular to Los Angeles, and what is global, especially when compared to Paris. Los Angeles and Paris both hold high ranked positions (numbers 6 and 3 respectively) on the Global Cities Index, which designates "the world's biggest, most interconnected cities" and "centers of commerce, culture, and communication" (Amburn).[51] However, the two metropolises are drastically different in countless ways, most notably in geographic size and shape. On the one hand, Paris occupies a circular region that is roughly 40 square miles. On the other hand, Los Angeles, with its sprawling size and amorphous geographic shape, covers some 503 square miles. According to David Fine, "Los Angeles took its shape in an uncharacteristic way for American cities: it grew not by pushing out centrifugally from a dense core, but by the separate development of towns often at

[51] According to the article, the main metrics by which "global cities" are measured are: "business activity", "human capital", "information exchange", "cultural experience," and "political engagement." Both Los Angeles and Paris dropped one spot in 2010, but climbed back up to their original positions in 2012 (Hales 3).

considerable distance from one another, a process that had been going on since the 1880s. The old plaza, birthplace of the city, had become by the twenties simply one of a number of centers" (10).[52] Consequently, Los Angeles has no easily discernable center and periphery as Paris does, a fact that has earned it the title "anti-ville" (Lévy 134-38).[53] Many of the fringe spaces in Los Angeles are actually in the center, while in Paris they are all located toward the periphery of the city. [54] The narrator does, however, differentiate between "la ville des hauteurs" and "la ville basse" (34, 112, 242), the "la ville des hauteurs" being roughly equivalent to the center of Paris and "la ville basse" being roughly equivalent to Paris' peripheral zones.

During his foot-bound exploration, which is mostly limited to the "ville basse" because the public transportation does not operate in the Hollywood Hills, the narrator comes across a very mixed population.[55] Fittingly, the nonlinear form of *Le Ravissement* reinforces the confrontation of two disparate worlds within the city.[56] On one page, the

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[52] See also McNamara 1. For a good picture of the size and shape of Los Angeles, see the *Los Angeles Times*' study, "Mapping L.A.: Los Angeles."

[53] In the section called "L'anti-ville" Lévy says: "Or Los Angeles n'a pas de centre. Elle a des zones, des quartiers, voire des villes dans la ville qui ont, chacune, une sorte de centre. Mais *un* centre, *un* point unique à partir duquel opérerait la loi d'isonomie dont les Athéniens tenaient qu'elle est au principe de toute ville, un nœud ou un foyer avec lequel les habitants de Beverly Hills, Hollywood, Venice, Chinatown, Koreantown, Little Saigon et Little Tokyo, Malibu, Inglewood, Pico Union [...] entretiendraient un rapport à la fois distinct et symétrique, rien de cela n'existe à Los Angeles" (135). In *Los Angeles ou la ville au loin*, Jean-Luc Nancy says that, "À Los Angeles, rien ne rassemble, ni l'Hôtel de Ville ni *downtown*, le centre-ville. À Los Angeles (on dit L.A., nom siglé, clair et léger pour l'énorme étendue brumeuse), les nœuds des *freeways* s'enlèvent au-dessus de cet espace sans lieu, sans localité" (16). Fanny Daubigny calls Los Angeles "une fiction proustienne" because of "son absence de centre, l'étoilement de sa structure, la magie de ses noms, [et] son obsession de la représentation" (66).

[54] This, of course, would be due to different visions of urban planning in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Veivo 284). In opposition to Paris, most cities in the United States demonstrate a vision of urban planning that has "preferred the periphery of the city over its center" (Veivo 284).

[55] Nancy also notes that, "La misère et la dégradation pénètrent insidieusement un peu partout, on les trouve à deux pas des boutiques chics de Melrose, et tout se mêle à Venice" (17).

[56] One wonders if the nonlinear narrative of *Mulholland Drive* influenced Rolin at all. The narrator says he watched David Lynch's 2001 film on the eve of his departure for Los Angeles and that he likes the film precisely because of the complexity of its plot and its obscurity (21-22). Even if Lynch's film was an influence, it is not solely responsible for the narrative structure because Rolin has been

narrator virtually follows Britney Spears' or Lindsay Lohan's every move as they shop on tree lined Rodeo Drive or attend exclusive events. On the next, he loses his way in a neighborhood, crisscrossed by railroad tracks and freeways, that is full of warehouses and freight zones. On one page, he infiltrates a private Rotary Club dinner at the Chateau Marmont where the "standard room" costs upwards of $400. On the next, he studies the dingy Olive Hotel, the site where an ex-convict murdered a fifteen-year-old prostitute in 2007 (186-188, 192).[57] America, as depicted in such scenes, is the land of extremes, just as Cendrars described in 1936.[58] Rich and poor collide, which is something Rolin's readers do not witness in Paris in *Zones* and *La Clôture* because, in those works, the center is occluded entirely.

Despite the cities' apparent differences, the narrator comes across fringe spaces in Los Angeles that look oddly familiar to the non-places and non-place-like spaces that

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known to rely on nonlinear plots in the past. See *La Clôture* and *L'Explosion de la durite*. But, as it is in *Le Ravissement*, the difficulty of distinguishing fact from fiction – or dream from reality – is a constant motif in *Mulholland Drive*.

[57] Even though the narrator spends the majority of his time at one motel, The Holloway (unlike in *Zones* where Rolin changes hotels approximately every night while he moves around the outskirts of Paris), the narrator does seek out numerous other hotels and motels for various reasons – some associated with his mission, some not: he visits luxury hotels like the Chateau Marmont (138-144) and the Mondrian Hotel (138-39, 213-215) because Britney has been known to stay there; he visits motels made famous – or infamous – for one reason or another: the Park Plaza Hotel which, although no longer in use, has appeared in numerous movies (102-103, 265-266), The Olive motel where a fifteen year old prostitute was murdered in 2007 (186-188, 192), the Hotel Normandie LA where Malcolm Lowry once stayed and wrote (192-194), and The Standard Hotel, where he and Wendy visit an art exhibit that they find laughable (184-185, 189); lastly, he visits several rundown, nondescript motels: a motel on N. La Brea Avenue where he takes Wendy, the prostitute who doubles as a Britney look-a-like for whom he apparently falls head over heels (183), the Sunrise Hotel near the Port of LA in the San Pedro neighborhood where he waits for his exfiltration (269-270), the Rancho Dolores (which he jokingly calls "la ferme des douleurs") and the Ski Inn ("l'établissement le plus modeste, sinon le moins hospitalier" where he stays with Wendy during his second extraction attempt (275-280)). The seedy hotels are juxtaposed with the ritzy hotels, reinforcing the economic divide he observes in Los Angeles.

[58] It is not just French writers and journalists who are intrigued and concerned by America's extremes. See for example German newspaper editor, Gerhard Spörl's article, "America, Land of Extremes: An Enigmatic Country Elects a New President," which appeared in *Der Spiegel* on Oct. 31, 2008 or Bristishman Benedict Rogers' opinion piece, "Musings on America: Land of Extremes," which appeared in The Huffington Post on July 19, 2013.

the Rolinian narrator frequents in *Zones* and *La Clôture*. In certain instances, the images and even the lexical field, with words like *zones*, *terrains vagues*, and *la clôture*, appear almost identical, signaling the global nature of the phenomenon.[59] In *Le Ravissement de Britney Spears*, as in his other works, Rolin does not set out to preserve a picture-perfect view of the city. His writing serves as proof that, as Dominique Viart has written, "Écrire le réel, ce n'est donc plus installer une 'histoire' dans un cadre réaliste, mais aller directement vers cette matérialité même du monde qui témoigne de ce qu'il fut et devient" (*La littérature* 227). Thus, he gravitates toward vacant lots, subway stations, railroad tracks, homeless camps, public parks, and America's largest port. Such spaces are the less-than-picture-perfect places that most people pass through quickly or avoid altogether.[60] They are the spaces where, as Daniel Pinson explained, "demographic changes and anxieties caused by global processes can be located" (103, qtd. in Veivo 287).[61] They are the spaces that Hollywood's cameras often pass over. If, as Joshua Armstrong has noted, Rolin's exploration of "fringe and problematic spaces [is] a lateral, and therefore heretical, use of forward-moving modern-day space in order to restore visibility onto supposedly un-noteworthy 'non-places'" (Armstrong "Window Crossings" 4), then his exploration of such spaces in Los Angeles is especially "heretical" because it challenges the mythic vision of Hollywood and of America that Hollywood projects.

The best example of this, perhaps, is the scene where the narrator gets lost after taking a wrong turn while on his way to explore the Los Angeles River where it passes through the downtown area, near Union Station. He comes across two jails "d'un aspect inévitablement assez rude" (123); a homeless camp, eerily deserted during the day; a

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[59] See also Welch for reflections on the global nature of the non-place.
[60] See also Armstrong "Writer, Window, World…" 463-466.
[61] See also Martin-Achard 23.

vacant lot for sale; and a "bâtiment industriel d'un autre âge" (124). Like Marc Augé's *non-lieux*,[62] this "impossible space" is at antipodes with anthropological places in that, as Edward Welch said: "it resists or deters human intervention, appropriation and investment" (Welch 67); the detention centers, in particular, testify to "some of the more problematic consequences of the increasingly global circulation of goods and people" (Welch 49). The narrator's exploration of non-places voided of meaning and connection does not end there. In the very same scene, after finding his way back to his starting point, the narrator embarks on a path that leads down by the river, a path that is notably "mal entretenu [et qui] n'était emprunté, s'il était, que par des reprouvés" (125). At that point, the narrow river itself is not much to look at, and the concrete riverbanks are covered in graffiti. Train tracks and power lines run parallel to the river on both sides and "sur la rive gauche, dans l'angle obtus formé par l'intersection de Chavez avec Mission Road, s'étend en profondeur un paysage ferroviaire: des trains *double stack*, transportant des conteneurs sur deux hauteurs, y évoluent lentement parmi des montagnes de gravats ou de véhicules hors d'usage" (126). In the rather forsaken area, the Rolinian narrator cannot help but notice the giant billboard for Norris Cancer Hospital. In his eyes, the slogan, "You are not alone! […] Fight on!" (126), is a hypocritical attempt to reassure any ill and unwell who find themselves on that deserted strip of Mission Road. The slogan for Norris Cancer Hospital seems especially hypocritical for Rolin, because as he previously stated in *Zones*, the proliferation of senseless signs in the "pseudo-ville" is itself a "prolifération cancéreuse" (95).[63] Without

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[62] According to Augé, *non-lieux* are not places of permanence and connection, but rather interchangeable spaces of transience where humans remain anonymous and solitary, for example: chain hotels and grocery stores, transportation networks (airports and train stations, highways and train tracks) and refugee camps.

[63] See also Martin-Achard 17.

a doubt, it would be hard to picture a scene more antithetical to the typically pristine images of health, wealth, and beauty that Hollywood sells.

One could say the same thing of numerous other fringe spaces that the narrator visits in *Le Ravissement*: whether it be Vista del Mar Park, a park which lies wedged between the ocean and the end of the runways of the LAX airport, and which thus reeks of kerosene, a park so inaccessible and so nonsensical that the Rolinian narrator deems its existence must be due to an error of calculation (120-121); or the Harbor Freeway subway station which is sandwiched between a desolate parking lot and the interchange where the 105 and 110 freeways intersect in one of the most dangerous neighborhoods of Los Angeles (260-262); or MacArthur Park, a public park which was the sight of gun battles between rival gangs in the 1990s and is now paradoxically home to a number of homeless and mentally ill denizens of Los Angeles (101);[64] or finally, the neighborhood of warehouses and freight zones east of San Pedro Avenue, which the narrator describes as "relativement désert et sinistre, avec ses camions en mouvement, ses trottoirs poussiéreux zébrés de traînées de pisse et ses longs murs couverts de tags ou de graffes"(177).[65] These are the places in which Hollywood stars and starlets would never dream of setting foot. They are thus invisible places. In Rolin's thorough descriptions of such fringe spaces, however, it is clear that he is intrigued by these very spaces and places. For example, despite the Harbor Freeway station's unfavorable situation, he describes it as, "la plus étrange, et la plus spectaculaire, de la ligne verte du

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[64] In French, Rolin calls it a "zone de tir à vue." He cites sociologist Mike Davis' 1992 study, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* with regard to this information.

[65] Several of these fringe spaces remarkably recall places that Rolin described in *Zones* and *La Clôture*. Vista del Mar Park, which used to be a town, reminds the reader of Goussainville-le-Vieux, a deserted village situated in line with the runways of CDG airport, which Rolin visits in *La Clôture* (174-76). MacArthur Park evokes peripheral Parisian parks that Rolin visited in *Zones*: a small park in Sarcelles (89-91) and the Jardin de Stalingrad (104-07).

métro, et peut-être de l'ensemble du réseau" (260) and likewise describes the 105-110 interchange as "le plus bel échangeur de Los Angeles, et l'un des plus arborescents, dont les tentacules se déploient et s'entrecroisent" (37).

In his micro-mapping of Los Angeles, Rolin turns his ethnographic gaze not only to the fringe spaces, but to the people who inhabit these spaces, the people who occupy the most subaltern positions in society, those who – like the places they frequent – are absent from the picture-perfect image Hollywood projects around the world. After all, as Rubino observes about *La Clôture*, for Rolin, "L'inventaire des milieux et des décors est indissociable des tares sociales et des péripéties humaines dont ils sont le théâtre (65). In *Le Ravissement* Rolin does not gloss over the poor families at the Santa Monica Pier (68-69),[66] the elderly, the disabled, and the mentally ill who ride the city buses (107), the Latinos who protest on Broadway against Arizona's new immigration laws (148-149), the homeless Cuban beggar on Sunset Avenue for whom "le rêve américain avait manifestement cafouillé" (212), or the clandestine Latino immigrants who cheer for Team USA during a televised soccer match (281). No person, however marginalized, is too peripheral for his story. By shedding a spotlight on the subaltern, Rolin underscores the fact that a select few stars who are "well-known for their well-knownness"[67] receive endless attention, whereas the anonymous masses remain largely invisible. As a result, his emphasis on the marginalized and the subaltern calls into question – as many LA writers have before him – the myth of Hollywood and the

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[66] In this scene, it is worth noting the fact that Rolin mentions that there is a Chinese entertainer writing people's names on rice. This person also appears on p. 82 in *Zones*.

[67] See Turner 5 who quotes Boorstin 58. Terence J. Fitzgerald also says that, "Thanks largely to an entertainment industry and its accompanying press coverage, which grants extraordinary attention to people of otherwise average gifts, we now live in a society in which Paris Hilton can be famous simply for being famous" (3). One of the characters in David Lynch's 2001 film, *Mulholland Drive*, also expresses this idea, saying matter-of-factly that one can be a great actress *or* a movie star. Sometimes people end up being both (26:45, my emphasis).

mechanisms by which celebrities become fetishized while so many people who inhabit the "real Hollywood" remain forgotten.

If the mere mention of such people has the effect of calling into question the visibility of of celebrities in the "reel Hollywood" and the virtual invisibility of the marginalized in its real counterpart, the effect is augmented when the narrator takes the time to develop the stories of several of them, as he does in *La Clôture* with Lito, Gerard, and the other residents of Rue de la Clôture. Such is the case for Abdul, the watchman of the Park Plaza Hotel, who is a Somalian refugee and former pirate "d'une douceur angélique" who also studies theater and film, claiming to have written the indigenous version of *Black Hawk Down* (102).[68] It is also the case for Wendy, the Britney Spears look-a-like "bien plus jolie que l'original" who is actually an auburn-haired prostitute recently arrived from Eastern Europe (182).[69] The narrator not only tells their stories, but also expresses affection for them (especially Wendy for whom he falls head over heals) and concern for their welfare.

This point is especially pronounced in the extended fifteen-page portrait the narrator paints of Felipe and Sandro, the members of the paparazzi with whom he rides around on several occasions (241-256). Despite the fact that they are better off economically than Abdul and Wendy, the two Brazilian transplants remain marginalized because of their status as immigrants and because of the stigma associated with their

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[68] The narrator remarks the particularity of seeing a Somalian refugee serving as watchman for a bygone luxury hotel "où la ségrégation la plus stricte avait dû prévaloir à l'époque de sa splendeur" (102).

[69] Her story seems to echo that of Ginka Trifonova, the Bulgarian prostitute whose 1999 Paris murder shifts the focus of Rolin's project in *La Clôture* from the Boulevard Ney (between La Porte de Saint-Ouen and La Porte d'Aubervilliers) to Rue de la Clôture (36-38). The echo is especially pronounced when Wendy tells him the story of Alyssa Gomez, a young addict and prostitute killed by an ex-convict, Gilton Pitre, at The Olive motel in the Silver Lake neighborhood of LA in 2007 (186). The narrator expresses concern for Wendy's safety, and seems bent on keeping her with him in an effort to help her avoid the same fate as Ginka or Alyssa.

profession. One might think that the narrator would paint a pejorative portrait of the paparazzi because of the fact that their job consists of invading people's privacy so as to capture images that create and perpetuate the myths and rumors that are the fodder of the celebrity media. The narrator does not hide how futile their occupation is and how much of their time is spent waiting, baking in their cars, for something tabloid-worthy to happen. In fact, he mocks this aspect in one scene where a paparazzi waiting for Lindsay Lohan to leave the Santa Monica courthouse repeatedly states the obvious: "Nothing is happening!" (209). Nevertheless, the narrator takes a genuine interest in Felipe and Sandro as individuals. In fact, listening to Felipe and Sandro's life stories and aspirations is the only thing that keeps him from becoming depressed while waiting for Britney during a "ride along" one afternoon (253).

By dint of spending time with them, the narrator begins to see them not as predators taking advantage of their prey (although he does liken their work to hunting (251-253)), but rather as individuals with unique stories and aspirations, doing their best to make a living. Sandro, who eats leftovers his wife packed him for lunch, toiled for twelve years as a police officer in Porto Allegre before managing a parking garage in Beverly Hills and then finally becoming a photographer (242-243). Felipe, who has been less lucky in love and who writes letters to a Brazilian senator's daughter, aspires to become an LAPD police officer (246). What is more, the narrator realizes that their relationship with the stars – and with Britney in particular – is one not just of proximity, but also of camaraderie (244). He may not be surprised that they feel gratitude toward Britney (after all, she, by her very existence, allows them each to earn a living), but he is surprised to discover that they, the captors of the images, do not often believe the reality of the stories their pictures tell in the celebrity press (245-246). They are not

merely members of the paparazzi. In fact, they are, he claims, "exactement le contraire de ce que l'on pouvait craindre d'un paparazzi" (243). Accordingly, the narrator describes them, and in particular Sandro, using the words *calme*, *gentillesse*, and *délicatesse*, saying that they inspire *confiance* et *sympathie*. Thus, at the end of the day, the narrator admits that: "[il] s'était établit entre nous […] une relation de confiance immédiate, comme il ne peut en exister […] qu'entre parias" (253).

In this *roman à clef*, it is often difficult to distinguish which elements of these individuals' stories are factual and which elements are fictive. Rolin has admitted in an interview with ARTE that Wendy is a fictional character, but also acknowledged, in the very same interview, that real people inspire – at least in a small capacity – the characters in his works ("Jean Rolin" ARTE). While Rolin has said in another interview that the story about Felipe and Sandro is true ("Dialogues avec Jean Rolin"), certain aspects of it oddly echo an encounter with "two twenty-year-old building laborers from El Salvador" which sociologist, Mike Davis, describes in *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (qtd. in Ulin 775).[70] Regardless of their varying degrees of authenticity, characters like Abdul, Wendy, Felipe, and Sandro represent the plight of the many irregular, itinerant immigrants whom Rolin actually came across during his trip to Los Angeles. Each of them has recently immigrated to Los Angeles, fleeing a troubled past – whether it be a war-torn country, a dangerous situation, or limited

[70] On May Day 1990, when Davis asked the two El Salvadoreans what they thought about Los Angeles, one of them said that, "L.A. already was everywhere. They had watched it every night in San Salvador, in endless dubbed reruns of *I Love Lucy* and *Starsky and Hutch*, a city where everyone was young and rich and drove new cars and saw themselves on television. After ten thousand day dreams like this, he had deserted the Salvadorean Army and hitchhiked two thousand five hundred miles to Tijuana. A year later he was standing at the corner of Alvarado and Seventh Streets in the MacArthur Park district near Downtown Los Angeles, along with all the rest of yearning, hardworking Central America. No one like him was rich or drove a new car – except for the coke dealers – and the police were as mean as back home. More importantly no one like him was on television; they were all invisible" (Ulin 775-76).

economic opportunities – hoping for a better life in the United States. While their life in Los Angeles may be better than their life prior to coming to America, they remain marginalized. In telling their stories, Rolin lets the subaltern speak. By bringing the fringe spaces into the center of attention, he undoes the totalizing opposition between center and periphery (or visible and invisible) and shines a spotlight on the otherwise unnoticed people.[71] These people who come to Los Angeles for diverse reasons are part of what makes Los Angles a global city, and they must not be forgotten. No matter how poor, disenfranchised, or invisible, the marginalized inhabitants of Los Angeles – like those in Paris or Calais or the Congo – are victims of the very same system. They are people with stories that deserve to be told. Edward Welch is right to state with regard to Rolin's writing that: "[His] perspective is that not of the freely circulating agent of global capital [...] but of those who are caught up in the flows and movements beyond their control, and whose agency is diminished and determined by global forces of change and globalization" (68). Los Angeles may be drastically different than Paris, but the signs of globalization are equally evident in the fringe spaces and in the lives of those who occupy them.

Conclusion

By painting a picture of the hidden "real" side of Hollywood in contrast with Hollywood celebrity culture, *Le Ravissement de Britney Spears* asks us to consider where things are and where they are going in a global city like Los Angeles. It encourages us to take a serious look at how the "real" side of Hollywood and the "reel" side of Hollywood

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[71] See Milne 59-61, 67 for more about how Rolin undoes this totalizing opposition. See also Martin-Achard who says that, "En restituant à la banlieue les mots dont elle est privée, la littérature [périurbain] cherche à la rendre habitable, à restaurer un lien entre les hommes et le territoire qu'ils peuplent" (26).

tell two different stories. As such, it also challenges us to think about how much has changed or not changed with respect to previous depictions of Hollywood. While many native novelists have depicted Hollywood as "a national phenomenon," Jean Rolin, like the British and French chroniclers of Los Angeles before him, "measure[s] it in broader, cross-cultural terms" (Fine 22). Without a doubt, globalization has brought about considerable progress with respect to increased mobility, interaction, and communication. Nevertheless, the extreme contrasts that LA writers including Blaise Cendrars noted nearly seventy-five years ago remain. As such in Rolin's Hollywood novel, Los Angeles appears, as it has so many times before, "as both a distinct place on the American map and, more broadly, as a metaphor for the problems and dilemmas of the modern urban world" (Fine xii). Indeed, *Le Ravissement de Britney Spears* offers a clear image of the extremes in America. Similar to John Fante's *Ask the Dust* (1939), Rolin's Hollywood novel unmasks "the polished surface pretense and illusion endemic to the city […], but it also celebrates, even exalts the rough substance of life as he finds it in the rented rooms and sooty streets of old L.A" (Cooper 84).[72]

Lest one think that Rolin only has a negative view of American society, Rolin describes a scene at a bar in quasi-utopian terms:

> On peut penser tout le mal qu'on veut des Etats-Unis: mais il me semble que nulle par ailleurs, dans le monde, on ne rencontrera dans un bar autant de gens différents – des hommes et des femmes, des jeunes et des vieux, des beaux et des moches, des gringalets et des colosses, des Noirs et des Blancs, des anglophones et des hispanophones, des militaires et des civils – communiant dans un tel climat d'innocence, si difficile que puisse être la définition de cette qualité, ou de cet état d'esprit. (278)[73]

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[72] In an interview, Rolin stated explicitly that John Fante's novel influenced him ("Personal interview").

[73] This scene at the Blue Bar is similar to, yet different from a scene in *Zones* that takes place at the Café-Tabac-PMU in Sarcelles (75-78). There is equal diversity in that scene ("Le clientèle offre le spectacle d'une diversité ethnique véritablement fabuleuse"), but little mingling between groups ("les gens se regroupent par communautés, les mélanges et les interférences sont rarissimes").

This melting pot metaphor echoes the characteristic way Los Angeles writers of the 1930s concluded their novels with an elegiac nod to previous generations of immigrant and urban fiction. As Fine has said, "The collision of the American promise and its betrayal is a recurring theme in this fiction, but the novels end, typically, with some kind of accommodation to the New World, expressed as a process of Americanization, a melting-pot fusion of cultures, or a commitment to a collective struggle for a new America" (7). This ending, which prevents the crystallization of a singular discourse (though one can identify elements typical of anti-American discourse throughout the novel), is also typical of Rolin's fiction.[74] He draws attention to the superficiality and artificiality of Hollywood celebrity culture, but with a comical detachment, he also shows how enticing it is. While he raises awareness about the hidden, "real" side of Hollywood, he stops short of engaged political commentary or a call to action. He presents a picture of contemporary society as a Stendhalian mirror for all to look into and consider.

In this way, Rolin leaves his readers with many issues to consider. *Le Ravissement de Britney Spears* challenges us to consider how we conceive of center and periphery in global cities, as well as how globalization affects people and places in those cities. In keeping with the Hollywood novel's tendency to "track [...] shifts in the broader literary and popular culture, as well as the changing structure of film production" (McNamara 9), Rolin's novel also poses questions about the role of the media and the Internet in today's digitized world. One can find out almost anything using Google, Wikipedia, and specialized news sites as the narrator demonstrates. What's more, using Britney's infamous 2007 head-shaving incident as an example, the

[74] See Viart 220-21.

narrator signals the permanence of information on the Internet and suggests that the reader can visit the very same celebrity sites and read the very same articles:

> Il suffit en effet de deux ou trois clics – taper 'Britney Spears,' puis 'Tarzana,' ou 'Esther Tognozzi' – pour le revoir indéfiniment, en plusieurs versions, sous différents angles, tels que l'ont immortalisé les innombrables paparazzis […] les vidéos sont là, sur Internet […] prêtes à prendre le relais, avec une précision, une intensité dramatique, une vérité documentaire auxquelles aucun texte ne saurait prétendre. (55-56)

Videos of Britney Spears are immortalized, accessible to one and all. Yet, because everything on the Internet is mediated, it can be difficult to differentiate phony material from authentic information. The structure of Rolin's semi-fictive novel problematizes this, as well. There are clearly fictional elements and factual elements, but it is impossible to distinguish perfectly between the two.[75]

By writing a pastiche of a spy novel set in Los Angeles with the name of an American pop star in the title, Rolin also challenges the notion of what constitutes "serious" French literature. Without a doubt, it is surprising to see Britney Spear's name in the title of a French novel.[76] It is equally surprising to read in detail about Hollywood

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[75] See also Motte 135. With regard to *L'Explosion de la* durite, he claims that Rolin constructs what Pierre Bayard has termed "an 'intermediary' space where fiction and the real overlap, and which enables a productive conversation between illusion and reality."

[76] Jean Rolin is not, however, the only French author to publish a novel about a blonde American bombshell. In the same year, Simon Liberati published *Jayne Mansfield 1967* (Prix Femina), a novel in which he reconstructs her fall from fame and exhibits a macabre fascination with her death in a car accident. In 2008, a group of French writers including François Bégaudeau, Arno Bertina, and Maylis de Kerangal collaborated on *Une Chic Fille*, a novel about Anna Nicole Smith. In 2006, Michel Schneider published *Marilyn Monroe, dernières séances* (Prix Interallié). Two more novels, which appeared in 2013, are François Saintonge's *Dolfi et Marilyn* and Grégoire Delacourt's *La première chose qu'on regarde*, about Marilyn Monroe and Scarlett Johannson, respectively. See Cloonan 65 and 76. Blonde bombshells have not been the only starlets of interest. In 2014, Nelly Kaprièlian released her first novel, *Le Manteau de Greta Garbo*, in which the narrator reflects on the Hollywood starlet, her own life, and the role clothes play in the creation and projection – or masking – of one's identity. Other French writers in recent history who have written about Los Angeles include Éric Laurrent and Frank Smith. Laurrent's translated short story, "American Diary," which describes the narrator's observations of several US cities (Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Salt Lake City) appeared in *Best European Fiction 2011*. Laurrent had previously published, *Ne pas toucher* (2002), a novel set primarily in a luxury hotel off of Mulholland Drive in the Hollywood Hills, overlooking Malibu, Santa

celebrity gossip. If one were not familiar with Jean Rolin's *oeuvre*, one might not expect it to be a "serious" work of literature. But Rolin audaciously uses these American aspects to play with notions of similarity and difference between French and American cities, between center and periphery, and between high and low culture. *Le Ravissement de Britney Spears* is a masterfully crafted story built on incongruities. It may be ludic and lighthearted, but it is "serious" literature. Rolin's work demonstrates how, since the return of history, the subject, and storytelling in the post-1980 French novel, "Authors of fiction with serious intellectual and aesthetic ambitions no longer inevitably set themselves apart from the interests of a broad reading public," and furthermore, how "this return to storytelling is part of French literature's continuing reflection on its own role and function" (Davis and Fallaize 15). Furthermore, Rolin's Hollywood novel is what Warren Motte terms "a 'critical novel,'" that is, "one where a metaliterary voice makes itself heard [...] one which comments pungently upon the limits and the possibilities of the novel itself as an evolving cultural form, through its own practice" (133) and one in which there is a "victory of style over substance" (138).

In *Le Ravissement de Britney Spears*, Rolin presents an anecdote about how, in 1959, Mark Rothko withdrew his paintings from the newly opened Four Seasons restaurant at the Seagram building in New York upon realizing that "quiconque mange ce genre de nourriture, et pour un tel prix, ne regardera jamais mes peintures" and that, as a consequence, his art would not have the power to change their lives (118-119). Whether or not one believes that art can change the world, Rolin's work demonstrates that novels are worth regarding. Throughout this Hollywood novel, although he spends so much time focused on visual media, Rolin subtly privileges the novel. After reading a

Monica, and the city of Los Angeles. In 2009, radio producer and writer, Frank Smith, published *Dans Los Angeles*, a poetic account of the narrator's journey around the city.

passage from Michel Schneider's *Marilyn, dernières séances* (a 2006 novel about Marilyn Monroe which I have quoted in the epigraph to this chapter) the narrator says, "Pas mal, non?" to which Wendy replies, "Oui […] La littérature, c'est tout de même autre chose que cette boule blanche qui s'allume lorsque l'artiste est en ville" (189).[77] If, "The Hollywood novel's depictions of the culture of the industry frequently serve as vehicles for writers' anxieties about a medium that threatens to supplant literary narrative" (McNamara 9), in Rolin's novel, the depictions of the Hollywood culture industry make clear that, as long as writers like Rolin are around, literature will always have the final word.

It is no accident that, in addition to numerous implicit intertexts with previous generations of Los Angeles novels,[78] Rolin includes explicit references to *chefs-d'œuvre* of the 20th Century literature. Before one even opens the book, there is the obvious titular intertext with Marguerite Duras' *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* (1964). Moreover, Rolin makes direct allusions to other literary works like *Albertine disparue* (1925), the sixth volume of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, and Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (1947), thereby anchoring his own work in a rich, global literary history. After all, Duras', Proust's, and Lowry's works are not just any intertexts. Each of them appeared on *Le Monde*'s 1999 list, "Les Cent Livres du Siècle," as numbers 71, 2, and 99, respectively.[79] By inviting comparison with several of the best novels of the 20th

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[77] The "boule blanche" is a piece of artwork, which the narrator and Wendy found risible, while attending an exhibition at the Standard Hotel (184-85).

[78] These implicit intertexts certainly include John Fante's *Ask the Dust*, as I have mentioned, and also Norman Mailer's *The Deer Park* ("Personal Interview"). They may also include F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon* (1941), Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), and Charles Bukowski's *Hollywood* (1989).

[79] The filmic intertexts, Orson Welles' *Touch of Evil* and David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive*, also figure on *Cahier du Cinéma*'s and *Le Figaro*'s lists of the top 100 films.

Century, Rolin is attempting performatively to write *Le Ravissement de Britney* into literary history for the 21st Century.

In the end, for Rolin, all is pretext for literary creation. Every place and every person (French or American, rich or poor, visible or invisible) has a story that begs to be told – and read. Thus, in addition to his novels about France, Africa, and the Middle East, Rolin has added a *roman américain* to his repertoire. He has taken on a writing project that explores and engages with an American city and culture industry, without losing his unique style and Frenchness. In an age of celebrity where stars are famous for being famous and "where the literary celebrity is indeed subject to the same systemic structures as any other kind, competing for space in the newspapers, television chat shows and so on" (Turner 18), Jean Rolin has created a literary masterpiece that can only add to his own "literary celebrity."

What is an "American" genre? Christine Montalbetti's Rewrites of the Western and the Road Story

"I don't know how much the Western film means to Europe; but to this country it means the very essence of national life. I am referring now to the late frontier – the frontier of the range and the mining camp, with all its youthful follies and heartbreaks and braveries that we know and love best. It is but a generation or so since virtually all this country was frontier. Consequently its spirit is bound up in American citizenship."
William S. Hart, 1916

"Allons! whoever you are come travel with me!"
Walt Whitman, "Song of the Open Road," 1856

For Christine Montalbetti, America is a land of literary inspiration.[1] Several of her recent novels reveal a fascination with the *paysage américain* and a desire to re-view and reinvent American genres as she sees them. In 2005, Montalbetti tried her hand at the Western, the putative "most cinematographic genre" (Godard 117) which, according to William S. Hart, represents "the very essence of national life" in the United States (Fenin and Everson 1). She published a novel provocatively entitled, *Western*. It is the story, divided into four parts – "Sous l'auvent," "Chez Dirk et Ted Lange," "La sieste," and "Le duel" – of a day in the life of a cowboy. While the title would encourage one to assign the novel to the eponymous genre, it quickly becomes apparent that this Western is anything but traditional. Despite the fact that the paratext hints at the protagonist's "histoire secrète" and intimates that his desired reparation might soon occur, very little happens. Certainly, Montalbetti includes glimpses of the characteristic elements of the Western, but the action and adventure is conspicuously all but absent. In 2009, four years after *Western* hit bookshelves, Christine Montalbetti published another rewrite of an American genre entitled *Journée américaine*. The novel tells the story of Donovan, a young man who sets out on a road trip from Oklahoma to Colorado to visit his college

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[1] See Montalbetti *En écrivant Journée américaine* 26-27 and "L'Espace" 127.

friend, Tom Lee. Based on the title and the brief synopsis on the back cover, the reader expects a classic American-style road novel. After all, the synopsis reads as follows: "Les conditions ont l'air optimales pour la conduite. Ciel clair, route dégagée, confort de suspension du break, autoradio avec commande au volant: on est paré. Attachez vos ceintures, il s'agit d'arriver au ranch avant la nuit." Right away, one remarks that the most essential elements of the American road story are present: the open road, the open sky, a car, and the potential for a soaring musical soundtrack. Given the command, "Attachez vos ceintures," the reader anticipates that she will soon be swept up in a fast-paced American road novel, full of action, adventure, and excitement – though surely, as is always the case, there will be detours and diversions along the way, preventing the protagonist's desired arrival before nightfall. In reality, this synopsis is misleading. In *Journée américaine*, just as in *Western*, Montalbetti experiments with generic conventions and narrative structure, and in a work of *bricolage*, transforms a classically American genre with her penchant for digression and frequent use of metalepsis.

Warren Motte and Philippe Brand have argued in their respective chapters on *Western* and *Journée américaine* that Montalbetti challenges the generic status quo and exercises a dilatory style in order to encourage people to think about how stories are told, and novels written.[2] While they perform thoughtful readings of the texts and provide convincing evidence to support successfully their claims by referring to conventions of the novel and techniques of narrative theory, they do not directly treat the history and iconography of the Western and the road story, genres which have known many iterations and variations.[3] Therefore, I feel the need to furnish more

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[2] See Motte *Fiction Now* 177-206 and Brand "Moving Targets" 106-36.

[3] Motte does mention that *Western* "owes less, perhaps, to Bret Harte, Zane Grey, and Louis L'Amour than it does to John Ford, Howard Hawks, and Sergio Leone" (177), but he goes no further in that

context about these genres because the fact that Christine Montalbetti, a contemporary French writer, is rewriting these typically "American" genres is, I believe, a matter of critical importance. As Mikhail Bakhtin once wrote in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, "The more complete and concrete our knowledge of an artist's *generic contacts*, the deeper can we penetrate the peculiar features of his generic form and the more correctly can we understand the interrelationship, within it, of tradition and innovation" (157). After all, "A genre lives in the present, but always *remembers* its past, its beginning" (Bakhtin 106). In Montalbetti's *romans américains*, the presence of conventions and techniques that signal the "genre memories" of the Western and the road story, makes her innovatively unconventional treatment of these genres paradoxically all the more noticeable.[4] On a fundamental level, her works raise issues of transcultural – and in this case, transatlantic – literary borrowing and showcase the resulting hybridity of postmodern cultural forms. What's more, with frequent references to vision and changing perspectives, Montalbetti reminds us that she is not merely rewriting "American" genres, but that she is also transposing genres that she deems to be predominantly cinematic.[5] In creating literary pastiches of film genres, she

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direction. Brand references Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* and mentions several traditional elements of road stories, but only briefly.

[4] Montalbetti actually refers to *Journée américaine* as a "roman américain" in *En écrivant Journée américaine* 36 and again to the fact that she set out with a desire to write a "roman américain contemporain" in "L'Espace" 127. In both cases, she uses this term in reference to the novel's American setting. My definition of the *roman américain* includes – but is not limited to – this sense of geographic setting, as well as the idea that a *roman américain* re-presents American people, places, and culture, the Franco-American relationship, and American genres and topoi as see through the eyes of French writers. I am employing the term "genre memory" as Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson use it to summarize Bakhtin's theory about the way a genre "remembers" (295-97).

[5] There were, of course, Western novels, but for Montalbetti, the genre is cinematic, as she explains in "From Western to Novel": "Western films are often based on an original story, a novel or novella. But what really remains of the Western, in our imaginations, being French, are not the stories themselves (even if some of them were once translated into French, they aren't available anymore, and who among us can claim to have read them?) but the cinematic version of these fables. In this sense, the Western is, or has become, in our perception of it, a film genre and nothing else" (111). As for the

challenges us not just to read differently, as Motte says, but also to look at categories of literature – and the world – differently. Ultimately, Montalbetti's *romans américains* cleverly call into question the process by which genres become codified, and especially, the idea that, in today's world, a genre can be termed quintessentially American, French, or otherwise. In this chapter, I will look first to the Western and then to the road story as I examine how Montalbetti references "critical" European cinema of the 1960s – specifically that of Sergio Leone and Jean-Luc Godard – as she adapts two classically American cinematographic genres into contemporary French "critical" novels.[6]

The Western and Montalbetti's "Slowdown" in the West

As I have mentioned, the Western has been said to represent, as Western star William S. Hart once stated in 1916, "the very essence of national life" in America (Fenin and Everson 1).[7] Indeed, the Western was the source of much American mythology as it relates to the founding of the nation and the Frontier Days of the westward expansion of America from the Revolutionary Period throughout the 19th Century.[8] From *Tumbleweeds* (1925) to *Stagecoach* (1939), *Red River* (1948) to *High Noon* (1952), *Shane* (1953) to *The Searchers* (1956), and *True Grit* (1969) to *The Wild Bunch* (1969), Westerns "treat characters as types and narrative as revolving around a small number of essential plots, offering various perspectives on fundamental issues faced by any

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road story, other than Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, she clearly had its filmic renditions in mind, as we will see. In general, Montalbetti has said how images – whether cinematic or painted – and "pleasures of the eye" influence her imagination and thus her writing ("From Western to Novel" 104).

[6] By "critical cinema" I am referring especially to the works of filmmakers associated with the *Nouvelle Vague* or contemporary European schools. The fact that these filmmakers were also film critics is, of course, quite evident in their films. I am using the term "critical novel" as Motte does in *Fiction Now*. He says: "each of these novels is conceived in a critical perspective, and each invites the reader, either openly or more subtly, to engage with it in a critical fashion" (11). Dominique Viart, has written about a similar concept, "le roman déconcertant" or "le roman critique" in *La littérature française au présent* (12-13).

[7] See also McClain 52.

[8] See Fenin and Everson 6-7.

society, especially the problem of law and political authority" (Pippin 224).[9] In the eyes of French film critic, André Bazin, the Western would have been limited to a status as a "minor literature" (148) and a national audience had it not been "freed from the bonds of language" and adapted to the silver screen (142). After all, Bazin believed, the Western – "the only genre whose origins are almost identical with those of cinema itself" (140) – possesses "a secret that somehow identifies it with the essence of cinema" (141).[10] This secret, the Western's mythic or epic quality, is what allowed the genre to have "world-wide appeal" (Bazin 141).[11]

Christine Montalbetti's 2005 rendition of the Western challenges both the cinematic nature of the genre and its intrinsic American essence, as she rewrites it. Certainly, she includes many of the characteristic elements of the Western. First of all, one immediately recognizes the setting: Transition City, a small, fictional frontier town in the American Old West with an iconic Main Street surrounded by the open range and Rocky Mountains. The reference in a flashback to the moment when the protagonist saw a locomotive – "*the iron horse, as they called it*" (159) – for the first time and then

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[9] Pippin lists the typical plots as: (i) the gunfighter trying to find a way to quit, which is in tension with the town's need for his violent skills, or the general travails of ex-gunfighters who have simply become irrelevant; (ii) the empire-ranch story, where a kind of feudal lord holds power threated by the coming of civilization and the dissolution of the next generation; (iii) episodes in the Indian wars, especially journeys across hostile territory; (iv) captivity narratives; (v) free-range ranchers trying to stop homesteaders and farmers from putting up fences and establishing claims to land; (vi) revenge quests; and (vii) wagon train movies, colonizers out to stake claims further west" (224).

[10] The first Western film, *The Great Train Robbery*, was made in 1903. Bazin was not alone in finding a special connection between cinema and the Western. In *Godard on Godard*, a collection of his writings for *Cahiers du cinéma*, Godard also called the Western, "the most cinematographic genre in cinema, if I may so put it" (117). In one of the first book-length studies on the genre, Fenin and Everson say that the cinematic renditions of the Western stand as "the purest and most original genre of the American cinema" (Fenin and Everson 45).

[11] According to Bazin, the ethics of the epic were at the source of the Western as evinced by "the superhuman level of its heroes and the legendary magnitude of their feats of valor" (147). Westerns had turned the Civil War into "the Trojan War of the most modern of epics. The migration to the west is our Odyssey" (148). See Fenin and Everson who describe how the Western "crossed the frontiers of nations, becoming truly international in spirit" (329).

traveled across the country on it situates the novel in the latter half of the 19th century, in keeping with custom.[12] As for the drifting cowboy protagonist, he spends the story time waiting, not unlike Gary Cooper's conflicted character in *High Noon*, for his chance to carry out his personal duty and seek reparation, though the motivation for this reparation remains unknown to the reader.[13] Indeed, from the moment one reads the paratext, one knows to expect a quest for amends, a quest which is in keeping with the traditional Manichean struggle between Good and Evil.[14] By the protagonist's side, the good side, stand his friends Dirk and Ted Lange, as well as the two minor, but compulsory female characters, Mary and Georgina Littlejohn.[15] Opposite him, on the evil side, stands Jack King, a ruthless gunslinger and the perpetrator of the protagonist's suppressed traumatic childhood experience. Other conventional elements surface in the stories Ted Lange tells of the previous night's brawl in the local saloon (because, in the narrator's words, "la bagarre, bon, vous savez ce que c'est" (69)) and of his early morning hunt on galloping horse for a "bovidé prodigue" (82). Eventually, after much discursive delay, the obligatory duel occurs. Montalbetti even refers frequently to cinematic language and techniques, expressly employing terms including, but not limited to: *champs* and *contrechamps*, *panoramas* and *travellings*, *surimpressions* and *clairs-obscurs*, *ralentis* and *arrêt sur images*, *version originales* and *versions traduites*. Walls and minds become *écrans* on which the protagonist projects his thoughts. In one scene, the narrator relates how, "[notre homme] *coupe court* à son autoportait [dans le

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[12] Most Westerns are situated between the Civil War and the turn of the century. In *Journée américaine*, she refers again to this moment in history, "la grande histoire des voies ferrées et de l'Ouest" (57).

[13] Montalbetti insists on the fact that it is reparation and not vengeance. See "From Western to Novel" 108.

[14] See Bazin 145.

[15] See Bazin 145 and Fenin and Everson 40-41 for discussions of the role of the woman in Westerns.

miroir] et sort de sa chambre" (182, my emphasis); and in the next, how, "Il voit, *en trois plans fulgurants* sa sortie illico du saloon, le bond qu'il fera pour enfourcher son cheval et la manière dont au galop il franchira la limite proche de la ville" (198, my emphasis). By using such terminology and techniques, Montalbetti feigns adherence to the generic conventions, encouraging the reader to view the story on her own mental movie screen. These characteristic – or, to borrow Bakhtin's terms, "archaic" – elements exemplify the Western's "genre memory."[16] Yet, they are not the stars of Montalbetti's show. In reality, their presence makes the novel's uncharacteristic elements, especially Montalbetti's slow-motion style, paradoxically, all the more noticeable. Instead of fulfilling the customary role of the hero, the horse, the fights, and the immense stretches of prairie – which, according to Bazin, is to serve as signs or symbols of the myth (142) – these elements in Montalbetti's story point to the myth's absence.

Traditionally, Westerns are stories of grandeur and heroism, action and adventure. In the section, "Plot versus Action?," of Fenin and Everson's 1962 study of the genre, they reiterate that, "an effective, interdependent, and mutually beneficial relationship between plot and action is a prime requirement for successful – that is, honest – Westerns" (44).[17] In Montalbetti's *Western*, all of the characteristic elements are present, but the action is absent. After all, the duel does not occur until the final page, "and by that time," as Motte has said, "it's almost a footnote" (*Fiction Now* 177). From the moment of the cowboy's slow awakening with the sunrise on the porch of the

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[16] Bakhtin explains that, "Always preserved in a genre are underlying elements of the *archaic*. True, these archaic elements are preserved in it only thanks to their constant *renewal*, which is to say, their contemporization" (106).

[17] In their view, the new strain of psychological Westerns in the 1950s were commendable in that they moved away from worn-out clichés, but overall, the more complex plots made them too slow. See also 42-44 and 327. William Wellman's *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943) is an early, albeit more successful, example of this trend.

local inn, to the leisurely lunch and conversation at his friends Dirk and Ted Lange's ranch, to the restless thoughts which disturb him during his afternoon siesta, very little happens. The narrator periodically reminds us that something is preoccupying the cowboy's thoughts – "ce qui de toute façon ne devait pas manquer d'arriver [...] ce dont chaque jour le rapprochait mathématiquement de l'avènement" (121) – but she repeatedly refuses to tell us what.[18] She defers that fundamental information, and in so doing, she activates Roland Barthes hermeneutic code, "playing strongly on her reader's semiotic desire, deferring information she herself suggests as crucial, frustrating – but by the same gesture honing – our desire to *know*" (Motte 179). She does not even divulge the cowboy's name. After beginning the novel by saying, "Appelons-le comme on voudra, ce trentenaire à la chemise carrelée" (9), Montalbetti's narrator then proceeds to refer to him interchangeably as "notre homme" and "notre trentenaire." She concedes that the cowboy's past is "une histoire oh là là mouvementée" (118) and "un récit d'aventures" (149), and continually suggests that the action will commence (27, 199), but, page after page, it does not. Instead, Montalbetti fills the narrative space with digressions about ants (12-17), her own bad memories (140-43), and stories about the life cycle of a drop of water (171-80), as well as intricately detailed descriptions of the physiological processes required for rocking in a rocking chair (10-11), standing up (31), digesting (89), and singing (94).[19] The narrator even defers secondary information. For example, when the cowboy joins Dirk and Ted for lunch at their ranch, she describes how the characters engage in conversation *au style direct* (47), but she does not relate it *directly* to us. In fact, it is not until over fifteen pages later that we

[18] See also 27, 30, 101, 118, and 145. See Motte's chapter on *Western* in *Fiction Now* for an extended discussion of these instances of foreshadowing (194-96).

[19] These physiological processes are precisely the types of actions which are not traditionally narrated. See Prince's chapter on "The Disnarrated" in *Narrative as Theme* 28.

learn the conversation was about a fight in the saloon the previous night (63). In the interim, she pauses to detail the heroic journey of a word coming out of our cowboy's mouth, a word she personifies as a lonely cowboy resembling John Wayne's character in *The Searchers*.

Counter-intuitively, it is in such digressions that we see the displaced and reframed action elements of the conventional Western most clearly. This is true not only of the lonesome expedition of the John Wayne-esque word. The ants on an arduous *expédition*, traversing the wooden rung of the protagonist's rocking chair are like miniature pioneers on the Oregon trail (12-17, 22-23). A piece of brown paper tumbling down Main Street alongside dried thistles and tumbleweeds ends up looking like the cowboy on the losing end of a fierce gun battle: "la surface ensablée, piquetée d'épines de chardons sauvages, notre papier brun, épuisé de sa fugue, et qui avait échoué là, à bout de forces" (36). As the protagonist wrestles with his personal duty and desire to seek amends, his opposing thoughts shoot arrows at one another and "disputent le terrain de son esprit" (121, 195). At sunrise, and again at sunset, light and darkness engage in epic battles (19-21, 201-05). At such moments, the narrator, knowing that the reader must be perplexed by the idiosyncrasy of this Western (wherein the action takes place in the digressions, and the description takes place in the diegesis), tells us to relax, slow down, and savor the moment; she has everything under control:

> on se laisse un peu aller [...] vous glissez là, abandonnant vos soucis [...] tout viendra en temps et en heure, laissez-vous porter [...] laissez-vous faire, quittez cette raideur [...] c'est un temps pour vous, un moment pour vous, que personne ne doit venir vous ôter [...] c'est votre heure de loisir, je prends les choses en main [...] je m'occupe de tout [...] je m'assure, c'est ma tâche, qu'il vous mènera là où il faut. (20-21)

Despite her assurance, it is initially difficult to relax when one sees the conventions of the Western genre so consistently thwarted.

Then, just as the reader begins to become accustomed to the unhurried narrative pace, relishing the lengthy descriptions of the townspeople that we (the protagonist, the narrator, and the reader) pass while heading down Main Street, the narrator tells us to quit dawdling and quicken our pace: "Mais vous ne disposez pas d'un tel loisir, il vous faut emboîter le pas à notre trentenaire, vite, ne pas le perdre de vue […] Vite […] hâtons-nous, contentons-nous je vous prie de ce croquis" (36). Whereas, before, the narrator told us to slow down and appreciate her digressions, now she tells us to hurry up, so as not to miss the main story. Contradictory as her directions are, they make the reader more aware of the narrative decisions that have been made and more attentive to how one might interpret those decisions. Montalbetti aims to show us that "digression itself – or what could look like it – has a dramatic function. Instead of distracting from the principal action, digression provides a new stratum, a depth: it gives the main storyline a meaning" ("From Western" 108). After all, given that the protagonist passes the story time waiting for something to happen, the main narrative thread "is an impossible subject for a story: a nonnarrative situation par excellence" ("From Western" 107).[20] Motte is right to say that "*Western* can be read as a showdown between story and discourse" (*Fiction Now* 198) and that:

> *Western* vexes two models of the novel one against another – two models of writing, certainly, but also two models of reading. On the one hand, there is the novel dominated by plot, event, logical causality, and linear narration. On the other hand, there is the novel that takes its time, that loiters, that digresses, that comments upon this, then that. For lack of a better term, one might call that latter form the 'critical novel.' (Motte 205)

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[20] See Prince 58-61 and 29 for respective definitions of narrative and event/existent which concisely elucidate the essential elements of a narrative situation.

Western, a horse of a different color, follows, without a doubt, this second mode of reading and writing. It is a "critical novel" that comments on and challenges the genre from which it got its name.

Of course, Montalbetti is not the first artist to challenge the generic status quo of the Western. From the mid-1960s to the early-1970s, Italian filmmakers presented their renderings and reinterpretations of the Western in an attempt to satisfy the continued demand of Italian filmgoers in the face of the dwindling numbers of Hollywood Westerns.[21] Sergio Leone, while not the first Italian to make a Spaghetti Western, was undoubtedly the most influential. In his eyes, by the late-1950s/early-1960s, American Westerns had lost the magic, mythic quality that had enthralled him as a young boy growing up in a Roman suburb and become, instead, "too formulaic, talky, and clichéd" (Frayling 26). Thus, he aimed to make Westerns that were both celebrations and critiques of their American counterparts. Although the American Western "has virtually no use for the close-up, even for the medium shot,[22] preferring by contrast the traveling shot and the pan which refuse to be limited by the frameline and which restore to space its fullness" (Bazin 147), Sergio Leone's Westerns are full of extreme close-ups and unsettlingly empty landscapes (Frayling 17 and 27). In his "Italianization" of the Western, as Italian writer, Alberto Moravia, called it, the darker humor, irony, and surprising reversals creates a carnivalesque atmosphere (Frayling 19, 27).[23] Though Leone's Westerns are "as realistic as possible" with an "emphasis on the unpredictable," there is also gritty violence and an exaggeration of spectacle to hold the audience's attention (Frayling 26). He evacuates the traditional moral certainty of the Hollywood

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[21] See Frayling 171: "Hollywood Westerns were in steady decline, from 150, or 34 percent of all North American releases, in 1950, to 11, or 9 percent of all North American releases, in 1963."
[22] The medium shot is also called – ironically enough in this context – the American shot.
[23] According to Clint Eastwood, Leone "opera-cized" the horse opera (Frayling 101).

Westerns.[24] This is most evident, perhaps, in the way the protagonist of *A Fistful of Dollars* engages in violence not in response to a moral imperative, but rather, in order to exploit an unjust situation. Critics initially excoriated Leone's Westerns and labeled them as "violent, noisy, naïve, pretentious, and astonishingly popular" (Frayling 195; cf. McClain 52-53, 56). In fact, the term Spaghetti Westerns, though now commonly and objectively used, was originally a pejorative designation. This was due in large part to the fact that Leone's films "'lacked the true spirit of the Western,' which, of course, was their purpose" (Frayling 19). Leone once explained that he aimed "to create the impression that the audience was watching a film they'd seen somewhere before, only to jolt them with the realization that they'd never seen the story told in *quite* this way before. There was the mix of recognition and surprise, visual clichés and trompe l'oeil" (Frayling 33). Consequently, Leone's Westerns are films about films, or "cinema cinema," as he liked to call them (Frayling 17).[25] In this way, Leone's work contributed to "a European cinematic 'moment' of the late 1960s, when ciné-literate filmmakers evolved a form of 'critical cinema' […] that made reference to the work of Hollywood directors about whom they had written" (Frayling 34).

If Leone's films were considered "critical cinema," then Montalbetti's 2005 novel is doubly critical. She references both American and Italian Westerns as she meditates on the differences between the American and European interpretations of the genre. In

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[24] See Frayling, Fisher, Forshaw, and McClain.

[25] See also Frayling 20, 34, 192. While Leone "quoted" previous Westerns in his Man With No Name Trilogy, he employed the technique even more frequently in *Once Upon a Time in the West*. Because of Leone's penchant for citation, Jean Baudrillard even called him "the first postmodernist film director"(Frayling 17). Following Leone's work, "*all* important American Westerns made after the mid-1960s were at some level parodies of the traditional Western and its old certainties" (Frayling 190). Examples of this would be: *True Grit, The Wild Bunch, and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (all made in 1969), as well as more recent revisionary westerns by Clint Eastwood – *Unforgiven* (1992) – and Kevin Costner – *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and *Open Range* (2003).

the novel, through the characterization of the Lange brothers, Montalbetti coyly hints at this formal and thematic consideration of the distinctions between European and American Westerns. Even though Dirk and Ted are twins, their drastically dissimilar personalities make it easy to differentiate between them (44). Ted is not only more active – "le moins sédentaire de nos deux vachers" (41) – but also more talkative. Dirk, by contrast, is *taiseux*, *froissé*, and *las* (42). When Ted sits straight, upright, and square in his chair, the ideogram that his body forms:

> […] n'est pas opaque mais *parfaitement lisible*, qu'elle déplie un petit énoncé *facilement traduisible*, au sujet de la manière d'emplir le temps et l'espace, une manière *désinvolte et heureuse*, exactement inscrite dans le décor, y trouvant sa place, comme si tout avait été façonné pour lui […] vous proposant *un modèle tranquille, accueillant* […] qui ne vous écrase pas, qui vous invite juste à faire de même, qui vous attire vers soi […]. (43, my emphasis)

In other words, Ted's posture replicates the conformism, straightforwardness, and mythic simplicity of American Westerns. On the other hand, the way Dirk, with his "tempérament on va dire secret" (42), sits in his chair is altogether different. He is "entremêlé sur sa chaise plutôt qu'assis, noué *comme un spaghetti* qui se serait emberlificoté dans sa cuisson" (42, my emphasis). Dirk's tangled up, knotted carriage, and the way he appears to be interwoven with the chair reflects the morally ambiguous entanglements and citational qualities of Italian Spaghetti Westerns. Even the way the twins smile distinguishes them. While Ted's smile is muscular and frank (44), Dirk's is "un pauvre sourire tordu, minimal, métonymique même, une allusion au fait de sourire, et dont il faut bien se contenter" (44-45). From their mannerisms, to their poses as they sit in a chair, to their dissimilar smiles, it is clear that they represent the differences between American Westerns and European Westerns. When the narrator states several times that Dirk is the one "pour qui vous éprouvez un sentiment d'amitié" (42), she is

telling us that, if we have to choose between the American and the European Western, we should choose the latter. That Montalbetti's narrator demonstrates a marked preference for European Westerns should not come as a surprise, given that her own authorial voice is comparable to Leone's directorial flair.[26]

Stylistically, Montalbetti's novel does share definite similarities with Leone's films, especially *Once Upon a Time in the West*, which is his slowest and most elaborate Western.[27] Throughout *Western*, Montalbetti's periphrastic language echoes Leone's rhetorical use of the camera.[28] Many of the protracted scenes in *Western*, in particular the lunch at the ranch, recall Leone's deliberately extended scenes in which action is unhurried and dialogue is sparse. Montalbetti's lengthy digressions on minutiae replicate the extreme close-ups that punctuate Leone's films in a process she terms *l'affabulation du détail*, or "cette manière, par exemple, de m'attacher à un tout petit élément du décor et de lui inventer une histoire, des pensées parfois, des velléités, qu'il s'agisse d'un objet […], d'un insecte… ou encore, dans cette même propension à la macroscopie, de travailler sur une émotion qui traverse le personnage et de la personnifier" (Lungo 281). In the final scene, she most explicitly references Leone's proclivity for shots in which close-ups of the characters' eyes fill the frame, especially during moments of climatic action. As Montalbetti's protagonist and his rival prepare to duel, the narrator focuses the reader's attention on their faces:

> Champ: Jack King, *le visage* entièrement noirci par le contre-jour, mais c'est bien là Jack King.

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[26] Montalbetti has also said that, because her last name is Italian, "In this sense, trying my hand at the Western, I could only ever have made a Spaghetti Western. This is the one thing I was conscious of relatively early in the writing of the novel […] this relationship also allowed me to introduce the question of ancestry into my choice of genre, the Spaghetti Western" ("From Western" 109-10).

[27] Montalbetti herself has commented on traits she feels her writing shares with Sergio Leone's films. See Montalbetti "From Western to Novel," Brand 133-34, and Lungo 280-81.

[28] See Frayling 178.

> Contrechamp: dans un dernier et lent sursaut, le ciel qui achève de rougeoyer laisse filtrer un faisceau de lumière ambrée, flavescente, qui vient éclairer de face *le visage* de notre trentenaire. (210, my emphasis)

Aided by the fact that there is a dearth of description of the protagonists' physical traits in the novel, one easily envisages the hero as Clint Eastwood or Charles Bronson facing off against his rival.

Besides the fact that Montalbetti's dilatory digression about ants alludes to Leone's extended scenes and startling close-ups, it also recalls the fact that Leone's Westerns were dirtier – and, in that way, more realistic – than their immaculate American counterparts. One thinks for example of the close-up of the fly that lands on the cheek of Jack Elam's character, Snaky, in the opening scene of *Once Upon a Time in the West*, a scene which is an undeniable intertext with the scene in *High Noon* where the three villains wait on the station's covered porch for the train's midday arrival.[29] The fact that Montalbetti's narrator describes the ants' expedition while the protagonist somnolently sits under the inn's porch awning further completes this visual citation. In fact, citation builds upon citation in *Western*, as Montalbetti repeatedly refers to her novel's American and Italian predecessors. During the section "Chez Dirk et Ted Lange," the narrator, usually so loquacious, refuses to narrate an interaction between Dirk and Mary as they prepare coffee in the kitchen, an interaction which leaves Dirk "tout rêveur" (90). She simply says, "on ne sait pas trop ce qui se passe exactement dans la maison, au cours de cette scène facultative […] dans l'intérieur sombre […] Je vous laisse fignoler la chose. […] Que s'est-il exactement passé dans la cuisine?" (90). This disnarrated moment subtly references the scene early in *The Searchers* that hints at the illicit love between Ethan and his sister-in-law, Martha, as they share a poignant

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[29] Peckinpah also includes close-ups of insects, specifically of scorpions in the opening scene of *The Wild Bunch*.

moment before parting ways, both oblivious to the presence of Rev. Captain Samuel Clayton, who looks on as he finishes his coffee. Even Montalbetti's insistence on the muted lighting of the kitchen channels a Fordian use of light and shadow. Without a doubt, Montalbetti's oblique and overt references to other Westerns are comparable to Leone's tendency to cite and comment upon Hollywood Westerns as he meditates on the mythology of the Western.[30]

In addition, throughout *Western*, Montalbetti translates Leone's use of freeze frame from the screen to the page with her use of narrative pause.[31] This is most manifest in an "*arrêt sur image* qui n'a duré que quelques secondes" (164, my emphasis) that suspends the stagecoach driver's motion as he removes his hat and reaches to open the passenger door. Montalbetti contemplates whether or not to prolong the pause in order to tell the stagecoach driver's story, but, ultimately, decides against it: "je ne sais s'il serait très judicieux qu'on l'immobilise […] au vu de la relative urgence de la situation" (164). In that frozen, intertextual moment, the reader visualizes the scene that introduces the three title characters of Leone's *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, as well as the scene that he directed for Tonino Valerrii's *My Name is Nobody* in which Jack Beauregard faces down 150 bandits of The Wild Bunch.[32] Speaking of the stagecoach, Montalbetti's onomatopoeic description of its clamorous arrival references the importance of amplified sound effects and of the role of Ennio Morricone's distinctive

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[30] See Frayling 31-33.

[31] According to Gerald Prince, "When some part of the narrative text or some discourse time corresponds to no elapsing of story time, pause obtains (and the narrative can be said to come to a stop). A pause can be occasioned by a description or by a narrator's commentarial excursuses" (*Dictionary* 71). See Motte, *Fiction Now* 189-90 for a discussion of the way Montalbetti's use of narrative pause, as defined by Genette and again by Prince, challenges us to "think about novels anew."

[32] One might also picture the series of freeze frames during the opening credits of Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*. Peckinpah's revisionist Westerns were no doubt influenced by Leone's style.

musical scores in Leone's films. The axle ("à la basse, je dirais *la do la do ré la do*"), the wheel rims ("dans les aigus, *si mi si fa si fa mi*"), the passenger compartment ("en mode mineur, autour de *fa fa ré fa fa ré*, avec les dièses attenants"), and baggage ("avec l'énergie de croches pointées, *do mi do mi fa ré sol*") all play their parts in an exaggerated, polyphonic symphony of sounds (163).[33]

Thematically, Montalbetti's choice to withhold the hero's identity until the final pages recalls Leone's films, as well. For one, the fact that the protagonist of *Western* remains nameless until the penultimate page, when we learn that his name is Christopher Whitefield, is a gesture toward the fact that Leone's Dollars trilogy (*A Fistful of Dollars*, *For a Few Dollars More*, and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*) was marketed in the United States as the "Man with No Name" Trilogy (McClain 55). Christopher Whitefield may dress like a cowboy in an American Western (with his "chemise carrelée"), but, in view of his enigmatic background and the mystery shrouding his identity, he resembles much more closely Clint Eastwood's poncho-clad character in Leone's films. Secondly, the fact that we do not learn the motivation for the protagonist's desired reparation until a tardy flashback recalls the manner in which Leone reveals Charles Bronson's nameless character's own reason for retribution at the bitter end of the epic *Once Upon a Time in the West*. Even once the reason for retribution is revealed, Harmonica (as Bronson's character is called for lack of a name), does not disclose his identity to his rival, Frank (Henry Fonda), until *after* he shoots him during their duel.

Despite all of these similarities with Leone's works, *Western* truly represents Montalbetti's own unique take on the Western. The digressive, discourse-oriented style

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[33] See also the onomatopoeia when Ted prepares to play a song after lunch (91).

is certainly in keeping with her other novels.[34] Even Leone's films are not stingy with action, violent shootouts, and gritty cynicism. Just as Leone took "some of the conventions, devices, and settings of the American Western film and a series of references to individual Westerns […] to tell [*his*] version of the story of the birth of a nation" (Frayling 31), Montalbetti takes the conventions, devices, and settings, as well as allusions to individual American *and* Italian Westerns, to tell *her* novelistic version of the story. She transforms the traditional Western genre, whose style does not resemble her own, while also exploiting the Spaghetti Western. She appropriates them and makes them her own, just as the cowboy protagonist figuratively takes possession of the hotel room, whose floral décor clashes with his personality, by virtue of inhabiting it (130-32). He begins to identify with the solitary mule driver on the toile screen (*paravent*) who is "à cheval sur son *hybride* de l'âne et de la jument" (131, my emphasis). Not only does Montalbetti suggest that "the way that storytelling provides us with a room of our own is one of the most profound satisfactions of narrative" (Motte 203), but she also insinuates that there is a particular fruitfulness to be found in the hybridity that comes from artistic cross-fertilization. Montalbetti imagines the possibilities for rewriting a genre that some say died in the 1960s (McClain 52, 60-61),[35] just as our cowboy

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[34] In *Nouvelles sur le sentiment amoureux*, each short story is the story of a distraction and thus constitutes a digression in its own right. In *Petits déjeuners avec quelques écrivains célèbres*, breakfast is generally not a part of the primary setting and situation. Montalbetti often toys with the reader, acknowledging their potential frustration at all of the digressions. In *Expérience de la campagne*, a novella made up of continuous digressions, she describes how Simon frequently interrupts his reading, and she playfully conjectures about whether it was because people asked him to help with something or because he lost focus and decided to suspend his reading in order to make tea (43-44). Here, in *Western*, she tells the reader to skip to p. 19, if she is not interested in reading the digression about ants (12).

[35] Italian Westerns like Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* and Valerii's *My Name is Nobody* intimate the end of an era and the death of the Western. In *Once Upon a Time in the West*, the arrival of the locomotive in the West, bringing civilization along with it, reinforces the fact that the frontier times of the American Old West are a thing of the past. There is no more frontier. Even the title suggests that the subject is a tale from long ago. *My Name is Nobody* is essentially the story of the

engages in “la réécriture régressive des choses” (133), imagining alternative stories to replace memories of unpleasant experiences. His rewriting makes his memories of past events “romanesque” (108, 133). Montalbetti’s rewriting, in which she fashions a room of her own in the Western tradition, challenges our perception of the “novelistic”.[36] She encourages the reader to pose questions about the Western as novel, and as genre. While Leone’s Westerns were morally ambiguous, the moral of Montalbetti’s story is clear: the Western is not just an American genre. Whereas the mythology of the American Western centers around the fundamental question of citizenship – “whether there is – especially in modern America – a unique sort of social bond that links individuals, often strangers, together in a distinctive ethical relationship and distinctive sort of enterprise” (Pippin 226) – the mythology of Montalbetti’s *Western* centers not around citizenship, but, rather, around the reader-writer relationship, specifically the fictional bond that forms as the writer retells old stories in new ways.

I will now turn to Montalbetti’s second American rewrite, focusing, again, on her flouting of convention, and more specifically, this time, on her use of digression and metalepsis. It certainly seems fitting that Montalbetti’s second American remake takes on the road story, a direct artistic descendant of the Western, which has also been called quintessentially American.[37] While *Western* “a surgi plutôt d’une image, en même temps floue et synthétique, d’une vision de la lumière dans l’espace américain tel qu’il pouvait

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retirement of legendary gunslinger, Jack Beauregard, as a young gunslinger, Nobody, takes his place. Nobody repeatedly tells Jack that he “will go down in history.”

[36] As Motte says, “Through [the] process [of radical displacement], and largely through the effect of narrative metacommentary, Montalbetti encourages her reader to subscribe to the idea that the importance of the novel is not principally invested in plot, but rather in elements of narrative that we habitually view as being peripheral to plot” (Motte 198). See also Motte 187 and 190.

[37] See Cohan and Hark: “The road movie is, in this regard, like a musical or the Western, a Hollywood genre that catches peculiarly American dreams, tensions, and anxieties, even when imported by the motion picture industries of other nations”(2) and Laderman: “Combining the legacies of classical Hollywood and the 1950s highway boom, the road movie offers a distinctly American version of these European modernist influences” (5).

apparaître dans les films," Montalbetti has explained in an interview that *Journée américaine* "ne naît plus d'un rêve d'Amérique, mais d'une confrontation à des espaces véritables, confrontation qui a produit en moi une sorte de stimulation, le désir d'écrire un roman américain contemporain" ("L'Espace" 127).

The Road Story and Montalbetti's Unconventionally Conventional Rewrite

The journey has always been a dominant trope in American literature. From James Fenimore Cooper's sea novels and Leatherstocking Tales (1823-1841) to Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), from Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) to John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), American literature is replete with tales of exploration and escape, quests westward and journeys back east, as well as less-directed peregrinations of the lost and wandering souls in search of themselves.[38] The dominance of this motif should come as no surprise because, as Janis P. Stout explains in her seminal study on American journey narratives, American literature is "a literature of movement, of motion" (3) and furthermore:

> That this should be so is in great part a reflection of our national history. Space has pressed on us, and spatial movement has been the characteristic expression of our sense of life. […] the fact remains that American history begins with voyages, of exploration or escape or migration. The pattern, once set, continued. (4)

Beginning in the late 19th century and continuing throughout the 20th century, a number of technological, historical, and cultural factors – the invention of the car and cinema at the end of the 19th century, the expansion of the interstate highway system in the 1950s, and the 1960s counterculture that called into question the American ideal – paved the way for the emergence of a specific type of journey narrative, the road genre. The road novel, which had historical precedents like Walt Whitman's 1856 "Song of the

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[38] See Stout and Laderman.

Open Road," came into its own with the publication of Jack Kerouac's 1957 masterpiece, *On the Road*. The tale of two friends who crisscrossed America, searching for meaning and a truer, more free existence, it eschews mainstream society, celebrating, instead, the countercultural values of the Beat Generation. *On the Road* served as the archetype for the onslaught of road novels and road movies that followed in the 1960s, 1970s and beyond, though it was not until the early 1970s that the term "road movie" began to be used and the genre was defined in retrospect (Benoliel 4).[39] According to David Laderman, "on the cusp of classical Hollywood's demise, the 1960s counterculture infused the cinematic act of driving with a politically rebellious spirit, best exemplified by *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *Easy Rider* (1969)" (Laderman 3-4). As classic Hollywood genres like the Western rode off into their sunset years, the road movie raced into high gear. Over the years, the genre, cycling between innovation and commodification, has become known for its adaptability, depicting characters as diverse as romantic couples or buddy and outlaw pairs, not to mention its variations with gay, feminist, or racially marginalized protagonists. Nevertheless, until the past decade, scholars claimed it, like the Western before it, was peculiarly American in essence.[40]

Montalbetti's 2009 novel, *Journée américaine* enters into dialogue with such American works. Many of the elements of the road narrative are present in *Journée américaine*, but they are intentionally misplaced, misused, or reframed. First of all, there is the journey itself to consider. Generally, in a road narrative, as Laderman has explained, the protagonist sets out on a journey for two main reasons: either that person is a disillusioned individual on a quest to discover his identity (individual,

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[39] See Laderman 12-13 for a list of road novels including Updike's *Rabbit Run* (1960) and Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971). See Wood for a summary of 100 road movies.
[40] See Cohan and Hark. See also Mills.

national, etc.) and to find freedom and is thus roaming, moving *toward* something, or that person is an outlaw figure, desperately fleeing *from* something or someone (Laderman 20). Sometimes, the purpose of the journey is a combination of the two. Either way, the essential is that they represent autonomy and mobility, or "automobility" (Mills 3). The protagonist usually does not have a specific destination in mind, or if he does, he usually encounters many detours, diversions, and speed bumps along the way. Kerouac's *On the Road* provides a perfect example of this: Sal Paradise travels from one city to another across the country with little purpose or direction, changing course at the drop of a hat. Often, the narrative ends before the protagonist arrives because the journey is, after all, more important than the destination.

In Montalbetti's novel, however, the protagonist has a clear goal and does not deviate from that plan. Donovan sets out one morning from his suburban Oklahoma town with a precise destination in mind: his friend Tom Lee's ranch in Colorado. He is certainly not a desperate outlaw on the lam, running from society and the law like Bonnie and Clyde in Arthur Penn's 1967 film or Thelma and Louise in Ridley Scott's 1991 film. Nor is he really on a quest in search of America or some pearl of wisdom or kernel of truth as Whitman and Kerouac were (Mayer 369-70). He may have hung out on the fringes in college,[41] but there is no indication at the moment of enunciation that he fits the profile of the politically rebellious, countercultural outsider. He is quite simply a young man heading toward a reunion with a friend, a reunion that, regardless of the length of time spent apart, "se faisaient toujours avec la même aisance" (11) as

[41] See 21-26. Donovan and Tom Lee would spend hours on benches at the edge of the university quad, talking or merely sitting in silence. As they observed their busy classmates, they felt that "il y avait, dans toute cette agitation, quelque chose d'impropre" (24) and "parfois, Donovan and Tom sentaient qu'on aurait pu repêcher un" (25). See also 144-54. Later, at a wedding in Livingstone, MT, Donovan and Tom gathered in the "coulisses normalement transgressives" with the rest of the outsiders (153).

the narrator explains to the reader in the incipit. A mere glance at the title reveals that Montalbetti is clearly toying with the resemblance between the French word "journée" (meaning day) and its false American cognate "journey," which, in its most commonly used sense, denotes a trip, often with the implication that it is long or arduous. While *Journée américaine* does recount an "American trip," all of the purportedly primary action takes place during a single "American day."[42] This challenges the typical formula of road movies, which generally "distances itself from the Aristotelian dramatic unities, in favor of the episodic style of Cervantes or Brecht" (Laderman 17). Donovan's trip is not the eventful, drawn-out odyssey that one might expect. In fact, just like the main character in Tom Lee's novel, *Nothing to Write Home About*, Donovan could be called "un Ulysse qui n'aurait rien à raconter au retour" (104).[43]

Accordingly, one can summarize the events of the day trip that Donovan takes in a short paragraph: Donovan gets in the car one morning and starts driving, leaving behind the suburban Oklahoma sprawl in favor of the open highway. The car eats up the pavement "comme un mètre à ruban" (59) as he speeds by the occasional cluster of homes and gas stations. But, for the most part, all he sees are flat, undefined fields; there isn't a soul in sight. He stops for a hamburger and fries at a roadside cafeteria and has an unexpected encounter with Jane, a college acquaintance. A light rain begins to fall as Donovan gets back on track, and the only signs of life are the occasional oil wells and herds of livestock that dot the homogenous, horizontal countryside. The sun comes out from behind the clouds, as the countryside starts slowly to become more contoured and

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[42] All of the action in *Western* also takes place between sunrise and sunset.

[43] In Tom Lee's novel, *Nothing to Write Home About*, a man sets out to travel across the American prairie for no pressing reason. His trip is very uneventful. Without a doubt, Tom Lee's novel is a *mise-en-abyme* of Montalbetti's larger project. It is just one of several novels within the novel. For more on this see Brand "Moving Targets" 124-28.

the mountains materialize in the distance. Donovan makes a pit stop at a thrift store to pick out a host gift for Tom Lee. Then, he makes one final stop to stretch on the shoulder, thinking back to his college years, to Tom Lee at the ranch, and to Jane whom he would like to see again, before continuing on into the sunset. Ultimately, he does not actually arrive at the ranch at the end of the novel, and the narrator finishes by saying that, "il va s'agir de reprendre la route […] de remonter dans le véhicule pour rouler vers la suite, oui, la suite" (279). In the end, Montalbetti mimics the typically unresolved endings of road narratives by concluding the novel with Donovan still *en route* with hopes of a future reunion with Jane floating in his head. Yet, in this tale of friendship, the reader has known since the opening pages what to expect: Tom Lee will extricate himself from the chair on the front porch, walk over to Donovan's car, and greet him with a hug: "Ce vers quoi Donovan roule à présent, ce *hug* (cette accolade) dans la lumière réussie" (12). At the beginning of the final chapter, the fact that Montalbetti evokes the various ways Donovan and Tom Lee routinely take leave of one another at the end of their visits (Tom Lee always accompanies Donovan to his car), also reinforces the unspoken certainty that Donovan will arrive, just has he has so many times before (272-76). The promise of such a peaceful ending is atypical of the fatalism that frequently marks road movies in which dreams go unrealized and often become nightmares (Atkinson 16 and Wood XV, XVI-XII).[44] There are effectively none of the

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[44] *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Easy Rider* (1969), and *Thelma and Louise* (1991) all end in the deaths of the protagonists. In *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), the Joad family is forced to continue their transient lifestyle, searching for food, work, and shelter after parting ways with Tom. In *Detour* (1945), the police pick Al up in the final scene and the viewer understands that he will be held responsible for two deaths – one of which he did not commit (Haskell dropped dead with no intervention from Al) and one which was purely an accident (the telephone cord strangled a passed out Vera when Al pulled on it, trying to break it, while standing on the other side of a closed and locked door). In *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) Bobby abandons Rayette at a gas station and hitches a ride with a trucker heading the opposite direction they had been traveling. In *Broken Flowers* (2005), Don's quest to find the

proverbial roadblocks, detours, and dead ends that one sees in cult road movies, although Donovan does traverse a section of roadwork that obstructs his view and impedes his progress, however briefly (218).

Not only is the journey different from the type of trip one might expect in a road novel, but, as I have mentioned, the protagonist is also not the typical hero of one either. Conversely, if one considers the supposedly secondary tales the narrator tells about Tom Lee and Linda Burn, the lover who spurned him, one realizes that their stories lend themselves much more readily to the narrative frame of a classic road novel. Tom Lee, for example, is portrayed as a brooding loner who has left his Oklahoma apartment and headed – quite literally – for the hills, leaving society behind as he tries to heal from his broken heart. On the ranch, removed from society's reach, he spends most of his days sitting on the porch, writing, and looking at the mountains. This flight from society, with all of society's technology, and the resulting juxtaposition with nature, which offers more authenticity, is a common motif in road narratives.[45] In his self-imposed exile, Tom Lee embodies the disenchantment and "sense of postmodern anxiety and restlessness" (Wood xvii) characteristic of road narrative protagonists. He wrestles, just as Odysseus and the Prodigal Son did before him, with the difficulty of ever being able to return home again and imagines how he could write a second novel entitled *Nothing to Write Home About*: "l'histoire d'un homme végétant dans un ranch, par exemple, à mille milles de tout, se demandant *why* il est *fucking* venu depuis la ville se terrer là"

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mother of his son is unsuccessful, and he is left standing at a literal and metaphoric crossroads as the film ends.

[45] See Laderman 18 for more on the importance of the theme of the human relation to technology and the opposing pastoral ideal.

(105).[46] The title he dreams up is ironic. It is not so much that he has nothing to write about, as he does not have a stable home with a family to whom he can write. The topic of home and issues of stability – and more frequently instability – are, after all, very typical in road narratives.[47]

But perhaps Linda Burn would be an even more fitting protagonist of this road novel. She is an itinerant figure who wanders rather aimlessly from one place and one relationship to the next. When Linda meets Tom, she is stopped at a gas station to refuel while on the road, running from the unwelcome advances of her sister's brutal husband. After meeting Tom, a fellow traveler at the gas station, and after sharing a bite to eat with him inside, Linda decides to change course on a whim and follow him. As the narrator says, "Les itinéraires sont faits pour être modifiés, et les deux voitures avaient fini par se suivre l'une l'autre" (170). That momentary decision to modify her itinerary – a decision so commonplace in the road genre – turns into a whirlwind romance. One autumn day, however, it ends abruptly for a reason unknown to the reader. Linda leaves Tom and retreats to her childhood home where she rehashes what happened to a trusted friend. With time comes perspective, and Linda decides to return to Tom Lee's to start over. Upon arrival at his Oklahoma City apartment, she discovers that Tom has departed and a new tenant has moved in. Linda stays with the new tenant, Elizabeth,

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[46] I refer to Odysseus and the Prodigal Son because Tom Lee believes that the question of time and the parable of the Prodigal Son – "avec toutes les variantes qu'elle peut revêtir, jusqu'à celle du père et du mari prodigue, en la figure d'Ulysse" (106) – are structuring principles in his life. In his mind, all novels could be called *Time is of the Essence* or *Nothing to Write Home About* (106).

[47] See Laderman and Orgeron. Montalbetti toys with this stability/instability dialectic. In *Journée américaine*, she chooses to write about time-tested friends instead of fickle lovers (14-18), though she does treat the issue of romantic instability when presenting the relationship of Tom Lee and Linda Burn, as well as that of Linda Burn's sister and her husband. In addition, in the penultimate chapter, she presents a summary of the novel Donovan wrote in college. *The Missing Memory* is a *mise-en-abyme* with a twist of Montalbetti's novel: it tells the story of star-crossed lovers instead of faithful friends. The "sentiments de l'héroïne, c'était pour Donovan le cœur de son récit" (265) in which the unnamed heroine travels by plane to visit Ben. Like Montalbetti's novel, the story ends just before the girl arrives.

and joins her in her daily routine of eating breakfast at McDonald's where she meets another young man, Rick, with whom she enters into a brief love affair. The narrator establishes a direct parallel between Linda's story and Odysseus' when she describes how Rick imagines himself as the guardian of a cave (the McDonald's where he works) and debates which role he should play (that of the Cyclops, Circe, or Calypso) in order to prevent "son Ulysse à lui, qui a nom Linda" (210) from repairing her raft and leaving. Try as he might to keep her, Rick is not successful. Linda moves on again shortly after, because like all Odyssean episodes, her adventure with him is only temporary.

If Tom Lee or Linda Burn were the protagonist of Montalbetti's novel, it would correspond more closely to the prototypical road novel. Without a doubt, Tom Lee's and Linda Burn's lives are much more episodic. They would surely have more to write home about than Donovan, the "Ulysse qui n'aurait rien à raconter au retour" (104). It is no accident that, when relating their stories, the narrator makes several allusions to the Prodigal Son and especially to Odysseus, who "appears as the first Western road warrior" (Corrigan 144; cf. Laderman 6-7). Still other options for a more characteristic road novel would be to have Donovan and Tom Lee journey together as two buddies out to conquer America, or, to have Tom Lee and Linda Burn live out the trials and tribulations of their love story on the road. Even Linda Burn's brother, another Prodigal Son figure whom the narrator describes as "un être mal défini [...] poursuivant [...] quelque chose comme le fantôme en fuite de son identité" (245-46), would have been a more likely candidate. Instead, Montalbetti's authorial decision to place the dilemma-free Donovan at the wheel of the car can be read as a deliberate choice, once again, to call into question the conventions of the classic road novel.

Nonetheless, one recognizes several essential elements of a road narrative in *Journée américaine*. As with *Western*, Montalbetti must, first, access the "genre memory" of the genre in question in order for her work of *bricolage* to be successful. Only then will her work of appropriation and transformation truly stand out by contrast from the norm and highlight her unique voice and approach to literature. Thus, first and most obviously, Montalbetti depicts Donovan setting out in his car. After all, "Road movies are, by definition, movies about cars, trucks, motorcycles, or some other motoring self-descendant of the nineteenth-century train" (Corrigan 144); the car "becomes the only promise of self in a culture of mechanized reproduction" (Corrigan 146). Donovan's station wagon may not be the expected sleek, fast (preferably convertible) car, and there may be no evidence of him bonding with it or channeling his emotions through it,[48] but it is a car nonetheless, and its presence appropriately places the novel in present-day America. Secondly, as Donovan embarks on his journey, the narrator specifically describes how he fumbles in the glove compartment to get out a CD. This detail is not anodyne; it demonstrates a recognition of the significance of rock 'n' roll music in 1960s and 1970s road movies, sometimes referred to as rock 'n' road movies (Laderman 19). In addition, Montalbetti invites a metaphorical reading – the journey as life – as road narratives often do.[49] Not only does Donovan's trip occur between sunrise and sunset, but the narrator also specifically interrupts her description of the passing countryside to reflect:

> Tout ça qui file, à peine aperçu que déjà derrière soi, les trajets, le moment, excusez-moi, mais où l'espace ressemble le plus au temps.

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[48] See Laderman 13 and 18 for more on the importance of the relationship between character and car.

[49] This tendency to "revenir sur sa vie" is often symbolized by looking in the rearview mirror (Hurault-Paupe 50).

> C'est un fait que les trajets portent souvent à reconsidérer le dessin de sa vie, comme si, oui, à voir filer tout ça, on se laissait contaminer par le petit travail de la métaphore, malgré soi.
> Et conduire donne à votre rêverie un air autorisé, quelque chose de doux et d'inévitable […] tandis qu'au lieu des deux ou trois images qui emplissent habituellement vos heures assises la situation vous amène insidieusement à reconsidérer le trajet de votre existence. (146-47)

In a further nod to the "genre memory," Montalbetti employs language which has a distinctly cinematic sensibility to describe the immeasurable stretches of the American plains and the endless sky of the open road.[50] She alludes, on numerous occasions, to this novel's filmic heritage, as she also did in *Western*. For example, as Donovan drives straight ahead and the sun appears, the narrator says: "À travers le verre fumé des lunettes, la réalité vous a un air sépia, quelque chose d'un peu passé dans la couleur, *comme une vieille copie d'un film des années soixante-dix*" (197, my emphasis) and later that when Donovan looks in the rearview mirror:

> […] il se doute bien que rien ne viendra s'inscrire dans son rectangle, lequel nous offre *un travelling arrière parfaitement minéral, un beau plan, en cinémascope*, où se reconnaissent des paysages de western, mais que nul cavalier ne vient tacheter de sa silhouette intense – et, pour l'heure, point de véhicule non plus. (200, my emphasis)

Not only do such statements allow the reader to picture the scene on the widescreen of his mind's eye, they also describe typical filming techniques of road movies (tracking shots, frame-within-a-frame shots, and montage-style editing)[51] while simultaneously referencing the frontier myth that the road genre shares with one of its generic ancestors, the Western. Still furthermore, Montalbetti includes classic images of Americana throughout *Journée américaine*: from the highway itself, the landscape, and

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[50] Montalbetti has said that objects and images often inspire her writing ("From Western" 104; cf. "En écrivant" 10). In this case, the road scenes relate what Montalbetti actually saw – and filmed – during a drive down Route 66 ("En écrivant" 23). She has also published still shots from her time in the United States in *En écrivant Journée américaine*.

[51] See also Laderman 15-16.

the open sky, to college and frontier life, the fanfare of American football games, a characteristic roadside diner and McDonald's.[52] These iconic images echo those of many past road movies. On one occasion, Montalbetti directly cites *Five Easy Pieces* (1970) in the scene where Linda asks Tom Lee to make love to her the way she had seen Jack Nicholson's character do so in Rafelson's film (173).[53] In these ways, Montalbetti's work resonates in the echo chamber that the road narrative's "genre memory" has created over the years.

There is no doubt that Montalbetti is just as familiar with the customs and iconography of the road genre as she was with those of the Western. She mimics the tendency of road movies to cite one another, either directly or by use of commonplace conventions. She does not, however, content herself to recycle the tired clichés that Michael Atkinson repudiates in his 1994 retrospective on recent road movies (17). Instead, Montalbetti innovates, adding her own unique voice and inflection to the mix. As Primeau says, "It is mostly the great writers who are attuned to a genre's fullest potential, and for them, the opportunity to assume familiarity with conventions of a genre makes 'short cuts' possible and expands artistic potential" (2).[54] This is most evident, perhaps, in the way that Montalbetti knowingly breaks the key convention: the

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[52] She even kept the Babel poche translation of Don Delillo's *Americana* on her desk while writing *Journée américaine* ("En écrivant" 41).

[53] Besides *Five Easy Pieces*, Montalbetti has also said that Jim Jarmusch's *Broken Flowers* (2005) and Elia Kazan's adaptation of Steinbeck's *East of Eden* (1955) inspired her. She makes oblique references to them in the text. One sees similarities between Montalbetti's text and Jarmusch's film in the way the main character takes a trip down memory lane. The drama surrounding Linda Burn, her sister, brother-in-law and his father appears to be a twist on the familial drama in *East of Eden*. It is interesting to note that Montalbetti has referenced *East of Eden* as inspiration and not *The Grapes of Wrath*, an oft-cited proto-road story. See Montalbetti "L'espace" 134.

[54] See also Morson and Emerson 297 and 306.

majority of "the action" in *Journée américaine* does not take place on the open road.[55] In fact, fewer than fifty pages out of the nearly 280-page text relay information about Donovan's drive. The rest of the text details Donovan's wandering thoughts and memories of college and of his friendship with Tom Lee, as well as the narrator's frequent interjections and reflections on seemingly superfluous details, all of which take precedence over the action on the asphalt. In this way, Montalbetti plays with the notions of foreground and background, of speed and slowness. Early on, when the narrator describes Donovan's trip as it gets underway, she says, "on avance à vitesse américaine" (13). Though the car races forward across the changing countryside, the driver sits still inside and lets his thoughts take over. There is a constant juxtaposition of movement and inertia. The car advances straight ahead, but the prose meanders along at an unhurried pace.

The real diegesis is in the details and the digressions, once again in a technique that Montalbetti has called *l'affabulation du détail*. Her propensity for elaborating upon macroscopic details and for highlighting the nuances of characters' emotions by personifying them is apparent when she anthropomorphizes the coats of Donovan and Jane so that they represent and act out the sexual tension their owners feel while sitting in a booth at the roadside diner (77-84). It evinces itself, yet again, in the section that relays Tom Lee's "histoire chaotique" with his Remington typewriter – a story that mirrors that of his relationship with Linda (138-42).[56] Her penchant for inventing backstories about objects and her corresponding tendency to attribute thoughts and desires to them manifests itself in the account of Tom Lee sitting at his coffee table on

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[55] See Laderman: "According to Daniel Lopez's 'road movie' entry in his genre catalog *Films by Genre*, 'the open road is the environment in which the central action takes place' (256)" (14).

[56] Montalbetti's use of the ambiguous pronoun "elle" ensures that the reader does not know when she transitions from talking about *la* Remington to Linda.

the porch typing a short story in which his coffee table – "ah, mes amis, les histoires que cette table pourrait raconter" (68) – tells its own story: "comment on l'a amenée ici en charrette, les propriétaires qu'elle a vus se succéder au ranch, leurs histoires de famille, les amours et les meurtres" (157). Indeed, detailed narrative digressions form the bulk of the narrative as they do in all of Montalbetti's fiction. There is even an entire 40-page stretch of the novel in which the narrator makes no mention of Donovan's road trip, but considers other subjects (107-45). From that point on, information directly related to Donovan's drive occupies less and less narrative space. In fact, most of the second half of the novel is more about Tom Lee, Linda Burn, her family members, and the rural Colorado townspeople who swap stories and gossip about them at the local bar.

Nonetheless, the digression that is, I believe, most paradoxically central to this work occurs in the third chapter.[57] Here, Montalbetti recounts the fanfare of a college football game between the Oklahoma Sooners and the University of Colorado Buffaloes. She does so, not because it has a vital role to play in the diegesis, but simply "pour dire que Donovan and Tom, oui, avaient passé du temps sur ces gradins, assistant aux matches comme les autres étudiants" (53). Not only does she interrupt the road trip to talk about a football game, but she also chooses to do so through the focalization of mosquitos for whom "les sessions d'*American football* représentent une occasion de festivités *king size*," because there is:

> Nul besoin, alors, d'errer lamentablement (vaguement guidé par un filet de dioxyde de carbone dont on suit la trace dans l'air) dans les jardinets et autres courettes arrière à la recherche de l'interstice qui permettra d'entrer dans la maison des dormeurs: ce sont là des tonnes de chair

[57] Initially, Montalbetti intended this chapter to be the first. See Lungo 284-85.

> offerte, complaisamment installée sur les gradins, exposée sans retenue dans la nuit américaine. (32)[58]

After describing how the "vampires miniatures" (38) enjoy their "buffet à volonté" (35), the narrator shifts the focus to describe, in longwinded detail, all aspects of the game: the action on the field (33-35), the uniforms of the players (40-43), the gestures of the seven officials making calls (43-44), the *majorettes* (44), and the journalists (45), not to overlook the mascots of both teams (46-50). Up until the narrator wittily states, "Mais revenons-en à nos moustiques" (50), it remains difficult to distinguish between the main thread of this chapter-long digression and the departure from that digression.

In that way, this chapter in which digressions pile upon digressions acts as a poetics for Montalbetti's writing. In an interview, she has stated that:

> Ces 'boucles' et 'spirales' correspondent d'ailleurs moins en vérité à une propension au détour, que, si l'on veut à l'inverse, au fait qu'il me semble que la digression est au cœur même de notre expérience, qu'elle nous est constitutive. Notre rapport au monde est essentiellement rêveur et digressif. Notre pensée sans cesse digresse, dans toutes les situations, solitaires ou collectives, dans lesquelles nous nous trouvons. (Lungo 284)

Journée américaine, along with the rest of Montalbetti's works, reflects this view that digressions are central to one's life story, not peripheral; desired, not detrimental. A novel à la Montalbetti is clearly "une longue histoire d'abandon et de reprises" (241) like the *épopées* that the objects for sale in the roadside thrift shop could tell. When the narrator returns to talking about the mosquitos, she paints a picture of what happens when they try to zero in on a solitary subject and rule out all the rest. Insidious thoughts dampen the mosquitos' previous sense of invincibility with regard to the smorgasbord below:

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[58] The fact that Montalbetti focalizes this chapter primarily through the eyes of mosquitos recalls the episode of the ants' adventure at the beginning of *Western* (12-18).

> C'est que cette même profusion qui les enchantait les épuise à force de tant de choix dont ils ne savent plus se débrouiller.
>
> Nos bestioles peinent de plus en plus à exercer leur libre arbitre, et elles se disent qu'il doit bien y avoir à leur indécision des causes enfouies, opaques, boueuses, que l'événement vient remuer, des circonstances qu'on pensait avoir oubliées et qui pourtant continuent d'œuvrer, par en dessous, et qui font d'elles ces petits êtres ballots et incertains. (51)

The mosquitos become paralyzed before the plethora of choices, unable to select a single, best target. In that way, they are like a writer who cannot choose a single subject for her story. They are like Tom Lee, who fell for two college girls but could not decide which one he preferred during his "summer of Buridan's donkey." In keeping with the fable, he ended up with neither, although he did write about both and turn the saga into a novel (118-129). Such stories would lead one to believe that the message of Montalbetti's writing is: if you are not obligated to choose one (target, girl, or subject), don't.

If the example of the indecisive mosquitos is not clear enough, than the final paragraph of the third chapter helps us further to understand Montalbetti's dilatory poetics. According to the narrator, Donovan and Tom Lee would go to football games to watch the game, but also to watch girls:

> Ils s'y retrouvait pour [le match], et aussi parce que les filles y allaient, et que c'était joli de les voir suivre avec tension les déplacements sur le terrain, quand elle les suivaient, et joli aussi de les voir s'en désintéresser, quand elles s'en désintéresseraient et que tantôt leurs yeux croisaient les vôtres, tantôt elles laissaient dériver leur regard vers des mondes plus intérieurs où passait dieu sait quoi. (54)

As much as Donovan and Tom Lee attended the football games for the primary purpose of following the action on the field, they took equal pleasure in watching girls lose interest in the game. Just as the mosquitos' incapability to choose a target mimics the writer's inability to choose a single story to tell, Donovan and Tom's interest not only in the game (the main plot), but also in the girls' disinterest in the game and subsequent

inner thoughts (the diversion or digression) illustrates Montalbetti's perspective on fiction: one may start out writing – or reading – about one subject, only to discover more enthralling subjects along the way, and that is more than OK. Jean-Luc Godard once said that, "Le cinéma, c'est l'art du mouvement, donc on peut changer d'avis!" (Coutard). For Montalbetti, this assertion rings true for *le roman*, not just for *le cinéma*.

In *Journée américaine*, as these examples illustrate, it is the authorial narrator, not the lonely traveler, who gets sidetracked and takes detours. Philippe Brand appropriately remarks that, "*Journée américaine* is indeed an exceedingly mobile text, but not in the traditional sense of a road novel" ("Moving Targets" 107). Montalbetti's narration, not Donovan's itinerary – the discourse, not the story – presents the "rambling, picaresque narrative path" (Laderman 17) that the reader of road novels (or viewer of road movies) expects. Here, the focus is not on the physical movement of the journey, but rather on the mental movement, namely the wandering inner thoughts of the solitary driver and of the narrator. While the driver's thoughts may drift inadvertently to memories of his college years, the narrator's digressions are anything but unintentional. As Montalbetti and Nathalie Piegay-Gros have said, "Si le narrateur s'égare, l'auteur, sans doute, sait où il va. Dans un texte littéraire, la digression est moins un signe de l'égarement, que la feinte d'un égarement; elle n'est pas l'indice d'une absence de maîtrise de l'écriture, mais la fiction d'une absence de maîtrise" (11).[59] Mainstream society and readers often view digressions negatively because the latter perturb the textual economy and consequently put the former's attention to the test. In Montalbetti's opinion, however – and Ross Chambers' concept of "loiterature" would

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[59] See also Motte "Critical" 52 and "L'Explosion" 131-32 and *Fiction Now* 191-206 for a more extensive discussion of Montalbetti's use of and scholarly writing about digression. See also Brand 118-22.

support this – digressions are not only pleasurable because they are freeing, but they are also critical: "La digression devient une technique de commentaire, qui montre la complexité et la pluralité de tout texte. […] Instrument rhétorique, procédé narratif, elle est aussi un outil critique qui permet de remettre en cause le fonctionnement traditionnel du récit " (67-9). In this case, the story whose conventions are *remise en cause* is the road story. The road genre may be touted as being open to variation and adaptation (Cohan and Hark 14), yet Montalbetti pushes the limits and calls into question the essential criteria for defining a road novel.[60] How much of a road novel must take place on the blacktop in order for it to qualify as such?

Given Montalbetti's scholarly interest in narratology and her writerly desire to tell old stories in new ways, it is no surprise that Keith Hassanbay, a secondary character in *Journée américaine* and one of Donovan and Tom Lee's college friends, states that: "[…] si on avait envie de réfléchir à la manière dont on construit les histoires, c'était vraiment un sujet épatant" (26). Though intellectually enthralling for readers like Keith Hassanbay, a Ph.D. student in cinema studies, Montalbetti's unconventional style, with its plethora of digressions, is, she avows, "une affaire de concentration" (268) which has the potential to test the patience of any readers who expected a different kind of road novel. Through digression and refusal to adhere to genre conventions, Montalbetti risks alienating her readers, as Jean-Luc Godard intentionally did by employing Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* to create critical distance in his films, especially in *Week-end* (1967), his road movie *avant la lettre*.[61] Godard subverted classical cinema techniques and narrative methods to alienate the spectator

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[60] Some scholars have, of course, spoken of the impossibility of defining the genre all together. See Corrigan 137 and Wood xvii-xviii.
[61] See Powrie 101.

and make the spectator aware of the camera and the filmmaking process. Montalbetti also subverts traditional techniques and draws attention to the writing process. Unlike Godard, however, Montalbetti attempts to draw her potentially estranged readers back and help them along the way by making frequent use of metalepses.[62] They occur throughout the novel, but nowhere more so than in the crucial third chapter. In such instances, the extradiegetic narrator does not disappear behind the fabric of the text as she attempts to write herself into the diegesis, reminding the reader of her artistic presence and control. While describing the series of five Ralphies (the buffalo mascot of the Colorado team) from the mid-1960s to mid-2000s, the narrator refers to herself writing the present work: "Au moment où j'écris ces lignes (tiens, il neige, une fois n'est pas coutume, derrière ma vitre, sur les trottoirs de Paris), je suis en mesure de vous présenter Ralphie V" (46). Later, on page 165, she directly refers to herself as "Christine."[63]

Not only does Montalbetti fuse author and narrator, but she also directly interpellates the extradiegetic reader, conflating reader with narratee. With the use of the pronoun "vous" or imperatives and interrogatives in the second personal plural, she takes the reader to the football game – "Ça *vous* dirait, de voir un peu comment ça se passe, sur un stade?" (31, my emphasis) – and proceeds to put her alternately in the position of mosquito, player on the field, and spectator at the game. First, she forces the reader to adopt the perspective of a mosquito preparing to strike when she says, "que *diriez-vous* de foncer sur cette calvitie commode, avec tous ces vaisseaux appétissants à

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[62] By definition, metalepsis is "The intrusion into one diegesis (*diégèse*) of a being from another diegesis; the mingling of two distinct diegetic levels" (Prince 50-51).

[63] See also pages 58-59, 70, 112, 138, 238, and 268 for other examples. This type of metalepsis is not new to Montalbetti. She also refers to herself directly, but that time by her full name, on p. 140 of *Western*. See Motte "Fiction Now" 184 for more on how she intentionally conflates her authorial voice with that of the narrator in a similar fashion in *Western*. See also Brand "Moving Targets" 110.

fleur de peau, disponibles, ô spectacle délicieux de leur émouvante vulnérabilité" (36, my emphasis).[64] Then, she puts the reader on the field as a player when she says:

> Au-dessus de *vous*, il y a ce grand ciel noir, et sous *vos* pieds ce rectangle d'herbe dont le vert acide explose dans l'obscurité du reste, ça continue de se disputer, sous *votre* casque [...] comment *vous* en êtes arrivé là, tout ce qui fait que c'est *vous*, là, à cet instant, avec le ballon serré contre *vous*. Mais ce moment de ressaisie de *vous-même*, au cœur de l'action, [...] voilà qu'on *vous* l'arrache, deux bras puissants enlacent *vos* jambes et bientôt il ne *vous* sera plus possible de courir, *vous* serrez encore le ballon mais [...] le ballon *vous* échappe [...] le jeu s'arrête, *relevez-vous*, ça reprend. (34, my emphasis)

In an instant, the reader becomes the center of the action that everyone has come to watch. Finally, Montalbetti puts the reader in the position of fan attending a football for the first time and she engages her as an interlocutor. The question, "Qui est Ralphie?" is understood to be a repetition of the reader's question followed by the narrator's explanation, "Eh bien, une bisonne, mascotte des *Buffaloes* [...]" (46). Montalbetti even offers the reader a full-access pass into the locker room where she encourages her to try on the football uniform in the passage that begins with the question, "*Vous voulez* essayer pour voir? Endosser leur costume?" (40, my emphasis), and ends with the command, "on est fin prêt, *regardez-vous* dans la glace" (41, my emphasis). Throughout the third chapter, and the rest of the novel, Montalbetti writes herself and the reader into the story. Again and again, she "calls our scholarly certainties into question, blurring narratological categories and exploding the boundaries between her fiction and the phenomenal world" (Brand 106), even though she is clearly aware of her transgressions. After all, as a literary scholar and expert in narratology, Montalbetti has published works on the reader-writer relationship (*Images du lecteur dans les textes*

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[64] See also 42 and 51 for similar examples.

romanesques) and the respective possibilities and impossibilities of fictional and referential writing (*Le Voyage, le monde et la bibliothèque*), among other topics.

Montalbetti has acknowledged in interviews that, in their unconventionality, metalepses are troubling for the reader because the narrator transgresses the traditionally airtight boundary between narrative levels (Lungo 278). Nevertheless, she does not cease to solicit her reader, continually transgressing formal boundaries (a twist on a common theme of boundary crossings in road narratives). She maintains that this is because her fictional texts, "se construisent sur cette utopie-là d'une communauté entre le personnage, la narratrice et le lecteur, une communauté dont il faut sans cesse réaffirmer les fondements" (Lungo 278) and that, "il se peut que chaque métalepse soit une manière de renouer ce contact. De l'entériner, de le réaffirmer, de le vérifier, de le consolider" (Lungo 278).[65] In *Journée américaine*, this is clearly an attempt to establish a community between character, narrator, and narratee – a community that would make up for Donovan's lack of a traveling companion and his failure to bond with his car. Indeed, in addition to the prevalence of the pronouns "je" and "vous," Montalbetti often opts for the more collective "on" and "nous" in order to insist upon this community.[66] From beginning ("*On* quitte doucement l'habitat disséminé de la banlieue" (12, my emphasis), "*On* a la route pour soi [...] *On* avance à vitesse américaine" (13, my emphasis),"*On* est paré" (14, my emphasis)) to end ("*On* approche du ranch" (272, my emphasis), "*On* roule à présent dans le crépuscule qui vient" (276, my emphasis), "*On* n'en est pas encore là" (277, my emphasis)), she places the reader in the car with

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[65] For more on her fear of losing her reader, see Lungo 281-82.
[66] Brand has referred to these as "floating" pronominal forms ("Moving Targets" 116).

Donovan and herself, "à l'abri du monde" (13). This story is not just about Dovonan's drive to visit Tom, but *our* drive and "*nos* deux amis" (161, my emphasis).

According to Montalbetti's poetics of narrative hospitality, the reader has an active role to play in the novel. It is no accident that, while sitting on the university quad with Donovan and Tom Lee, Keith Hassanbay used to say that:

> Les romans qu'on lisait étaient comme des maisons, et qu'on pouvait choisir de les habiter, longuement, progressivement, en s'habituant à l'atmosphère particulière de chacun, au volume des pièces, à leur configuration, au détail de leur mobilier, comme on pouvait préférer fureter vite fait de pièce en pièce, ouvrir une porte, et puis une autre, en faire le tour très vite, pour s'en faire une idée générale, en maîtriser grosso modo la répartition, avant, éventuellement, de séjourner plus longtemps dans telle ou telle pièce, ou même successivement dans chacune, quand, une fois que cette visite rapide avait conclu au coup de cœur, on avait décidé de passer dans cette maison le temps qu'il faudrait pour apprendre à la connaître jusque dans ses recoins. (28)

Through Keith's words, Montalbetti invites the reader to take up residence in her works. If, at first, she reads quickly to familiarize herself generally with the story, Montalbetti encourages her to slow down on a second pass-through so as to study sedulously all of the details and nuances before her. By dint of deconstructing and refashioning the road trip, Montalbetti gently forces the reader to read more actively and opens up a space – "un espace de connivence sincère" (Lungo 278) – for the reader to recognize herself in the experiences and emotions recounted.[67] After all, this novel is not just about road travel, but also – and perhaps more importantly – about friendship, shared memories, and the passing of time. It is about crossing a space that divides two friends; it is about the pleasure of writing and how literary invention permits a writer to

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[67] There are similar declarations in *Western* that also reveal Montalbetti's poetics of narrative hospitality. For example, she says, that, if you, the reader, buy an object from the General Store, and your friends ask you about it during a visit to your house, you can retell *Western*: "vous commenceriez, C'est l'histoire, etc., et vos hôtes […] ne seraient pas mécontents de votre hospitalité narrative, c'est à vous de voir"(115). Later, before she, herself, tells a story, she states, "vous êtes mon hôte" (140).

fashion a narrative space that allows her to cross the divide separating her from her readers, French or American.

In so many ways, *Journée américaine* is unconventional. Yet, in its unconventionality, Montalbetti's novel best expresses the essence of the genre. After all, it is a genre that conveys a desire for the liberation from "the oppression of hegemonic norms" (Cohan and Hark 1) and whose "generic core [depicts] a *tension* between rebellion and conformity" (Laderman 19-20).[68] *Journée américaine*'s protagonist may not incarnate countercultural values and his journey is not the typical rootless wandering one, but I would argue that Montalbetti's unique style – especially the slowness of the narrative speed – exemplifies the "countercultural" elements of this road novel. It is not the protagonist searching for liberty and identity, but the writer doing so as she continually transgresses boundaries and exercises her artistic license in an attempt to establish her own unique voice.[69]

In *Journée américaine*, the emphasis on detail and digressive descriptions rather than on action, along with the self-conscious and self-reflexive techniques (metalepsis and *mise-en-abyme*) that break the realist illusion of fiction and require more active readers, remind one of the French New Wave's tendency to use fragmented editing techniques and long takes along with the ever conspicuous *regard caméra*. Montalbetti's novel also mimics the tendency of New Wave filmmakers to cite or allude to other works of art (Powrie 21). In addition, she presents a new take on traditional Hollywood conventions, as Jean-Luc Godard had before her. Godard often treated aspects of the

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[68] See also Laderman 1, 6, 23, 35, 41-42.

[69] Montalbetti has explained: "[…] j'essaye de bricoler quelque chose qui ne peut passer de toute façon que par le développement d'une voix (avec un 'x', car c'est bien là, il me semble, que se situe le cœur de la question de l'écriture, dans le développement d'une voix, d'un rythme, d'un souffle) qui me serait propre, et qui charrie des choses personnelles (en même temps que des éléments collectifs très contemporains) d'une manière largement intuitive et inconsciente" (Lungo 280).

love/hate relationship between France and the United States in his films, especially as it related to issues of filmmaking and consumerism.[70] What's more, his films, *À bout de souffle* (1960), *Pierrot le fou* (1965), and *Week-end* (1967), along with several other European – especially Italian – films, had a great influence on the initial American road movies, though scholars have long minimized the road movie's European examples and influences, even as they extolled the openness and adaptability of the road genre.[71]

In all of its idiosyncrasies and iconoclasm, *Journée américaine* reinforces what scholars viewing the road narrative from a transnational perspective have been saying for the past decade: it is not solely an American genre.[72] In fact, there has been a proliferation of European – and especially French – road movies and novels in recent years: from Manuel Poirier's *Western* (1997) to Laurent Cantet's *L'Emploi du temps* (2001), from Bruno Dumont's *Twentynine Palms* (2003) to Cédric Kahn's *Feux rouges* (2004), not to forget Christian Oster's 2011 novel, *Rouler*. Formally, Montalbetti's "American" road novel is more typical of these European renditions which place less emphasis on high-speed, action-packed driving sequences (Laderman 248). As Laderman explains:

> Generally speaking, European road movies seem less interested than their American counterparts in following the desperately rambling criminal exploits of an outlaw couple; or, in romanticizing the freedom of the road as a political alternative expressing youth rebellion. Rather, the

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[70] See *Le Mépris* and Godard's writing about it in *Godard on Godard* where he talks about his approach to adapting Alberto Moravia's eponymous novel into the film (200-01). His discussion of how he filmed "a spiritual odyssey" instead of the "physical phenomenon" of Odysseus' original odyssey makes one think of how Montalbetti's *Journée américaine* is more about a mental journey, than a physical one.

[71] See Mazierska 3. Several of the other influential European films are: Roberto Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia* (*Journey to Italy*, 1954), Federico Fellinni's *La strada* (*The Road*, 1954), Ingmar Bergman's *Smultronstället* (*Wild Strawberries*, 1957) and Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'avventura* (*The Adventure*, 1959). More recently, Werner Herzog's, and especially, Wim Wender's road films had a strong influence on American filmmakers such as Jim Jarmusch. One does see similar styles and approaches in Wenders' *Paris, Texas* and Jarmusch's *Broken Flowers*.

[72] See Archer, Gott and Schilt, Mazierska and Rascaroli, Orgeron, and Wood.

> exploration of psychological, emotional, and spiritual states becomes more important to the Continental drive. Overall the European road movie associates road travel with introspection rather than violence and danger. (247-48)

Journée américaine epitomizes these stylistics. As she did with *Western*, Montalbetti expertly adopts and transforms American mythology, blending it with European influences and her own unique voice. Her work of *bricolage* results in a novel that is innovative and complex. It is the work of an *auteur* who exhibits a predilection for reflecting on how stories are told and genres, codified. Therefore, despite the fact that Montalbetti describes American people and places, and even occasionally uses English to transcribe the speech of her characters, she has appropriated this genre which Tina Olsin Lent once dubbed "as American as apple pie," and reminded us that it is also French. In today's world, she makes us question whether we can call a genre, American, French, or otherwise. After all, according to Orgeron, the road genre, with its diverse ancestry and openness to creativity and innovation, is, and always has been, a product of "Euro-American dialectic" (12). Even Jack Kerouac, the pioneer of the American road novel, proclaimed a French connection of which he was very proud, writing: "All my knowledge rests in my 'French-Canadianness' and nowhere else. The English language is a tool lately found […] The reason I handle English words so easily is because it is not my own language. I refashion it to fit French images" (*Selected Letters* 228-29; qtd. in Bibeau 63).[73] Christine Montalbetti, on the other hand, refashions American images to fit the French language and her own personal style in *Journée américaine*, a literary journey worth undertaking. Ultimately, as *Journée américaine* demonstrates, it was the

[73] Kerouac's "Franco-American" family relocated from the Saint-Laurent valley to New Hampshire in the late 19th century, and ultimately, to Massachusetts. In the preface to *Le Vagabond Solitaire*, he claimed Breton roots, writing, "Je suis de souche française, bretonne plus exactement" (Bibeau 66) and identifying "l'Officier Lebris de Kérouac, Baron de Cornuaille" as his first ancestor to establish himself in the Saint-Laurent valley. See Monette and especially Bibeau.

road genre's hybrid identity that gave it its dynamism in the 1960s and 1970s, and continues to do so today.

Conclusion

Bakhtin wrote that, "Genre is reborn and renewed at every stage in the development of literature and in every individual work of a given genre. This constitutes the life of the genre" (106). In rewriting the Western and the road story, Montalbetti reinvigorates genres which some scholars said became nothing but worn-out clichés in the 1960s and 1990s, respectively.[74] Though she appropriates "American" cinema and challenges us with regard to how we view genres, she does not do so to critique America. All of the characters in *Journée américaine* may eat hamburgers, and one even works at McDonald's, but her lyrical representation of America is a far cry from Dumont's critique of America and of the road genre in *Twentynine Palms*. Instead, her engagement with America is more akin to Franco-American filmmaker Jacques Tourneur's poetic interpretations of the Western in the 1940s and 1950s. Finding "le spectacle de la violence" repugnant, Tourneur focuses on "la chronique, [le] quotidien, la vie simple des gens… pas si simples qu'ils en ont l'air: aux clichés du western traditionnel, Tourneur n'en substitue pas d'autres; la poésie naît de l'épaisseur conférée aux silhouettes, de l'opacité qui assombrit les âmes […] Un relativisme européen dissout subtilement le manichéisme américain" (Roger "Le genre" 157). Tourneur's defiance of convention, like Montalbetti's, does not destroy the genre, but rather, allows him to present a more poetic alternative. Ultimately, Montalbetti's lyrical presentation of the American sky and mountains in her *romans américains* depicts, as did Tourneur's

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[74] See McClain on the Western and Atkinson on the road story. Of course, even after the genres were "dead," there were still some that succeeding in breaking the mold: for example, *Dances with Wolves* and *Unforgiven* for the Western, and *Thelma and Louise* and *Broken Flowers* for the road movie.

"déclaration d'amour à l'Amérique" (Roger "Le genre" 157), a deep-seated interest in America and in showcasing the richness of Franco-American hybrid works.[75] Just as Montalbetti blurs the boundaries between literature and cinema, fiction and reality in her works, she also blurs the boundaries between French and American in her generic rewrites. In today's cosmopolitan world of mobility, communication, and interaction – at a time when scholars advocate the need to "remap the geographies of literary and cultural forms" (Jay 4) – she reveals the impracticality of drawing rigid boundary lines and calling a genre simply French or American. In spite of periods of rancor and rivalry, France and America have a long history of alliance and mutual fascination with which Montalbetti's texts engage. It is certainly not coincidental that, in *Western*, Montalbetti evokes the story of J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, a Frenchman who emigrated to colonial America and wrote about what it means to be an American in *Letters from an American Farmer* (1783), later serving as a "political and cultural liaison between France and the United States" (Crèvecoeur).

According to Verena Andermatt Conley, in an essay for *French Global*, "it is the writers' responsibility to produce fictions that are active translations and ongoing negotiations between [the various communities of diverse ethnic, religious, or even national origins that make up modern-day nation states]" (Conley 150-51). Furthermore, Conley asserts that contemporary French literature is:

> […] still capable of opening spaces and of enabling travel, as well as translation and negotiation between communities […] in an effort to

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[75] Throughout *Western* and *Journée américaine*, Montalbetti is very attentive to details related to the sky and the vast, rugged countryside of the Midwest and West. In the third chapter of *Journée américaine*, for example, the narrator refers again and again to everything taking place "dans la nuit américaine" (32), "[au-dessous de] ce grand ciel noir" (34), "sous les grands ciels d'Amérique" (35), and "sous les ciels limpides" (44). See, for more examples, 88, 127, 182, 186. In an interview with Philippe Brand, Montalbetti did say that she was taken by the sky, which she describes at length in Donovan's scenes on the road ("L'espace" 127).

> create common national, European, and world spaces. *It neither legitimates a national culture, nor does it signify universal, transcendental values. Rather, it calls into question* […] *'divisions and boundaries, high culture and popular culture, representation and the unrepresentable, the modern and the postmodern, to point to the configurations of possibilities* […].' (Conley 157-58, my emphasis)

Montalbetti's American rewrites, which recast American people, places, and culture as seen through French eyes, create these new spaces in which to "translate cultural specificities"[76] while simultaneously "elaborating new ways of 'being in common'"[77] (Conley 156). For all these reasons, *Western* and *Journée américaine* are *roman américains*, par excellence. One looks forward to seeing how Montalbetti will continue this trend in her just-released *Plus rien que les vagues et le vent* (2014), a novel once again inspired by "la géographie américaine comme matière littéraire" (Pellen 48), a novel in which, "Pour la première fois, Christine Montalbetti s'essaie au suspense" ("Plus rien").

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[76] "[…] those writing at the cusp of the twenty-first century shift their emphasis to engage in an urgent elaboration of what [Étienne] Balibar calls *un nouvel espace*, a new space, both mental and physical, in which borders are undone and new articulations created among communities and even countries. In an ongoing effort to translate cultural specificities […]" (Conley 152).

[77] "At stake in [contemporary writing] is the construction of common spaces […] All these writers and theorists produce their 'fictional spaces' that concern problems of the nation-state, subjectivity, citizenship, the media, and marketing, as well as what it means to exist in a multipolar national and world-space and how to live along a cutting political edge" (Conley 154).

American Pastiche, or Tanguy Viel's Great American Novel à la française

Illustration for *TIME* by Jonathan Burton

Speramus meliora; resurget cineribus.
Father Gabriel Richard, 1805

In 2007, Donald Morrison's controversial article, "In Search of Lost Time" appeared in *Time* magazine. In the article, which Morrison would later develop into a book with a more ominous title, *The Death of French Culture*, he asserts that, despite all of the French government's support and subsidization of the arts, "France today is a wilting power in the global cultural marketplace." This is true, he claims, in literature, cinema, art, and music. In addition to all of the facts and figures he provides, the article includes an illustration by Jonathan Burton to drive Morrison's point home: the image depicts a French artist standing at the intersection of broad Haussmannian boulevards of Paris as he is about to be run over by a pink 1960s-era convertible representing Hollywood.[1] The implication is clear: if nothing changes in the contemporary French cultural sphere, the American culture, which has flooded France since World War II, will continue to flatten France.[2]

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[1] This is a fitting symbol. As David Fine has said in the introduction to his collection of essays on fiction about Los Angeles: "Violence comes by gun and, most appropriately for the locale, by the automobile. As Los Angeles emerged, in the 1930s, as the city on wheels, the car in fiction became the symbolic death instrument" (16).

[2] See Quignard's *L'Occupation américaine* (1994) for a literary illustration of America's postwar cultural "occupation" of France.

Morrison's article was not the first of its kind. In fact, it echoed an article that Alan Riding had published for *The New York Times* a decade prior entitled, "Where is the Glory that was France?" According to Riding, "French creativity has lost its spark" and French culture has "taken refuge in the past." One of the reasons that he identifies to explain this waning French prestige is the government's attempt to "manage" culture.[3] Riding also blames "the powerful tradition of intellectual snobbery, which requires that commercial success in the arts be scorned, particularly if it involves anything remotely linked to American popular culture." Intellectuals, he says, perennially favor the obscure and the elitist over the successful and the accessible.

Although both Morrison and Riding paint a dismal picture of the arts across the board, the state of literature, as they depict it, is perhaps most alarming. In fact, in the interim of the two aforementioned articles, Riding would write another article for the *New York Times* in 2006: "After Foreigners Take Four Top Book Awards, Is French literature burning?" If non-French French-language writers have won four of the six most coveted French book prizes, Riding muses, they must be "offering something absent in homegrown French fiction." Riding, like Morrison, attributes this to the fact that the contemporary French novel, which he says still suffers from the influence of the introspective and esoterically experimental *nouveau roman*, is not open to the world, is navel-gazing and narcissistic, and does not tell stories.[4] Not only are foreign writers

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[3] See Meunier's review essay of Frédéric Martel's study *De la culture en Amérique* (2006). She explains that "France is a medium-sized country with a medium-sized economy, but it has been able to project greater political might in the world and weigh more heavily in international affairs than would be dictated by its size alone thanks to the particular quality and the unique 'rayonnement' of French culture" (86). In order to protect what is left of the 'rayonnement,' Meunier asks whether France needs to consider adopting a cultural policy like America's (which Martel outlines in his study).

[4] See also similar comments by American writer, Douglas Kennedy, in Schofield's article, "Why don't French books sell abroad?"

capturing French book awards, but American and British fiction are also thriving in France, while French fiction struggles to find an audience abroad, especially in the United States.[5] The portrait these two journalists paint is morose, though they both seem blind to the much talked about *retour du romanesque* in French fiction since the 1980s.

American and British journalists are not, however, the only people writing about the crisis of French literature – and of French culture, more generally. This discourse of decline comes not just from outside France, but also from within. It is present in Tzvetan Todorov's *La littérature en péril* and Richard Millet's *Désenchantement de la littérature*, for example. *Déclinisme* and the discourse on the crisis of the French novel is not new. In the introduction to his 1995 study, *The Contemporary Novel in France*, William Thompson traces the history of the various manifestations of such discourses throughout the twentieth century, and especially after World War II.[6] Though often unjustified, as Thompson shows, the crisis and death of the French novel has been endlessly foretold.

Tanguy Viel situates his latest novel, *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan* (2013), in the context of this discourse of decline. The narrative begins as the narrator describes the moment when, troubled by the state of the contemporary French novel, which he had come to find "trop statique, trop pétrifiée d'une certaine manière" (9), he decided to write an American novel:

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[5] In the past five years, numerous articles have appeared questioning the exportability and translatability of French novels to the U.S. literary market. See Bouchy, Kaprièlian, Marie, Savigneau, and Schofield. Only Marie's article – which appeared in *Le Nouvel Observateur* and also on the French Culture in the U.S. embassy website – presents the issue in a positive light.

[6] See also Ruth Cruickshank's *Fin de Millénaire French Fiction: The Aesthetics of Crisis* and Dominique Viart and Laurent Demanze's *Fins de la littérature: Esthétiques et discours de la fin*.

> [...] j'ai fini par me dire que j'étais arrivé au bout de quelque chose, qu'après tout, mes histoires, elles auraient aussi leur place ailleurs, par exemple en Amérique, par exemple dans une cabane au bord d'un grand lac ou bien dans un motel sur l'autoroute 75, n'importe où pourvu que quelque chose se mette à bouger. (9)

One could read the narrator's admission about the French novel being too rigid and fossilized as a sign of defeat, initially. It is as though this French writer, like the artist in Burton's illustration, has been bowled over by a convertible carrying American culture. After all, he admits that he has more American novels than French novels in his personal library and has remarked that these very same American novels are translated and sold in bookstores around the globe. They are, he says, "des romans internationaux" (10). Thus, he spends the rest of the novel detailing his writing process and relating fragments of the end result, a novel about Dwayne, a former university professor from Detroit who drives aimlessly about in his old Dodge as he struggles to deal with his recent divorce. By the end, however, the narrator gets so caught up in retelling the story which he has written that his presence diminishes as Dwayne finds himself caught up in his uncle's illegal international art trafficking ring, and eventually, on the run from the law, heading down the highway toward New Mexico, where his music idol, Jim Sullivan, once mysteriously disappeared.

Ultimately, even though Viel's narrator claims to choose the most characteristically American elements that he can imagine with regard to protagonist, plot, and place, it is quite clear that *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan* represents a rather ironic attempt to write an American novel. Viel's narrator may purport to write this "American novel" because he has fallen victim to the discourse on the crisis of the French novel and finds French literature "inadaptée au besoin d'air que j'ai intensément ressenti à un moment de ma vie et que j'ai commencé à respirer en lisant des romans

américains" (9-10), but the end result, Viel's novel, actually serves as proof that French literature is not *à bout de souffle*. Just as Viel has previously turned to cinema as a source of inspiration to invigorate his writing, he turns to the contemporary American novel for the same reason. In *Cinéma*, as Ari Blatt has demonstrated, Viel "taps into the vast pool of celluloid resources in order to show that a less defeatist option is just as likely: namely, that in an age when mass visual culture threatens to disintegrate the culture of the book, film might be destined not to suppress literature, but rather to enrich it" (*Pictures* 150-51).[7] In *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan*, Viel continues this tradition of incorporating that which might be said to threaten the vitality of French literature into his writing in order to enliven it. Though he imitates certain elements of the American novels invading French bookstores, he also departs from them at times, refusing to lose his own style and refusing to let go of his Frenchness. Viel feigns acquiescence to the hegemony of American literature, but his work actually shows that if American fiction is currently at the center of the global literary marketplace, it does not have to remain that way. In the end, it is apparent that this is Tanguy Viel's playful pastiche of contemporary American literature and his response to the pressures that threaten French literature both from outside and within France. French fiction, according to Viel, is alive and well. After all, *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan* is not an American novel, but a *roman américain*, and a *roman américain* is always also a *roman français*.[8]

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[7] See Viart who says that "Pour Viel, le cinéma est à la fois le concurrent avec lequel rivaliser et la source d'inspiration à laquelle s'abreuver" (*Anthologie* 284). See also Franchini and Chassagne 1, Viart *La littérature* 293, and Viart and Demanze 262-63.

[8] In this chapter, I will also refer to the *roman américain* as an "American novel" as distinguished from an American novel.

In this chapter, I will analyze not only how Viel successfully pastiches American fiction, but also how Viel's use of *mise en abyme* and allegorical choice of setting, along with his poetics of anamnesis highlight the "Frenchness" of this work, all the while leaving room for his own unique storytelling style.

American Pastiche: Viel's Recipe for writing an American novel

La Disparition de Jim Sullivan represents Viel's greatest departure from his previous works with regard to setting, as all of his previous works for the *Éditions de Minuit*, are set in a French port city that is – or at least resembles – his hometown of Brest.[9] But, Viel's appropriation and imitation of the American novel should come as no surprise. America has loomed large in Viel's other novels. Not only do the members of the jazz quartet in *Le Black Note* (1998) give themselves new identities based off of the great American jazz players of the John Coltrane Quartet, but they also dream of escaping across the ocean to the States. In *Insoupçonnable* (2006), Lise and Sam also dream of fleeing to the States, their "terre promise" (70). More significantly, one of the trademarks of of Viel's style is that he finds much of the inspiration for his fiction in American crime and suspense cinema (e.g. Hitchcock, Coen, Scorcese).[10] This is evident in *L'Absolue perfection du crime* (2001) where one can see elements of American hardboiled gangster movies like Martin Scorcese's *Goodfellas* (1990). It is also evident in *Insoupçonnable* where the bungled kidnapping plot appears to have been inspired, in

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[9] See Blatt "Manic Fictions" where he talks about how there are limited, if any, explicit references to the real world in Viel's texts prior to *Paris-Brest* (373-74).

[10] Hitchcock was British, of course, but the films he made in the United States are often considered American. In his book, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929-1968*, Andrew Sarris said that, "Alfred Hitchcock is the supreme technician of the American cinema" (57). In an interview with Maxime Pierre and Laurent Mauvignier, Viel specifically identifies Hitchcock with "ce qui s'est passé dans l'Amérique des années 40-50" (Mauvignier and Viel "Affronter la crise" 8).

part, by the Coen brothers' film, *Fargo* (1996).[11] Viel's predilection for appropriating American cinema is most evident in *Cinéma*, which is Viel's literary remake of Joseph Manckiewicz's 1973 film, *Sleuth*. Though *Sleuth* is a British film in terms of production and distribution, it was directed by "one of the most brilliant of American directors" (Godard 13). Certainly, Viel is no stranger to American culture, and he is not afraid of recycling it in his works.

In *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan*, Viel is not shy about explicitly naming which American writers his narrator imitates. In one scene, the narrator describes how Dwayne and his mistress would lie for hours in a motel bed engaging in a passionate postcoital discussion about sex and literature. In agreement about the fact that "leur histoire ressemblait à un roman" (63), they debate who the author of their story should be: Jim Harrison, Laura Kasischke, Joyce Carol Oates, Richard Ford, or Philip Roth (63-64).[12] If they cannot agree on one, perhaps that is because all of the aforementioned authors have influenced Viel's novel. Theirs are the novels which inform the narrator's conception of what an American novel is and does and which serve as the basis for his "recipe" for writing an American novel.

Throughout the novel, the narrator explains that he chose this or that narrative technique or situation because "[...] il n'était pas question de déroger aux grands principes qui ont fait leur preuve dans le roman américain" (12). Therefore, the protagonist must be a divorced, middle-aged professor (12, 19-20) and there must be: an emphasis on minute details (23), a dinner scene which allows for the presentation of

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[11] See Guichard's article, "Fargo sur mer."

[12] Other American writers Viel references are: Melville, Thoreau, Whitman, Emerson, William Faulkner, Kerouac, Burroughs, Pynchon, and DeLillo. Alice Munro is also mentioned, though she is Canadian. Of the authors Viel mentions, Melville, Faulkner, Pynchon, Roth, and DeLillo have written works now widely considered Great American Novels.

all of the main characters (46-48), the physical description of characters (31-32), nature scenes (78-82), flashbacks (35), references to important historical events (25, 98), and adultery (106).[13] Intertwined with the narrator's account of how he incorporated all of these elements into his novel, one sees implicit intertextual allusions to specific American novels. As the narrator foreshadows Dwayne's ex-wife Susan's infidelity during the cookout scene, one recalls the cookout scene in Roth's *American Pastoral* during which Swede Levov discovers his wife is having an affair with his neighbor.[14] When Viel's narrator describes the suburban Detroit neighborhoods Dwayne and Susan live in before and after the divorce (29-31), one recognizes the unmistakable echo of the description of Frank Bascombe and his ex-wife's suburban New Jersey neighborhoods in Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter*. As for the narrator's account of Dwayne's affair with Milly, his former student who also works at a diner, one realizes that Dwayne has the same weakness for former students and waitresses as Cliff does in Jim Harrison's *The English Major*. And those are just a few isolated examples. The similarities abound.[15]

If, at first, it seems that the narrator is setting out to write an American novel entirely out of admiration for their international reputation, it soon becomes clear that his deference is ironic, his praise ambivalent. He is not trying to write an American novel, but rather, a caricature – or pastiche – of one.[16] On several occasions, however,

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[13] The list goes on. Other elements in the recipe are: the creation of a *fresque sociale* of different characters and narrative threads (59), the need to include a map (75), the blending of fictional and real people in a political thriller (120), and the fact that secondary characters tell their stories too (101); the narrative never comes full circle (147); and bizarre disappearances and aliens are to be expected (84, 153).

[14] This dinner scene also echoes the dinner scene at the beginning of Viel's own novel, *Insoupçonnable*.

[15] I would like to thank Tanguy Viel for pointing me on the right track with regard to some of the specific titles that inspired him.

[16] By pastiche I mean, "A work, esp. of literature, created in the style *of* someone or something else; a work that humorously exaggerates or parodies a particular style" (*OED* 2a). I prefer to use the

Viel has declared that he does not situate his work in the tradition of parody or pastiche. For example, in an interview with Maxime Pierre, he said, “Je n’ai pas l’impression d’être dans le détournement, au contraire: j’ai l’impression que je vais chercher là des moyens d’arranger ma propre matière” (2-3), and furthermore that, “Je n’identifie pas l’écriture à un acte de résistance, de subversion, aucune catégorie qui ferait que la littérature serait identifiée comme quelque chose de différent de la langue partagée, que cela se montre” (7). If he claims “aucun rapport au pastiche” (Liger “L’homme” n.p.), that is because he sees his texts as serious and sincere homages to the hypotexts (or films) that inspire him.[17] This may be true of his other texts – especially *L’Absolue perfection du crime* and *Insoupçonnable*. Nevertheless, in *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan*, Viel evinces the “cheerful[ ] irreveren[ce]” that Mikhail Bakhtin describes in his discussion of Ancient Greek parodies (55). Viel explicitly draws our attention to the recipe elements so that we recognize the form and style of American novels. Yet what results is not an American novel, but rather, *the image of an American novel* (Bakhtin 51).[18] Or, in other words, Viel’s “American novel” is actually his ludic critique of American novels. As Baptiste Liger has said, “Toute la malice de Tanguy Viel tient justement dans sa manière,

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broader term, pastiche, instead of the narrower term, parody, for the same reasons Kemp does in his article on Jean Echenoz’s crime fiction pastiches. As Kemp explains, when “rehabilitated […] from its connotations of aridity and degeneration [as Jameson defined it, pastiche is] a useful term for the ‘second degree’ text, which allows for parodic elements in the transtextual relationship without prescribing them, does not presuppose the intentions of the writer, and does not require us to set ourselves against the semantic inertia of modernist and pre-modernist conceptions of parody” (180). See Kemp 179-80 for an illuminating discussion on varying definitions of parody and pastiche by Bakhtin, Genette, Jameson, Hutcheon, and Rose.

[17] In both the ambivalence he directs toward the hypotexts in question and in the way he is reluctant to call his work parody or pastiche, Viel channels Jean Echenoz. See Kemp “Crime Fiction”: “Although Echenoz considers these appropriations as homages, and rejects the suggestion that his works are parodies, his use of crime fiction conventions is very unorthodox” (181).

[18] In the original text, while referring to the parodic sonnets at the beginning of *Don Quixote*, Bakhtin says that: “what results is not a sonnet, but rather *the image of a sonnet*” (51). See also Bakhtin 59 and 74-77 where he talks respectively about how parodied genres do not belong to the genre they parody and how the parody is an intentional linguistic and stylistic hybrid established in a process of reinterpreting, reworking, and re-accentuating.

particulièrement virtuose et pleine d'ironie, d'enchevêtrer l'action et le commentaire. Et de combiner le sérieux et le second degré, en ayant toujours un sens critique " ("Tanguy Viel" n.p.)

One sees the way that Viel masterfully combines action and commentary, seriousness and the second-degree particularly in his treatment of two specific ingredients, namely flashbacks and the obligatory references to historical events. With regard to the necessity of including flashbacks in an American novel, the narrator explains that:

> Même si je n'aime pas trop les flash-backs, je savais qu'il faudrait en passer par là, qu'en matière de roman américain, il est impossible de ne pas faire de flash-backs, y compris des flash-backs qui ne servent a rien, quand souvent il y a des pages entières sur la mère du héros ou le père du héros mort depuis longtemps, au point qu'on en arrive à oublier qu'on est dans le passé, et qu'alors, quand on revient au présent, on a l'impression que c'est le contraire, je veux dire, que c'est le personnage principal qui ne sert plus à rien. Pour m'a part, j'ai essayé de faire attention à ne pas m'éterniser dans le passé des personnages, mais il y a quand même des choses qu'il fallait raconter, des choses à propos de Dwayne Koster, des origines de Dwayne Koster, et si je puis dire, des fêlures de Dwayne Koster. (35)

Viel's narrator's assertion that he dislikes flashbacks and does not wish to "[s]'éterniser dans le passé des personnages" (34) recalls Frank Bascombe's statement that, "Americans put too much emphasis on their pasts as a way of defining themselves" (Ford 24). Immediately after admitting that trips to the past in novels annoy him, however, Bascombe proceeds to present his family history in the second chapter of Ford's novel.[19] Viel mimics this contradiction between Bascombe's narrative preference

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[19] Roth's *American Pastoral* also places a great deal of emphasis on the past: The reason Nathan Zuckerman sets out to write the story of his hometown hero, Swede Levov, is because he wants to understand how Swede's daughter's political terrorism three decades prior "transports him out of the longed-for American pastoral and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral – into the indigenous American berserk" (Roth 86). As he says, "To embrace your hero in his destruction, however – to let your hero's life occur within you when everything is trying to diminish him, to imagine yourself into his bad luck,

and narrative practice perfectly. Immediately after questioning the usefulness of flashbacks, the narrator begins the next chapter by launching into a series of analepses in order to explain the events in Dwayne's life that brought him to where he is in the opening scene of the narrator's novel, idling outside his ex-wife's house. Any idea that Viel is solely serious or sincere in his desire to emulate American novels evaporates. The flashbacks are not only extended – lasting from p. 35 to p. 106 – but also exaggerated. Directly after announcing that he does not particularly like flashbacks, the narrator leaps back several centuries to describe the origin of "les Koster d'Amérique,"specifically how Johannes Hendrick Koster came to American in 1652 after losing his family's entire inheritance in the 1637 Tulip Mania, "[le] premier krach boursier de l'histoire de l'Occident" (40). While Tulip Mania is in fact a verifiable historical event, its presence with the story sounds rather far-fetched, only adding to the humorous effect of the already over-exaggerated flashback. By mimicking the incongruity of Bascombe's statements and by exaggerating the flashbacks, Viel destroys any sense of verisimilitude, rendering the convention of American flashbacks absurd.[20]

As the narrator recounts flashback after flashback, he also fulfills another recipe ingredient by depicting how Dwayne's life and fate is tied to history. In this, he is most certainly alluding to the fact that, in Roth's *American Pastoral*, Swede Levov is described as "history's plaything" (87): World War II made the Swede the town hero, but Vietnam led to his tragic fall when his daughter, inspired by the self-immolation of the Tibetan monks around the time of JFK's assassination, set off a bomb at the local post office in

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to implicate yourself not in his mindless ascendancy, when he is the fixed point of you adulation, but in the bewilderment of his tragic fall – well, that's worth thinking about" (88). Therefore, the narrative enters into flashback upon flashback as Zuckerman "dream[s] a realistic chronicle" (89) for Swede Levov's life after his fall.

[20] See Kemp "Crime Fiction" 183 for a discussion of how Echenoz also uses exaggeration to the same effect.

protest against the war, killing one person and shattering the Swede's previously perfect life. Again, Viel exaggerates this American convention, tying key points in Dwayne's story not only to JFK's assassination, but also to the Vietnam War, and especially to 9/11 and the Iraq War, ensuring that Dwayne might also be called "history's plaything." On the day of JFK's assassination, Dwayne interrupts his mother cheating on his father, an event which created the fissures that would provoke his mental meltdown 40 years later (42-44). Though Dwayne never fought in Vietnam, the training alone was enough to give him PTSD and make him an alcoholic with "réflexes guerriers" (33, 94, 137) that only exacerbate his fragile mental state.[21] (These factors land him in a psychiatric hospital after he has a breakdown and unremorsefully burns down a video store upon discovering that Milly is filming a pornographic movie for the store's owner.) And since the narrator's novel is set at the turn of the 21st Century, he does not miss the opportunity to harp on the role that 9/11 and the war in Iraq play in further derailing Dwayne's life. If Dwayne watches the terrorist attacks on the WTC unfold while in his room at the psychiatric hospital (98) and then sits out front of his ex-wife's house listening to the news of the war in Iraq on his radio, it is because these are, in the narrator's eyes:

> de ce genre d'événements qu'on ne passe pas sous silence quand on est américain, je veux dire, écrivain américain, de ce genre d'événements qui planent au-dessus des livres et savent impliquer les personnages dans les problèmes de leur temps. C'est une chose dont on ne peut se passer en Amérique, la présence d'événements récents qui ont eu lieu en vrai comme la destruction des tours ou la crise financière ou bien l'intervention en Irak. Ce sont des choses qui doivent faire comme une onde de choc sur les personnages [...]. (25-26)

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[21] Both Roth's Swede Levov and Ford's Frank Bascombe trained as soldiers but did not end up fighting in WWII and Vietnam, respectively. While driving, Harrison's Cliff listens to news about the war in Iraq on the radio just as Dwayne does.

September 11th and the subsequent war in Iraq do have a violent effect on Dwayne Koster, just not in the capacity one would typically anticipate in an American novel. Dwayne does not lose a loved one in the terrorist attacks and he does not violently protest the war the way Swede Levov's daughter protested the Vietnam War. Rather, he finds himself on the lam, running from the FBI, after becoming embroiled in his uncle's illegal trade of ancient relics pillaged from Iraqi palaces and museums during American attacks on Baghdad. Everything in Dwayne's life is linked to major events in American history. Everything is exaggerated and over the top.

Besides overstating the recipe elements so as to make them appear absurd, Viel presents a stereotypical and caricatured image America, inspired by fiction (and film), not by real life experiences. The narrator frequently describes people, places, and plot points using the phrases "ce genre de" or "ce type de." For example: the chalet where Lee Matthews lets him stay when he separates from his wife is "le genre de chalet qu'on trouve beaucoup près des lacs, avec dedans le minimum pour vivre et même un poêle pour l'hiver, et puis un matériel de pêche digne d'un professionnel" (75-76); the garage where he buys his 1969 Dodge Coronet is "le genre de garage qu'on ne trouve qu'aux États-Unis" (90); and Dwayne's friend, Ralph, works as a traveling sales representative for veterinary products, in other words, "ce genre de métier un peu mélancolique qu'on trouve dans les romans américains" (101). The characters are also types. When the narrator refers to Dwayne, Alex Dennis, Lee Matthews, or the FBI agent as "un type," he is, of course, referring to the fact that they are men, guys. But at the same time, they are type-characters. Dwayne is not just a guy sitting in a white car outside his ex-wife's house ("un type arrêté dans une voiture blanche…" (16)). He is an amalgam of the

protagonists of the American novels that Viel is parodying.[22] He is "l'habitant type [de Détroit]" (21). He is "comme beaucoup d'Américains" (50). The presence of these quintessentially American people and places in *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan* are meant corroborate "une certaine idée de l'Amérique"(50). They make America seem uniform and homogenous.

Indeed, the idea that the narrator can successfully write an American novel based on a recipe of the themes and tropes of several contemporary American novels implies, as anti-American writers like Georges Duhamel did before him, that American cultural products have a formulaic quality. Of course, this is not true (certainly with respect to the works Viel references),[23] but he focuses on – and emphasizes – what they have in common, as opposed to what makes them unique. For example, during the obligatory nature scene in the wilderness, the narrator comments that this scene is like "toutes ces choses que Dwayne avait lues mille fois dans mille romans qui le fatiguaient un peu, disait-il, les feux de camp et les ours qui fouillent dans les poubelles, dans les romans, oui, ça le fatiguait un peu" (80). Such a passage only reinforces the idea that all American novels are products of the same mold, or recipe.

Though Viel exaggerates certain tendencies of American novels, implies that they are formulaic, and irreverently mocks the way Americans react to catastrophic events in history, one should not read *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan* as a malicious attack on Americans or American novels. Instead, Viel's tone and posture in this pastiche is akin to that of his Goncourt-winning Minuit predecessor, Jean Echenoz.[24] In

[22] Not coincidentally, there is a scene in *The Sportswriter* that is almost identical to the opening scene of the narrator's novel in which Dwayne idles in front of his ex-wife's house.

[23] If this were true, Roth's *American Pastoral* would surely not have won the Pulitzer Prize.

[24] Philippe Lançon, Norbert Czarny, and Sabine Audrerie all draw comparisons between Viel and Echenoz in their reviews of *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan*.

Echenoz's crime fiction pastiches, as Simon Kemp has demonstrated, "comedy and criticism are inextricably bound up," but they are always more playful than hostile and there is always "more metafictional celebration than derision" ("Crime Fiction" 186-88). According to Genette, it is this combination of intelligent analysis and ludic appropriation that make for a successful pastiche:

> L'hypertexte à son mieux est un mixte indéfinissable, et imprévisible dans le détail, de sérieux et de jeu (lucidité et ludicité), d'accomplissement intellectuel et de divertissement. Cela, bien sûr et je l'ai dit, s'appelle l'humour, mais il ne faut pas abuser de ce terme, qui presque inévitablement tue ce qu'il épingle. (Genette *Palimpsestes* 32; qtd. in Kemp "Crime Fiction" 185)

In *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan*, the narrator's use of irony, exaggeration, and burlesque criticism lucidly and "ludicly" turns the tables on the literary situation described at the outset of the novel. The fact that a French writer so easily appropriates the themes, narrative situations, and techniques of American novelists does not demonstrate a lack of creativity on his part. Instead, it calls into question the creativity and originality of the original works. The fact that he is able to incorporate "toutes ces choses qui méritaient des pages et des pages pour qu'on comprenne ce qui allait se passer, ou que certaines choses ne se passeraient pas" (51), into his 153 page text humorously suggests his superior French storytelling skills – or, at the very least, his exceeding economy of expression. After all, the American novels he pastiches range from 300-700 pages.

The Mirror in the Text – The Frenchness of *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan*

It is not accidental that Viel structures his novel around a *mise en abyme* of a French narrator detailing the narrative choices he made while writing his "American novel," also entitled *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan* (18). While the narrator's *La*

Disparition de Jim Sullivan is the story of Dwayne Koster, Viel's *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan* is both the story of Dwayne Koster and the story of a French writer writing an "American novel" about Dwayne Koster. In other words, it is a *mise en abyme* both of story and of narration.[25] This only reinforces the fact that the putative American text before us is the result of a French writer's creative genius. It reminds us that this novel is not – and, in essence, never will be – an American novel. As Jean-Claude Lebrun has said, "Il ne faut pas s'y tromper: malgré les apparences, Tanguy Viel n'a pas écrit un roman américain, mais une fiction typiquement 'made in France'. Toute de références, de clins d'œil et d'ironie. Avec pour décor en trompe-l'œil les Etats-Unis, leur littérature et ses poncifs."[26]

Paradoxically, the narrative structure Viel employs to insist on the novel's Frenchness is actually quite similar to the structure of Roth's *American Pastoral*. At the start of *American Pastoral*, the narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, describes his life-long fascination with the hero of his hometown, Swede Levov. After discovering that the Swede, as he is more commonly known, has died, the narrator realizes that all of his assumptions his legend were misplaced. He thus decides to write the Swede's story, to "exchange my solitude for his, inhabit this person least like myself, disappear into him" (74). Zuckerman's imagined chronicle of the Swede's life comprises the rest of the novel which never returns to the level of enunciation.[27] Zuckerman literally disappears into his character. It is clearly to this open-ended frame story that Viel's narrator refers when he says that, "en Amérique les lignes qu'on trace ne font jamais de boucles" (147).

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[25] This is also what Linda Hutcheon terms mimesis of *process* "that, as in Aristotle's definition, includes diegesis or storytelling, but also language itself" (x).

[26] See also Motte 223.

[27] It ends at the Swede's dinner party in 1973, not in 1995 when the narrator decides to write the Swede's story while attending his high school reunion.

Viel's novel also does not come full circle, ending at the level of Dwayne's story – as Dwayne walks off into the desert with Jim Sullivan (153) – without ever fully returning to the narrator's level.[28] Despite these patent similarities with regard to the open-ended frame structures, there is one major difference between Roth's novel and Viel's: though Viel's narrator never fully reappears at the end of the novel, he also never fully disappears. Throughout the narrative, unlike Roth's narrator, Viel's narrator frequently interrupts the diegesis to remind the reader of his presence.[29] For example, after recounting the scene where Susan cheats on Dwayne with his arch-nemesis, Alex Dennis, the narrator begins the next chapter in the following way:

> J'ai souvent hésité pour savoir dans quel ordre raconter toute l'histoire, à cause des différents personnages qui la traversaient et donc les différentes lignes narratives qui finiraient par se recouper plus ou moins mais requéraient forcément la patience du lecteur. Mais je n'ai jamais douté que c'était comme ça qu'on écrivait un vrai roman américain, surtout si je voulais que ça fasse comme une fresque, ainsi qu'il est souvent écrit sur la quatrième de couverture, souvent il est écrit 'véritable fresque qui nous entraîne dans les méandres de l'humanité' et ce genre de phrases tout à fait attrayantes qui expliquent le caractère international du livre.
>
> Toujours est-il que c'est ce moment-là que j'ai choisi, après qu'Alex et Susan avaient pour ainsi dire entamé puis clos leur liaison, pour qu'on découvre l'autre pan de la vie de Dwayne Koster, un pan qui s'appelait Milly Hartway [...]. (59)

Following this passage, the narrator continues, debating why he felt Milly's name had to be Milly and explaining that he wrote "des pages entières sur Dwayne et Milly" (60), before disappearing again as he recounts the circumstances of Dwayne and Milly's affair. For this reason, it is impossible to distinguish completely between the narrator's story about Dwayne and the narrator's discourse about writing Dwayne's story.

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[28] It ends in April/May 2003, not in 2012/2013 when the narrator is writing. (We can ascertain that the narrator is writing in 2012/2013 because he says that Jim Sullivan disappeared "il y a presque quarante ans" (18). Jim Sullivan disappeared in 1975, so 2012/2013 would fit that timeframe.)

[29] There are sections of Roth's novel that switch from third-person to first-person narration. These passages do not depict interjections, but rather moments when the narrator "disappears" into his character's thoughts, shifting from external to internal focalization. See 210-14, for example.

Though Viel's use of *mise en abyme* blurs the narrative levels, the narrator's interjections foreground his control. In previous works, Viel's narrators seem to lack control. As Alice Richir has said: "Comme nous venons de le voir, les personnages de *L'Absolue Perfection du crime* et d'*Insoupçonnable* sont assujettis à un modèle fictionnel propre au *polar*. Le narrateur lui non plus n'échappe pas à la force motrice de ce modèle générique: il apparaît d'emblée comme piégé au sein d'une dynamique sur laquelle il n'exerce aucun contrôle" (63). But here, in *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan*, the narrator demonstrates agency. In the passage quoted above, his hesitation before certain decisions related to the order of the story does not depict his powerlessness, but rather, his carefully reasoned narrative choices, as emphasized by his insistence that *je n'ai jamais douté*, *je voulais*, and *j'ai choisi*. He is not "dépossédé de son dire et de son agir" (69) as Richir claims Viel's narrators are.[30] Viel's narrator resists the recipe for writing an American novel. As he represents himself in the writing process, he often draws attention to the fact that he is not just any writer, but, specifically, a French writer. At one point, the narrator explains that, "Si j'étais un vrai romancier américain, c'est sûr que j'en aurais profité pour raconter dans le détail la vie de Ralph Amberson [...]" (101). Implied within this conditional phrase is the fact that he does not do this because he is not a real American novelist. In the same way, the narrator, who initially said that "il n'était pas question de déroger aux grands principes qui ont fait leur preuve dans le roman américain" (12), later admits that he does have some reservations about what he will include. If he does not want to write a political thriller, he explains that this is

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[30] Dwayne, the character in the narrator's story is, however, the one who is caught up in a story beyond his control, destined to fail. Like the characters who are "réduits à des parangons romanesques, pris dans les rouages d'une formidable mécanique fictionnelle, qui s'exerce au détriment de leur autonomie" (Richir 62), he is a type. He contemplates "Le même rêve d'évasion" as the protagonists of *L'Absolue Perfection du crime* and d'*Insoupçonnable* who are "pris au piège d'un scenario dont ils ne peuvent s'extraire" (Richir 60).

because, "Après tout, même si j'ai regardé vers l'Amérique tout le temps de mon travail, je suis quand même resté un écrivain français" (120).[31]

Ultimately, as I have said, Viel's use of *mise en abyme* displays the French narrator as author and reminds the reader that *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan* is very much a French novel. As we read the summary of the writing process of a novel that the narrator has already written, we are encouraged to revel alongside the narrator at his artistic genius. For this reason, Viel's thriller is very different from Joël Dicker's American-style thriller, *La Vérité sur l'affaire Harry Quebert* (2012), and not only in length.[32] It is true that the young Swiss author also chose to structure his novel around a *mise en abyme* in which the novel we are reading is the one that the autodiegetic narrator wrote. However, the narrator of Dicker's novel is American. In the best-selling and award-winning novel, as Chelsea Cain has said in her glowing review for *The New York Times*, "There are heady notions at play: truth and storytelling, mentors and students, writers and publishers, perhaps even a thought or two about the state of American literature. It all gets very meta." Yet, there are no diegetic markers of the novel's European origins. One imagines that those who read the American translation of Dicker's novel – which Penguin Books acquired with its largest advance ever – may not even realize that the book at hand is a translation.[33] There are no markers of Frenchness (or even of foreignness) on the cover of the American edition either: it does

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[31] This appears to be a moment of unreliability on the narrator's part. Even though he says he does not want to write a political thriller, the narrator's description of Lee Matthews' illegal art trade does mention that members of the Republican party are involved. Whether the narrator is sharing elements that he did not include in his novel or whether this is, in fact, a moment of unreliability on the narrator's part is not entirely clear. This passage does evoke the way the characters debate the Watergate scandal during the dinner scene in *American Pastoral*, even though *American Pastoral* is not a political thriller, but rather a *fresque sociale*.

[32] At 664 pages, Dicker's novel is 511 pages longer than Viel's.

[33] News about Penguin Books' high bid for the English translation received attention from *The Guardian*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, and *Publisher's Weekly*.

not identify a translator, and the author's name appears in all capital letters, omitting the diaeretic accent on the "e" in the author's first name. It may include the phrase "#1 International Bestseller," but that could just as easily be an American novel or a text from any other nation. Tanguy Viel, on the other hand, has written a *roman américain* which does not lose or hide, but rather exudes, its Frenchness.

If Viel's *mise en abyme* structure echoes Roth's self-conscious narrative structure in *American Pastoral*, it demonstrates what Sartre meant when, in his 1946 article "American Novelists in French Eyes," he described the "incessant exchange which makes nations rediscover in other nations what they have invented first and then rejected" (118). After all, Gide was the one who coined the term *mise en abyme*.[34] The device was then popularized by the writers of the *nouveau roman*. They valued the way that *mise en abyme* allows for introspection and used it such that: "La littérature, peu à peu persuadée qu'elle ne pouvait échapper à la clôture du langage, était ainsi à elle-même devenue à la fois son propre miroir, son terrain de prédilection et son chantier de fouilles. Dès lors, elle paraissait vouée à ne plus développer que des élaborations formelles, des jeux avec le langage et avec les structures" (Viart *Littérature* 15-16).

Whereas the writers of the *nouveau roman* used this device – this "mirror in the text" – to have the novel turn inward on itself, Viel's use of the mirror in the text actually reflects outwardly, connecting the world of the text with the real world. This is evident in the way he alludes to the contemporary French literary scene in the opening chapter. In writing a novel set in America that is a pastiche of American novels, Viel is all the while thinking about France and French literature.[35] In fact, the idea of reflections and

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[34] See Dällenbach 7-38.

[35] Scholars have often insisted upon the fact that French writers use America as a surface of reflection when they write about it. In other words, when they talk about America, they see or think

reflexivity as it relates to the use of *mise en abyme* encourages one to reconsider the significance of Viel's choice of Detroit – a city in which "un habitant peut percevoir dans son champ visuel jusqu'à trois mille deux cents vitres en même temps" (11-12) – as the setting for *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan*. Of course, a *vitre* is a window, not a mirror, but, under the right conditions, 3,200 of them can be just as reflective. It is not coincidental that Viel reiterates his view that Detroit is "une ville pleine de promesses et de surfaces vitrées" (12).

Viel's choice of setting is not a trivial matter. In fact, the issue is so important that he has the narrator spend the better part of the first two chapters describing his decision to set the novel in Detroit and then presenting a brief history of the city. As such, Viel encourages the reader to reflect upon why this novel is set where it is. Detroit is the perfect setting for Viel's *roman américain* not, as the narrator would initially have us believe in an intentionally incongruous comparison, because it is "une vraie ville internationale [...] une ville aussi moderne que New York ou Los Angeles" (11).[36] Nor is it because several of the writers Viel references (e.g. Ford and Harrison) often situate their work in Michigan.[37] Rather, Detroit is a perfect setting for this novel because it is an American city with French roots.

Although Viel does not make this fact explicit, it is hidden within the narrator's brief account of Detroit's history at the outset of the second chapter. When he says,

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about France. Two examples of this would be Tocqueville's *De la démocratie en Amérique* (1835) and Frédéric Martel's more recent *De la culture en Amérique* (2006). See Meunier and Zunz.

[36] Based on this statement, Viel's choice of Detroit would seem perplexing. While Detroit was once a major industrial center and is still America's automotive center, it is no secret that Detroit has been in a state of economic and demographic decline for the past 60 years and is generally not considered one of America's most thriving, global cities on the level of New York and Los Angeles. Surely, the narrator is being ironic, which only adds significance to the real reason, in my opinion, that he chose to set his novel in Detroit.

[37] Jeffrey Eugenides, another American writer who is popular in France, but whom Viel surprisingly does not reference, set his debut novel, *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) in Michigan.

"depuis qu'un certain Cadillac a planté son drapeau sur Griswold Street en 1701" (14), the narrator is referring to the founding of Fort Pontchartrain du Détroit by a French explorer, Antoine Laumet de Lamothe Cadillac.[38] In another thought-provoking omission, the narrator does not specify that Father Gabriel Richard, the priest who pronounced the words *Speramus meliora; resurget cineribus*[39] after the city burned to the ground in 1805, was a Frenchman who had recently fled France during the Reign of Terror (Woodford 38-39). That phrase he pronounced would eventually become the city's motto, emblazoned on its seal (Woodford 38-39). Although the narrator does not mention it, the French influence in the founding and flourishing of Detroit extends further in history. When it came to rebuilding after the fire, Judge Augustus B. Woodward drew up a city plan based on the one that Frenchman Pierre Charles L'Enfant had designed for Washington D.C. (Woodford 39). Perhaps it should come as no surprise that Detroit has also been called the Paris of the Midwest for its architecture, its public spaces, and for Washington Boulevard (Conot *American Odyssey* 9, 8-17). Though most no longer think of Detroit as the Paris of the Midwest, the city's flag still reflects its French heritage with *fleurs-de-lis* occupying the flag's lower left quadrant.

Detroit is also the ideal setting for Viel's novel because of its storied history – from the fire that razed the city in 1805 to the urban exodus which led to Detroit's economic and demographic decline in the latter half of the 20th Century and into the 21st Century, not to overlook its more prosperous times as a major industrial hub and the

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[38] Cadillac named the settlement accordingly because it stood on "le détroit du Lac Érié." See Woodford's chapter "The French Village" to read more about how "the wilderness outpost was founded [...] to control the rich fur trade in what is now Michigan and the Northwest Territory [...] and to prevent the British from encroaching upon the region" (15). After its founding, it remained under French control for sixty years.

[39] In English, "We hope for better things; it will rise from the ashes."

center of the American automotive industry. As the narrator explains, this volatile history gives Detroit a certain "riche[sse] d'un point de vue romanesque" (11):

> Il faut dire, depuis qu'un certain Cadillac a planté son drapeau sur Griswold Street en 1701, depuis qu'un certain Pontiac a voulu reprendre la ville en 1763, depuis qu'un certain Ford s'est installé à son tour en 1896, la ville a connu les temps prophétiques annoncés par le pasteur [Gabriel Richard] et la fumée nouvelle des automobiles, mais elle semble en partie retournée aux cendres qui hantaient sa naissance [...]. (14)

In keeping with its slogan, *Speramus meliora; resurget cineribus*, Detroit, as the narrator describes it, is a phoenix, which periodically perishes in flames – literal or figurative – only to rise again, a symbol of hope for future regeneration.[40] Certainly, it cannot be a coincidence that this "American novel" written by a French author is set in an American city that was founded by a Frenchman and has a novelistic history. One can read the narrator's account of Detroit's history as an allegory for the state of French literature. Indeed, in writing a novel set in America that is a pastiche of American novels, Viel is all the while reflecting on his French literary heritage. In presenting Detroit's history, Viel holds the history of Detroit up to his readers as a mirror, inviting them to draw a parallel with recent French literary history. After all, just as Detroit figuratively returned to ash in the latter half of the 20th Century, contemporary Cassandras such as Alan Riding have suggested that French literature has returned to ash, as well.

"Faim de la littérature": Rising from the Ashes, Writing from the Ruins

Whether or not Viel is specifically aware of Riding's article questioning whether French literature is burning, Viel is certainly aware of the discourse of decline. In fact, in 2010, he participated in a roundtable discussion entitled "Faim de la littérature" at a

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[40] The narrator also likens Detroit to "une sorte de Pompéi moderne, dont la lave ne proviendrait pas d'une roche incandescente, plutôt des crédits et des dettes, poussant à cet exode urbain dont la question se pose d'où ils sont allés, tous ces gens [...]" (14).

colloquium in Lyon, the proceedings of which became Dominique Viart and Laurent Demanze's *Fins de la littérature: Esthétique et discours de la fin*.[41] Though the discourses of crisis state that the French novel is stuck in its ways and out of touch with the world, Viel asserts that, "il me prend de rêver que la littérature redevienne un lieu de conversation avec le monde. Parce qu'au fond, c'est peut-être ça qui est en arrière-fond des discours d'aujourd'hui" (Viart and Demanze 259). The Cassandras can prophesy all they want, but Viel does not believe them. And yet, he admits that when he first set out to become a writer, a storyteller, he found himself in a difficult situation. He was torn between the desire to tell stories based on his appreciation of *une littérature pleine* (Poe, Doyle, Balzac, etc.) and his respect for *une littérature vide* (the works of New Novelists and other avant-garde writers like Beckett, Kafka, Bernhard):

> Il me restait donc à me demander comment écrire avec ce double héritage, l'héritage de quelqu'un de vingt ans ou vingt cinq ans qui a envie d'écrire des fictions, donc qui croit dans la littérature, de manière certes complètement mythologique, mais qui y croit, et en même temps se sent sans cesse ballotté par des impossibilités et des résistances à remettre la littérature au centre d'un dispositif. (Viart and Demanze 252-53)

Viel knew he could not write like Balzac, but he also understood that he could not write like Beckett either.[42] This left him between a rock and a hard place.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Viel's first novel, *Le Black Note*, represents this tension he feels between a desire to tell stories and the recognition that, after *l'ère du soupçon*, one cannot naively turn back the clock. For the writer who has said that "Pour moi, un livre, c'est une maison" (Viart and Demanze 252-53), it is not insignificant that the

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[41] This volume is the first of four in a series that assemble papers from four different conferences that took place in Lyon, Paris, Rome, and Lille in 2010 and 2011. The "Fins de la littérature" colloquium took place at the École Normale Supérieure de Lyon on November 25-27, 2010. See Viart and Demanze 10.

[42] See Allemand 302, Mauvignier and Viel "Affronter la crise" 7, and Viart and Demanze 252-53.

narrator of *Le Black Note* recounts repeatedly, in fragmented bursts, the story of how the house he once shared with the other members of his jazz quartet burned to cinders. Given the allegations of the "Declinists" that French literature is removed from the world, it is fitting that the house was located on an island, isolated from the mainland. With respect to the metaphorically-charged, burned house in *Le Black Note*, Viel himself has said:

> Et c'est peut-être ça l'histoire des ruines dans *Le Black Note*, c'est écrire après avoir, disons-le en toute modestie, beaucoup lu et après des images de livres, des images de livres totalement épuisantes, épuisées du roman, du point d'énonciation, de la possibilité qu'un sujet énonce quelque chose. Bref, qu'une parole ait lieu serait l'objet, qu'elle restitue un monde quitte à le fabriquer, c'est-à-dire qu'elle trouve une correspondance fictionnelle entre les mots et les choses. Qu'elle redécouvre un objet premier. Seulement, tout ça est tremblé, cassé, ruiné, défait. Il faut avoir la conscience que de l'objet premier, tout se dérobe, tout s'enfuit. Qu'il est posé à l'horizon du texte à la fois (et paradoxalement) comme sa finalité et son impossibilité constitutives. On ne va pas refaire l'histoire de la modernité mais quand on arrive comme moi, quand on a vingt-cinq ans en 1998 et quand on a lu Beckett, Duras, Bernhard, l'image du livre est l'image monumentale du passé plus l'image du livre déjà défait dans toutes ses considérations. (André and Faerber 90)

The literary scene a younger and unpublished Viel came upon seemed daunting. Reflecting this, ruined houses and failed families are a motif that runs through all of Viel's works for Minuit. In *Le Black Note*, the house is not only reduced to cinders, but the jazz quartet also disbands as a consequence. In *Cinéma*, the marital infidelity of Andrew Wyke's wife undoes him. When the cuckolded husband seeks revenge, the Wyke mansion becomes the scene of a fatal crime that will surely ruin Andrew. In *L'Absolue perfection du crime*, betrayal and backstabbing lead to the organized crime family's downfall, and in *Insoupçonnable*, one lover betrays the other and decides to set up house with the brother of her former husband. In *Paris-Brest*, the father's alleged crime drives a wedge between family members, and the narrators' attempt to reunite

with them for the holidays proves too much to bear. In that case, it is the manuscript of his *roman familial*, not the family residence, which ends up burning. Finally, in *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan*, one encounters a narrator reportedly mourning the death of French literature and a character mourning the ruins of his past family life, haunted by his (personal) history. Viel, too, is haunted by his (literary) history, as is apparent in his self-professed conception that writing is "une longue déploration, un échec préparé et qui jouit de lui-même. Ce peut être très heureux, l'écriture, mais forcément sur des cendres, sur quelque chose de noir au fond" (Allemand 309).

The weight of literary history, which manifests itself as ruins and broken households, represents Viel's awareness that he is always writing *a posteriori* (Andre and Faerber 89; cf. Viart and Demanze 259-62). For Tanguy Viel, "Le roman se fonde donc sur une redite, comme si l'auteur venait trop tard, et que le monde avait tout dit. Cette lassitude devant la répétition n'empêche pourtant pas l'œuvre de s'écrire, luttant contre un progressif engourdissement en proclamant le plaisir de dire, toujours là, et de raconter" (Franchini and Chassagne 4). In this postmodern moment, there is the sense that all stories have been told.[43] Thus, it is also not incidental that all of Viel's novels are retellings. As Hubert has said with regard to *Le Black Note*, "Il n'y a plus d'action quand le livre commence car le récit se fait à posteriori des évènements. L'action est transformée en fantasme de l'action, en image rêvée du réel. Il y a un écart entre la

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[43] In an interview Viel has spoken directly about this: "Finalement je trouve cette idée de postmodernité de plus en plus juste. Non pas vraiment le recyclage des codes, mais ce sentiment que nous arrivons « après », que toutes les histoires ont été jouées et surtout déjouées, que nous appartenons à un monde de spectres, entièrement reconstitué, parce qu'entièrement détruit avant nous : peut-être il faudrait lire le XXe siècle comme ça, comme la mise à sac de trente siècles de littérature. Alors depuis quelques années, nous puiserions sur ce champ de ruines, dans lequel nous avons à disposition une sorte de capital global de figures à réassembler. Si la postmodernité peut ressembler à ça, alors oui, nous y sommes" (Allemand 303). See Viart *La Littérature* 19-21 and also Viart and Demanze 259-260.

pensée et la réalité de l'action" (Hubert 9). In *Cinéma*, the narrator is reciting – or at least attempting to recite – his favorite film.[44] In *L'Absolue perfection du crime*, the narrator is reenacting the failed casino heist for the police. In *Insoupçonnable*, the narrator, shocked by his lover's betrayal, might be said to be mentally rehashing all of the elements of their plan in order to determine if there were any signs of Lise's impending betrayal that he had missed along the way. In *Paris-Brest*, the narrator re-narrates and comments upon the family story that he has already written in novel form. Lastly, in *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan*, the narrator is also re-presenting the novel that he has already written, which is, itself, a rewrite of American novels. Writing for Viel is a process of reciting, recycling, and reconstructing from the ruins. He cannot ignore "la bibliothèque" (Demanze 261), by which he means all of the literary texts that have come before him.

Nevertheless, in Viel's estimation, the library is not a place of *enfermement*, but rather of *libération*: "Écrire en sachant que des milliers de gens ont écrit avant nous, ce n'est pas s'éloigner du monde, c'est aller chercher dans le monde des traces d'existence, des pics de sensibilité, c'est espérer rejoindre une forme rêvée et même absolue de la communauté humaine" (Viart and Demanze 261-62). In *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan*, Viel is engaging in dialogue with "the American library." But on a deeper level, below the surface, he puts his text in conversation with "the French library," as well. At the same time that he explicitly cites, reworks, and reconfigures American literature, Viel also incorporates implicit elements into both the *matière* and the *manière* of his text that point to his French literary heritage.

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[44] Of course, as Blatt has pointed out, this ekphrastic ideal proves impossible. See *Pictures* 142-44.

As I previously mentioned, Viel's use of *mise en abyme* can be read as an acknowledgement of the ongoing influence of the New Novelists (and other avant-garde writers of the 20th Century).[45] Though Viel's use of *mise en abyme* reflects outwardly to the world in a way that it does not in many *nouveaux romans*, it does depict "l'aventure de l'écriture" that Jean Ricardou evoked in his study, *Nouveau roman: hier, aujourd'hui*. Like the texts of Michel Butor, Marguerite Duras, Robert Pinget, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and Claude Simon, Viel's novel "examines and traces its own nature" and, at times, appears "more interested in discussing the constituents of fiction than in creating it" (Prince "New Novel" 989-90). Even though Viel does place his text in dialogue with the real world, he is conceivably more concerned with the "realities of representation" than he is with the "representation of reality" (Prince "New Novel" 992). In point of fact, *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan*'s representation of America is not only intertextual; it is also virtual. The descriptions of the 3,200 windows in Detroit's skyline and of the city's poverty, violence, and state of abandon are based on the writer's online research – "d'après ce que j'ai lu sur Internet" (11); "ai-je lu aussi" (13); "sur mille photos qui circulent sur Internet" (14) – not real life experiences.[46] In *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan*, Viel's narrator feels obliged to include the physical description of characters in his "American novel," "même si je ne suis pas trop pour décrire physiquement les personnages" (31). In Viel's other novels, it is certainly true that "la dimension physique des personnages est presque totalement occultée" (Hubert 7).[47] The fact that his characters are typically "fuzzier" is a gesture towards the New Novelists' dismissal of

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[45] The self-reflexivity of Viel's novel stemming from his use of *mise en abyme* also links him to Cervantes, Diderot, Sterne, Borges, etc. See Norbert Czarny and Moix's reviews of *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan*, and especially Hutcheon's *Narcissistic Narratives*.

[46] Viel, like the narrator, did not travel to the United States to write this novel.

[47] See also Blatt "Manic" 374 and Richir "Masque" 67.

anthropocentrism.[48] Certainly, Viel does not entirely eschew character and plot or other techniques of traditional narrative, nor does he take uncertainty, relativity, and unpredictability (Prince 991) to the same extremes as the New Novelists, but he does tell the story in a fragmented, nonlinear fashion.

Viel also tips his hat to the members of Oulipo, the group of writers and mathematicians founded in 1960 by François Le Lionnais and Raymond Queneau, who sought to invent new potential forms of writing by experimenting with arbitrary formal constraints designed to stimulate the imagination and encourage innovation. Viel's title, *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan* echoes that of Georges Perec's well-known "Oulipian" crime novel, *La Disparition*. In Perec's lipogram, the letter "e" is missing. In Viel's novel, it is Jim Sullivan who is missing – not just in the sense that he disappeared into the New Mexican desert in 1975, as the narrator explains, but also in the sense that Viel's title is misleading. Jim Sullivan is not the main character. The main character, Dwayne, enjoys listening to Sullivan's music and is captivated by the story of his disappearance.[49] Jim Sullivan is present only in his absence. Moreover, in many ways, Viel's recipe for writing an American novel can be viewed as an "Oulipian" constraint that the author has given himself. His attempt to name all 50 American states, which references the jigsaw puzzle of the United States that Cliff carries along on his road trip in Harrison's *The English Major*, is a more subtle, yet no less "Oulipian," constraint. If Viel does not name all of the states – only 38! – one can assume that it is because Cliff does not visit all of the states in

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[48] See Hippolyte's *Fuzzy Fiction*. He describes how the epistemological uncertainty or "fuzziness [of figures] questions the nature and function of fiction after the formal dead ends of the 1960s and underlines its inherent unaccountability, its duplicity, no matter how readable the stuff may now seem […] In short, [these fuzzy subjects] point to the absence of referentiality in character development, while at the same time they underscore the inescapable need for heroes in literature" (18-19).

[49] See Czarny: "Il est en effet probable que le narrateur, à l'instar d'un certain Hitchcock, fasse de Jim Sullivan un MacGuffin, une de ces fausses pistes qu'aimait l'auteur de *La Mort aux trousses*" (n.p.).

Harrison's novel or because some were cut during the editing process.[50] Either way, it is clear that, just like the members of Oulipo, "Tanguy Viel souligne la valeur génératrice du modèle fictionnel, lequel, en faisant se mouvoir les différents acteurs romanesques, rend possible la mise en récit" (Richir "Masque" 69). What's more, if, according to Christelle Reggiani, Perec's constraints can be read as "un moyen de faire revenir le romanesque dans le roman" (Shaffner par. 4), then Viel's constraints can also be read as a desire to bring the novelistic back to the novel.

In the way that Viel channels Perec's "envie d'écrire des livres qui se dévorent à plat ventre sur son lit" (Penser/Classer 10),[51] he actually situates himself most closely to the writers of the post-1980 *retour au récit*. Dominique Viart has explained the return to storytelling in the following way:

> Aux jeux formels qui s'étaient peu à peu imposés dans les années 1960-70 succèdent des livres qui s'intéressent aux existences individuelles, aux histoires de famille, aux conditions sociales, autant de domaines que la littérature semblait avoir abandonnés aux sciences humaines en plein essor depuis trois décennies, ou aux 'récits de vie' qui connaissent alors un véritable succès. Le goût du roman, le plaisir narratif s'imposent à nouveau à des écrivains qui cessent de fragmenter leurs récits ou de les compliquer outrageusement. (Viart *La Littérature* 7-8)[52]

Éric Chevillard, Marie Darrieussecq, Patrick Deville, Marguerite Duras, Jean Echenoz, Annie Ernaux, Christian Gailly, Éric Laurrent, Patrick Modiano, Christian Oster, and Jean-Philippe Toussaint are identified as key writers who helped to bring about this

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[50] This also creates an intertext with Perec's *La Vie mode d'emploi* in which Bartlebooth is unable to complete all of the puzzles. It also makes one think of Michel Butor's *Mobile: Étude pour une représentation des États-Unis*. He begins each section by "Bienvenue au/en ______," naming the states from A to Z. As Jean-Philippe Mathy has said, "Butor's narrative itself vies with Freedomland in this effort to totalize reality past and present, to exhaust, through the encyclopedic accumulation of details, anecdotes, trivia and the display of erudition, the multiplicity of being" (*Extreme Occident* 167).

[51] This is the fourth of four personal literary objectives that Perec laid out in the section "Notes sur ce que je cherche" of his posthumously published *Penser/Classer*. The other three objectives are: "sociologique" ("le monde qui m'entoure"), "autobiographique" ("ma propre histoire") et "ludique" ("le langage")" (10).

[52] See also Asholt and Dambre 11, Davis and Fallaize 15, and Kemp *French Fiction*.

shift. Though their works return from "Gidian self-consciousness, surrealism, the *nouveau roman*, Oulipian constraint, and the extremes of *Tel Quel*ian transgression" (O'Meara 299) to more traditional modes of subjectivity, characterization, plot, and storytelling, they do not return fully to the traditional, "Balzacian" realism of the 19th Century. As Viart has said, "Le 'retour au récit' se joue dans l'intervalle de ces deux pôles selon la formule d'un 'je sais bien, mais quand même': il s'agit de retrouver le romanesque sans y souscrire, d'assumer la 'pulsion narrative' sans s'y abandonner naïvement" (*La Littérature* 410).[53] Thus, the writers of this "littérature à double registre" (Viart *La Littérature* 411) constantly point out the artifice of the stories they tell, resort to techniques of narrative distancing and second-degree such as irony and pastiche, and relay a sense of anguish or anxiety about narrative in a dry-witted, often minimalist style.[54]

As I have showed above, Viel's use of pastiche in *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan* along with the way he anchors his texts in literary history situates him in the lineage of Echenoz and other Minuit writers. Viel cannot simply tell Dwayne's story. As his narrator describes the various narrative choices he made when he wrote his "American novel," he reminds us that the story is a construction. Viel also incorporates elements of another current of ludic and impassible novels, "le roman fantaisiste"[55] into his "American novel." In *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan*, the narrator's implication that aliens and bizarre disappearances are par for the course in American novels – "Et puis voilà, c'est l'Amérique" (84, 153) – ostensibly applies more to this trend in French literature

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[53] The "deux pôles" are "un goût pour les récits, une nostalgie de leurs élans – et la conviction qu'il n'est plus possible, aujourd'hui, d'en écrire de semblables" (Viart *La Littérature* 410).

[54] See Viel's comment in André and Faerber 93-94. See also Moix.

[55] "Lorsque la dimension ludique se conjugue à l'étrangeté, elle bascule vers d'autres mondes, comme parallèles au monde quotidien et non dénués de fantaisie" (Viart *La littérature* 420).

than to the American novels that he references. Indeed, the fact that Dwayne converses with an apparition of Jim Sullivan "en surimpression sur son pare-brise" (108) and eventually walks off into the desert with him at the end of the novel patently illustrates the fanciful tendency of some contemporary French novels which leave realism behind. In his use of irony, pastiche, and fantastic elements, "Tanguy Viel s'amuse et subvertit, s'invitant dans le sillage d'ironie tracé par d'autres aux Éditions de Minuit" (Audrerie in *La Croix* n.p.).

It is no surprise that scholars have described Viel as a writer who is very cognizant of the historic moment in which he is situated.[56] One could say that he has a poetics of anamnesis which is encapsulated in *L'Absolue perfection du crime* by Marin's aftermarket American rearview mirror engraved with the phrase, "les objets dans le miroir peuvent être plus près qu'ils n'apparaissent" (15).[57] This rearview mirror symbolizes "cet effort constant de réécriture et de rétrolecture" (André and Faerber 97) in all of Viel's writing: he moves forward without forgetting where he has come from, always looking backward at his literary heritage which looms large behind him. Near the end of *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan*, the scene where Dwayne presses on the accelerator and speeds straight ahead (150-52) echoes a statement Viel made while discussing Marin's metaphoric rearview mirror, namely that, "il faut bien qu'il y ait en nous quelque chose capable d'appuyer sur un petit accélérateur pour faire défiler la route devant même si, selon les individus, la taille du rétroviseur est plus ou moins grosse, plus ou moins large. Ou tout du moins, la tentation de le regarder" (André and

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[56] See Viart *Anthologie* 284.
[57] See André and Faerber 97.

Faerber 98).[58] Though always looking in the rearview mirror, Viel does not merely recycle the techniques of other Minuit and writers of the return to storytelling. Stepping on the accelerator, he also forges his own narrative path.

Tanguy Viel, Master of Suspenseful Storytelling

Dominique Viart has said that "ces romans [impassibles et ludiques] privilégient le récit sur l'histoire, qui, en dernier ressort, importe peu, mais amuse beaucoup, parfois au péril même de sa cohérence" (*La littérature* 412). That is not entirely true for Viel. He certainly takes pains to show that he is not naïve in his storytelling, as I hope to have shown.[59] But, he does not let the narrative discourse (*le récit*) overrun the story (*l'histoire*). In interviews, Viel has not hid his appreciation for – and desire to tell – good, suspenseful stories. He has said that, "L'histoire, le scénario si on préfère, est quand même un élément capital pour moi" (Guichard n.p.), and furthermore that, "La seule chose que je sais dire de mes livres c'est que leur but ultime est de raconter une histoire, et de la raconter le mieux possible" (Pierre 2). Elsewhere he has spoken of his irrational fear of boring himself and his readers because, in his opinion, "c'est aussi le propre du roman d'être sinon policier, au moins 'intrigant'" (Guichard n.p.) because, in his opinion, "si l'on écrit un roman c'est pour que d'autres jouissent du récit qu'on raconte" (Pierre 4).[60]

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[58] Perhaps the fact that Dwayne drives off the cliff at a bend in the road symbolizes Viel's sentiment that, even if you could turn the rearview mirror in different directions, "je ne pense pas que l'on puisse changer la route sur laquelle on est" (André and Faerber 98).

[59] Richir says that, « En effet, Viel ne vise pas tant à reproduire les codes d'un genre narratif classique—le *polar*—qu'à élaborer une fiction consciente d'elle-même et de ses effets » ("Masque" 68-69). See also Hubert who says that, "L'écrivain a le souci de faire du livre un espace qui ne soit ni l'impuissance de la littérature ni l'artifice de la vie mais un espace pudique, conscient, critique, suspendu entre le monde et l'homme" (54).

[60] See also where Viel expresses his opinion that, "la tâche du romancier est de raconter une histoire" ("L'homme" n.p.). Viel's work clearly illustrates what Davis and Fallaize mean when they say that,

Tanguy Viel is known not only for the anamnesis and the intermediality of his novels, which constantly look to the past while also mobilizing cinematic scenes and techniques, but also for his suspense-filled *polars* and his "aisance narrative efficace" (Viart "Anthologie" 284). While none of the American novels Viel draws inspiration from is a crime novel or suspense thriller, *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan* is precisely that. As Norbert Czarny wrote in a review of the novel, "*La Disparition de Jim Sullivan* est en effet un roman à suspense. En tant que roman américain, ç'aurait pu être 'une véritable fresque qui nous entraîne dans les méandres de l'humanité', mais son auteur ne l'a pas voulu" (n.p.). Viel willfully leaves out some ingredients of the American novel and adds in additional ingredients borrowed from his previous works – ingredients which are themselves borrowed from American crime cinema and 19th C. gothic novels, such as vengeance, organized crime, high-speed chases, and murder.[61] Viel's departure from the American novels Viel imitates becomes more apparent once the narrator's diegesis returns to the time of the first scene after his foray into flashback after flashback (106). It becomes more like one of Viel's other novels. It also becomes more cinematic (even though Dwayne's torching of a video store might be said to symbolize Viel's attempt to raid the American fiction shelves at the bookstore instead of his personal DVD collection).[62] At that moment, it becomes clear that Viel's novel is not just "l'aventure

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"One of the salient features of more recent fiction has been the rediscovery of the pleasure of writing and, whatever the degree of sophistication of the novelist in question, the role of writer as storyteller and entertainer" (15).

[61] See Allemand 302, Richir "Masque" 58, and also Franchini and Chassagne 2.

[62] Several of the more cinematic scenes are: the FBI agent spying on Dwayne and Lee in the antique shop; the American soldier dying in Baghdad; the two hit men riding a motorcycle to a bar; Dwayne driving down the road from Baltimore in a scene with atmosphere akin to that of Edgar Ulmer's ill-fated *Detour*; and Dwayne driving off the road like Thelma and Louise at the conclusion of the eponymous film

d'une écriture," but also "l'écriture d'une aventure." It is a suspense-filled story, packed with adventure and excitement.

In truth, Viel's narrator has been preparing the reader for the moment when the story would take over all along, building suspense gradually using techniques borrowed from none other than the master of suspense himself, Alfred Hitchcock. Hitchcock was renowned for his ability to plant narrative bombs in order to create tension and anticipation. The key, Hitchcock maintained, is that the public must be aware of the bomb's existence. That way they become engaged spectators, participating in the scene, enduring fifteen minutes of suspense instead of the mere fifteen seconds of surprise they would experience if they were not aware of the bomb's presence.[63] Without a doubt, Viel, who has previously professed his admiration of Hitchcock,[64] has mastered this distinction. The narrator's revelation that Dwayne and Susan's respective marital infidelities are like bombs in their lives (57-58, 64-65) is a nod to Hitchcock's narrative bombs, as well as to the bomb that destroys the Swede's life in *American Pastoral*.[65] Just as Hitchcock said the spectator must be made wise to a potential bomb that will go off, Viel's narrator begins to assemble the pieces of the bomb from the start. He informs the reader that Dwayne is mentally unstable and suggests that it is not a good idea for him

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[63] See Truffaut 73 for Hitchcock's full explanation of the distinction between surprise and suspense.

[64] See Viel's *Hitchcock, par exemple*.

[65] The language Viel's narrator uses echoes the language the Swede's brother uses in *American Pastoral* to explain to the narrator how the fact that Merry was the Old Rimrock bomber affected the Swede. He says that,
"His life was blown up by that bomb. The real victim of that bombing was him" (68), and again that, "That crime could never be made right. There was no way back fro my brother from that bomb. That bomb detonated his life. His perfect life was over. […] The bomb might as well have gone off in their living room" (69-70), and still further that, "How could a big, sweet, agreeable putz like my brother be expected to deal with this bomb? One day life started laughing at him and it never let up" (74). Reeling from the shock of this unsuspected admission, the narrator says that, "It all began for the Swede – as what doesn't? – in a circumstantial absurdity. And ended in another one. A bomb" (80). A few pages later, he refers to the Swede's daughter and the decade "blasting to smithereens his particular form of utopian thinking" (86). See also 341.

to be idling in front of his ex-wife's house (33, 43-44). Though we do not know why, we learn that Dwayne no longer teaches at the University of Michigan (27) and that his ex-wife has a restraining order against him (33). Very quickly, we also learn that Dwayne's ex-wife is now in a relationship with Dwayne's arch-rival, Alex Dennis, a man who has one-upped Dwayne not only in poker and teaching, but also, now, in romance. While Dwayne sits, spying on his ex-wife and Alex Dennis at the outset of the novel, the narrator tells us that "ce passif [entre les êtres], à un moment ou à un autre, il faudra le liquider" (34). We also learn early on that Dwayne's uncle, Lee Matthews, will play an important role in the novel (though the narrator does not begin to explain this further until fifty pages later (24, 74)). In this manner, by then end of the first section of the novel, the narrator has identified the components of the narrative bomb. He provides the reader with just enough clues to leave her with an ominous sense of foreboding, knowing that something bad will happen, but not knowing exactly how or when it will happen: "le problème restait là, suspendu à la fin d'un chapitre, et on attendait la suite pour comprendre comment on en était arrivé là" (35). It is not a question of if, but when the bomb will go off: "Et bien sûr, ça arriverait. Bien sûr, des deux bombes qu'ils avaient chacun tenues dans leurs mains, Susan et Dwayne, c'est la sienne, Dwayne, qui exploserait" (65). The fact that the reader does not know exactly how, when, or where the bomb will explode, draws her in. After all, suspense, as Hitchcock said, "is the most powerful means of holding onto the viewer's attention" (Truffaut 72). Suspense propels the story forward, even as it enters into some sixty odd pages of analepses.

Viel also employs Hitchcock's technique of utilizing larger-than-life versions of objects to give them heightened significance in his films (e.g. the phone in *Rear Window*

and the glass of milk in *Suspicion*).[66] Viel has commented previously on his desire to draw the readers' attention to certain objects of thematic or narrative importance in the same way in his writing: "Dans le roman, j'aimerais bien que certains objets aient cette puissance-là, de concentrer toute la charge émotive du récit: la peur, l'inquiétude, la cruauté seraient contenues dans le panama, la Jaguar ou le club de golf. En termes stylistiques, on appellerait ça une métonymie [...] Voilà, c'est ça un objet pour moi, une sorte de tout petit contenant, mais qu'on peut remplir à l'infini" (Guichard n.p.). While Viel is referring to *Insoupçonnable* in this statement, it certainly holds true of the amplified importance of certain objects in *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan*, notably the objects in Dwayne's 1969 Dodge Coronet. Just as the winter weather describes Dwayne's wintry mood in the opening scene of the narrator's novel, the objects in the car describe Dwayne's personality, and together, foreshadow what is to come (16). The bottle of whisky on the passenger seat and the mess of cigarettes in the ashtray represent Dwayne's fragile mental state. The fishing and baseball magazines on the back seat signify his status as an everyday American man who appreciates quintessential American pastimes. The copy of *Walden* in his trunk reminds the reader of his former life as an English professor.[67] The punk rock CD by the Stooges serves a memento of Dwayne and Susan's happier days (32, 68). Of all the objects, the hockey stick in the trunk appears, at first, to be an insignificant addition, an afterthought to the narrator's enumeration of Dwayne's remaining possessions: "et puis une crosse de hockey" (16). Yet, over the course of the novel, its reappearance makes it the "largest"

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[66] See Guichard.

[67] In Harrison's *The English Major*, Cliff frequently refers to his appreciation of Thoreau. Unlike Dwayne, he takes solace in nature, and ultimately, decides to turn to art and literature as an outlet. As the novel ends, things start to take a turn for the better as he begins the process of reconciliation with his ex-wife and looks forward to rebuilding his grandfather's farm.

object with the most highly charged meaning. At one point, after describing how Dwayne and Ralph talk baseball during the barbecue, the narrator explains that "le vrai sport emblématique, le vrai ciment entre les êtres, ce n'est pas le baseball, non, c'est le hockey sur glace" (49). While this fact merely seems to justify the presence of the hockey stick in Dwayne's trunk, the narrator's subsequent explanation of the sport has a more foreboding effect. Ice hockey is, he explains:

> un sport violent, un sport extrêmement sauvage qui va très bien avec une certaine idée de l'Amérique […] un sport qui convient très bien à des types comme Dwayne Koster, si on considère comme les Américains que dans le sport on exorcise ses démons, si on considère surtout que Dwayne Koster est un personnage plus complexe et plus sombre qu'il en a l'air et que, comme beaucoup d'Américains, il y a des volcans qui sommeillent dans son cerveau – le type de volcans qui peuvent se réveiller d'un instant à l'autre. (50)

The narrator's description of the sport is revealing and makes one reevaluate the potentially nefarious significance of the hockey stick in this hot-blooded man's trunk. By the third time the hockey stick appears, when the narrator candidly explains why he included it among Dwayne's personal effects – "je m'étais dit que [sa crosse de hockey] pourrait servir, je veux dire, de savoir qu'un type un peu nerveux comme Dwayne se promène avec une crosse de hockey dans le coffre de sa voiture, sans être sûr qu'elle servirait forcément ni à quelles fins mais juste que c'était une possibilité" (68-69) – the reader now feels almost certain that, whenever Dwayne's "bomb" explodes, the hockey stick will play a part. And indeed, it does. It becomes the instrument that a panicked Dwayne uses to bludgeon the F.B.I. agent tailing him to death (139-40).

In addition to the suspense-crafting techniques that Viel borrows from Hitchcock, he manipulates his trademark repetitive, rhythmic style to the same end. Some scholars have discussed how the circular and epanorthotic nature of Viel's writing

gives it a more visual, cinematic, musical, or colloquial aesthetic.[68] Others have suggested that the panicked, pained, and desperate utterances of Viel's narrators reveal their mental anxiety and their inability to say what they want.[69] Viel, himself, has said that he feels the need to use hypertrophic language and long sentences alternately to convince himself of the novelistic value of what he is writing; to depict the narrator in the midst of writing; or to express the continuous character of thought.[70] All of these assertions ring true as they characterize Viel's diverse and dynamic modes of expression. Nonetheless, in *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan*, the primary effect of the repetition is different. In this novel, the narrator is lucid and in control as he details his adventure of writing an American novel. His protagonist, Dwayne, is the one who is frenzied and mentally unstable.[71] Viel uses the rhetorical device of repetition expertly not just to express emotions and ideas, and not just to clarify, but especially to emphasize and accent, to create drama and suspense. As Czarny has said: "[La phrase] tourne, elle ressasse, elle emprunte à l'oral, elle joue du retardement, laissant exploser le mot final, celui qu'on attendait avec l'impatience de l'enfant qui écoute un conteur, à la fois inquiet et joyeux." Through a process of delay and duplication, the repetition suspends or slows narrative progression, while paradoxically creating a rhythm which

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[68] See Czarny, Durand 445, Richir "Masque" 68 and Richir "Faire jazzer la voix narrative" 71-79.

[69] See Blatt "Manic" 375-77 and *Pictures* 149. See also Franchini and Chassagne 2.

[70] See Roy and Guichard.

[71] Once he is released from the hospital and begins drinking again, Dwayne only becomes more hysteric and irrational. When Dwayne realizes he is being followed while on his way to deliver the Sumerian relics to Uncle Lee, the string of repeated phrases relay his racing thoughts and the panic which has taken hold of him (136). The repetition increases the rhythm and mimics the quickening of his heartbeat and the shortening of his breath. It gives a sense of urgency and immediacy. In these moments, the narrator spends less time telling his adventure of writing and, instead, allows the reader to experience the adventure along with him.

drives the story forward.[72] Repetition occurs more and more as the novel progresses. It occurs most frequently in moments of foreshadowing and ultimately in key climactic action sequences. The repeated words and phrases act like a crescendo in a movie soundtrack whenever the narrator refers to climactic moments in the story he wrote, whether it be the presentation of Dwayne's foe (27), the revelation of Susan's and Dwayne's infidelity (55, 60), or Dwayne's decision to enlist the aid of Uncle Lee "to take care of" Alex Dennis (76, 107).

Viel also makes use of the narrative device of disnarration to create anticipation.[73] Like repetition, disnarration is "a rhythmic instrument" that can be used to slow narrative speed and multiply narrative possibilities to help create suspense (Prince *Narrative as Theme* 35-36). The narrator tells us what the characters did not do, think, see, or say before revealing what they actually did, thought, saw, or said. Perhaps the best example of this occurs when the narrator imagines the conversation Dwayne could have had with Milly instead of resorting to setting the video store ablaze (96-97). By presenting unrealized possibilities first, the narrator again moderates the narrative speed, suspending the presentation of what actually happened. After all, as Truffaut said to Hitchcock, "the very nature of suspense require[s] a constant play with the flux of time, either by compressing it or, more often, by distending it" (Truffaut 72). If the narrator delays the diegetic truth in such moments, it is to create suspense.

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[72] See Allemand who says that, "Chez [Tanguy Viel], il me semble que les tensions internes et les expansions de la syntaxe se substituent au *suspense* du récit et sont parties essentielles de la dynamique narrative" (304).

[73] By definition, disnarration "covers all the events that *do not* happen though they could have and are nonetheless referred to (in a negative or hypothetical mode) by the narrative text" (Prince *Narrative as Theme* 30). This includes, for example, the mention of Dwayne's unrealized wish for Alex Dennis to return to Minnesota (27, 45-56).

Besides creating suspense, disnarration, like repetition and *mise en abyme*, also depicts the narrator in the act of writing. Disnarration "makes explicit the logic at work in narrative" (Prince 35-36) by allowing the narrator to depict the type of narrative decisions the narrator had to make.[74] It conveys his passion for storytelling. He is a narrator relishing the narrative possibilities open to him who gets caught up in retelling the novel he wrote. Once again, this reinforces the fact that the narrator exercises complete control over his characters and his narratees. On the second page, the narrator's repetition of "je ne dis pas que/je dis que" demonstrates more than just his desire to be precise:

> *Je ne dis pas que* tous les romans internationaux sont des romans américains. *Je dis seulement que* jamais dans un roman international, le personnage principal n'habiterait au pied de la cathédrale de Chartres. *Je ne dis pas non plus que* j'ai pensé placer un personnage dans la ville de Chartres mais en France, *il faut bien dire*, on a cet inconvénient d'avoir des cathédrales à peu près dans toutes les villes, avec des rues pavées autour qui détruisent la dimension internationale des lieux et empêchent de s'élever à une vision mondiale de l'humanité. (10, my emphasis)

Right from the start, the repetition of the verb *dire* directs the reader's attention to the importance of what is said and not said, or what is written and not written. Richir is right to note that Viel's writing is "une réflexion sur le rapport que le sujet contemporain entretient avec l'acte de raconter. Il s'agirait [...] de restaurer dans le même mouvement la capacité du sujet à dire quelque chose de lui-même et celle de la fiction à représenter le réel" (68-69). Viel's narrator's repetition of the verb *dire* and interjections of "ai-je dit" or "ai-je écrit" throughout the novel emphasize not just the importance of telling and writing, but more so, the fact that it is he who spoke these

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[74] Prince has said that, "The overtly metafictional narrative, on the contrary, resorts to it mainly through a narrator in order to multiply signs of arbitrariness and contingency and in order to insist on the text's own artificiality" (*Narrative as Theme* 37). This is also certainly true for *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan*.

words, he who wrote them. Viel's French narrator is the keeper of the words, the masterful storyteller. As Hubert has said, "L'œuvre littéraire ne peut s'accomplir que si l'écrivain rassemble assez de bribes de phrases, de genres épuisés pour prendre la parole, et écrire un récit qui retrouve une transitivité avec le monde. La littérature de Tanguy Viel est une littérature d'après la fin, qui cherche à se figurer pudiquement comme survivante et à affirmer malgré tout son désir de raconter des histoires" (54). It is certainly not inadvertently that, just prior to this passage quoted above, the narrator begins the second and third sentences of the novel anaphorically with "pendant longtemps," a phrase which reminds one of the incipit of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, a story written by one of the greatest French storytellers of all time.

Conclusion

While many contemporary Cassandras would suggest that contemporary French literature is burning, or in crisis, or dead, Tanguy Viel's *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan* responds that French literature is not dead, but rather, alive and well.[75] One of the reproaches that the proponents of the "discours de la fin" have held against the French novel is that it is no longer in dialogue with the world and that it does not tell stories. By contrast, American literature is touted for its ability to tell stories, to tell the world.[76] This has been one of the reasons given to explain the fact that American fiction sells

[75] As Czarny says in his review, "*La Disparition de Jim Sullivan* est aussi un hommage au roman, comme genre vivant." (n.p.).

[76] In addition to the news articles I have cited in the introduction to this chapter, see the comment that Arno Bertina's made during the "Faim de la littérature" roundtable discussion: "C'est ce qui différencierait la littérature américaine de la littérature française: 'eux' sauraient raconter des histoires, déployer un monde. Si on peut leur reconnaître ce talent, ajoutons que les écrivains français ou francophones explorent et magnifient un autre aspect de la littérature : le travail sur la langue" (Viart and Demanze 264). In his article about the "American scene (*version française*)," William Cloonan wagers that American novels attract attention in France, "in part because the stories they tell are perceived to privilege action, movement and extreme situations over Gallic cogitation" (68).

well in France, while French fiction barely makes a dent in the literary market in the United States. Viel's *œuvre* serves as proof, however, that French literature is still in the business of telling good stories. If Morrison and Riding question whether French literature will ever be able to strike a balance between elitist obscurity and popular accessibility, Viel shows that it can be done.[77] He, like Echenoz and other contemporary writers, "draw[s] on themes and structures from popular culture" and shows that "Authors of fiction with serious intellectual and aesthetic ambitions no longer inevitably set themselves apart from the interests of a broad reading public" (Davis and Fallaize 15).

It is interesting to note that Morrison concludes his article by quoting the section of Sartre's "American Novelists in French Eyes," that says: "We shall give back to you these techniques which you have lent us. We shall return them digested, intellectualized, less effective, and less brutal – consciously adapted to French taste. Because of this incessant exchange which makes nations rediscover in other nations what they have invented first and then rejected, perhaps you will rediscover in these foreign books the eternal youth of that 'old' Faulkner" (118).[78] That is exactly what

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[77] Speaking of his admiration for Hitchcock and Fritz Lang in an interview with Maxime Pierre, Viel has previously expressed his desire to find such a balance: "d'un côté on est dans des contraintes de production et de séduction qui les rendent effectivement populaires et qu'en même temps ils arrivent à tisser des liens extrêmement singuliers avec une vision du monde. Et je pense qu'à l'intérieur du roman je pourrais refaire ce compromis, et ce n'est pas un hasard si la technique du cinéma m'intéresse aussi comme durée: j'ai l'impression de faire des livres qui s'écrivent en deux heures, et surtout, même si on ne les lit pas forcément d'une traite, leur économie est basée sur une économie extrêmement cinématographique. D'ailleurs, et je le dis après avoir lu récemment la *Poétique* d'Aristote, les fondements de l'art d'Hollywood ne sont pas très loin de ce texte. Notamment sur la question de la mémoire du spectateur: ne jamais donner plus d'informations que le spectateur n'est capable de se souvenir jusqu'à la fin de l'objet" (Mauvignier and Viel "Affronter la crise" 8).

[78] Morrison then goes on to say, "Thus will the world discover the eternal youth of France, a nation whose long quest for glory has honed a fine appreciation for the art of borrowing." He concludes that France must recognize and appreciate the Francophone artists "committing culture all over the place [...] Therein may lie France's return to global glory."

Tanguy Viel has done. He has re-appropriated techniques that the French once lent to American novelists and "consciously adapted [them] to French taste."

Consequently, Viel's novel asks us to consider what an American novel is. Though this *roman américain* is a work which reworks American literary genres and topoi, in Tanguy Viel's hands, it is very clear that it is fundamentally French. Just as *Cinéma* can never be a film, *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan* can ontologically never be an American novel. It can, however, rival the storytelling capacity of American novels and suggest that a contemporary French novel is just as cosmopolitan, just as "international" as an American one. Not only does Viel respond to the discourse on decline that threatens France from within the Hexagon, but he also respond to the influence of American fiction and demonstrates that French fiction can equal – if not surpass it. To all of those who are predicting the death of French culture and the end of literature, Viel raises them this novel as though to say, *Speramus meliora; resurget cineribus*. Just as the Renaissance Center on Detroit's skyline stands to represent the city's resilience, Viel's novel – a pleasure to read – demonstrates that French literature can and should expect better things.

Conclusion

Sometimes, France and America act like the best of friends. In the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, France demonstrated overwhelming solidarity with the United States as exemplified by Jean-Marie Colombani's headlining article in *Le Monde*, "Nous sommes tous américains." Some thirteen years later, it was the United States' turn to stand with France in denouncing the terrorist attacks against Charlie Hebdo, a policewoman, and a Kosher grocery store in January 2015. Americans joined the chorus of people around the world expressing their solidarity with France and their unshakable belief in the freedom of speech and of the press in the three word proclamation, "Je suis Charlie." U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, made a public address to the French people, as he had several times before, *in French*. President Obama took the opportunity not only to condemn the attacks and share his condolences with the victims' families, but also to affirm the transatlantic friendship that has endured since the days of George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette. In his official statement, he said:

> France is America's oldest ally, and has stood shoulder to shoulder with the United States in the fight against terrorists who threaten our shared security and the world. Time and again, the French people have stood up for the universal values that generations of our people have defended. France, and the great city of Paris where this outrageous attack took place, offer the world a timeless example that will endure well beyond the hateful vision of these killers. We are in touch with French officials and I have directed my Administration to provide any assistance needed to help bring these terrorists to justice. (Obama)

There is no denying that the President's words reinforce the "official discourse" of Franco-American friendship (Bishop 21). But when Obama did not attend the parade in Paris several days later, some questioned how invested the United States really is in the relationship. In other words, after a strong show of verbal solidarity by the leaders of

the United States, everything between France and America returned to "normal" in the Franco-American love affair characterized by "passions, jealousies, idyllic moments, suspicions, break-ups, reconciliations, heartbreaks, [and] the perpetual accusations that 'you don't love me as much as I love you' (Bishop 21). But if "normal" means conflict and drama, one can imagine that there are many present and future *romans américains* to be written. After all, every novel needs conflict, and the Franco-American story is particularly novelistic.

Romans américains do, indeed, continue to be published. As a matter of fact, Frédéric Beigbeder and Christine Montalbetti both added to their collections of *romans américains* this past fall with *Oona & Salinger* and *Plus rien que les vagues et le vent*, respectively. Literary critic, Nelly Kaprièlian, released her debut novel, *Le Manteau de Greta Garbo*, in which the narrator reflects on the Hollywood starlet, her own life, and the role clothing plays in the creation and projection – or masking – of one's identity. Régis Jauffret published his latest novel, *La Ballade de Rikers Island*. With an epigraph announcing that, "Le roman, c'est la réalité augmentée," the novel recounts Jauffret's version of the circumstances surrounding the 2011 Dominique Strass-Kahn affair. Based on current events and recent literary history, I would wager that there will be no shortage of *romans américains* to study in the near future. They are important not only for the picture they present of America, the Franco-American relationship, and quintessentially American genres and topoi, but also for their inherent reflections of French individuals, writers, and society in the third millennium. They engage with contemporary issues including terrorism; social, economic, and racial issues; the nature of reality and the role of art – especially novels – in a digital and global age.

Furthermore, with regard to French views of America, there are many new directions to turn. An examination of the post-9/11 *roman américain*'s antecedents (e.g. Doubrovsky's autofictions) would certainly enrich the study of this sub-genre of the contemporary French novel. It would also be very worthwhile to compare the "fictions" of America in *romans américains* to the images of America in novels by Francophone writers like Dany Laferrière, Catherine Mavrikakis, and Éric Plamondon.[1] Besides looking at novels, it would be intriguing to look at other genres including comic books. The January 2015 issue of *France-Amérique* included a report on a current trend: "Le Western en BD." Finally, cinematic engagements with and representations of America also warrant attention: from recent films set in the United States[2] to French filmmakers who have spent part of their careers in Hollywood or developed an "American style,"[3] to the very rare French remakes of American films.[4]

Indeed, with regard to French views of America, there are many avenues for the taking. One wonders, however, how American artists are looking at France. The June 2011 edition of *L'Express* that I referenced in the introduction to this dissertation claimed to present, "Ce que les Américains pensent des Français." What *do* Americans think of France? Are American writers still writing in or about the Hexagon? In recent years, there have been claims that America is indifferent to France on the political front. In 2003, the U.S. went to war in Iraq without France. A decade later, in late summer 2013, the U.S. opted not to participate in France's plans for military action in Syria

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[1] Several other Francophone writers from Quebec and the Caribbean who have written about America are: Maryse Condé, Jacques Godbout, Monique Larue, Jean-François Lisée and Jacques Poulin.

[2] I am thinking of *2 Days in New York* (2012) and *Le Casse-tête chinois* (2013).

[3] For example, Jean Renoir, René Clair, Marcel Carné, Julien Duvivier, Louis Malle, Luc Besson, Jean-Pierre Jeunet, Pierre Morel, and Bertrand Tavernier.

[4] Perhaps the most interesting case in recent years is Jacques Audiard's *De Battre mon cœur s'est arrêté* (2005), a remake of James Toback's *Fingers* (1978).

(Cohen). In the cultural arena, Beigbeder's *Windows on the World* depicts the average American's indifference to French culture, and American journalist, David Morrison, has boldly declaimed the "death of French culture" in his article "In Search of Lost Time."

In a 2004 special issue of *French Politics, Culture & Society*, Edward Knox says that America's "continued assertion of [France's] decline [and] irrelevance on the world stage" is paradoxical, and prompts him to wonder: "if France is clearly no longer so important, why is it necessary to keep saying so, and what does that insistence indicate about the sayers?" (Knox 2). It is true that French culture is not translating very well in the United States these days.[5] But Americans still have a lot to say about France.[6] Since the Revolutionary period, Americans have been writing in or about France, especially Paris. Adam Gopnik's literary anthology, *Americans in Paris* (2004), presents letters, short stories, and excerpts of American writers and Francophiles from Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson to James Baldwin and Jack Kerouac, not to omit the

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[5] Here, I am using the word "translate" in the sense of literary translations, but also in the sense of cultural translatability. As an example of cultural untranslatability, American reviews of Tavernier's film *Quai d'Orsay* (released in the U.S. as *The French Minister*) reveal that his sense of humor was apparently lost in translation.

[6] Knox provides many examples, saying that: "There continues to exist at the same time a large body of objective and even favorable literature on France. The last ten years have been particularly rich in specialist studies of Franco-American relations, from sister revolutions to war-time alliances, from France as a travel destination to American expatriate life there, from selling American products in France to remaking French films and the challenges of adopting French intellectual discourse. In 2001-2 alone, five books appeared that help Americans understand what it takes to get along in France, France's approach to globalization, cross-cultural stereotypes, Paris's place on the world stage, and the future of French-US relations. The *Tocqueville Review* remained a major source for cross-cultural analysis of Franco-American questions, and *Foreign Affairs* ran overviews of the 'French exception' in 1998 and 2000. In 1999 the Brookings Institution established a Center on France and the United States and has since published an English translation of Foreign Minister Védrine's assessment of France's place in a globalized world, an analysis of the French reaction to globalization, and a prospective overview of US-France relations. Moreover, in addition to some 30 remakes of French films in the last twenty years, from 1990 to the present some 50 personal narratives and works of fiction have taken France for their setting and/or Americans in France as their subject" (2). Despite all of this American interest in France and the Franco-American relationship, Knox does admit that America still "looms larger in the French perspective than vice versa, and so we have few overviews of 'France on Americans' minds' corresponding to the recurrent *Amérique dans les têtes* theme in France" (3).

literary giants of the Lost Generation. The variety of Gopnik's collection shows how, as "An almost inevitable destination for writers and thinkers, Paris has been many things to many Americans: a bastion of old-world traditionalism, a hotbed of revolutionary ideologies in politics and art, and above all a space in which to cultivate an openness to life and love impossible at home" (Second cover).[7] Ultimately, just as French writers see themselves when writing about America, this anthology demonstrates how American writers "Discovering Paris […] discovered themselves" (Second cover).[8]

Carolyn Durham's monograph, *Literary Globalism: Anglo-American Fiction Set in France* (2005), picks up where Gopnik's anthology leaves off.[9] Durham treats works by American authors such as Diane Johnson, Claire Messud, Edmund White, Tony Hays, and Sarah Smith. Of course, as the title indicates, not all of the works are American, and Durham even suggests that this contemporary trend of Anglo-American fiction set in France stems from the success of British writer, Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence* (1990) (Hansen 98). What is most noteworthy is the way Durham's discussion of this trend elicits many of the same questions as the *romans américains* that I have presented in the pages of this dissertation. In *Literary Globalism*, Durham's essays "suggest that in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries even mainstream English-language fiction can no longer be contained within conventional boundaries, whether narrative,

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[7] Edward Knox also says that, "'France' does not mean the same thing to [all Americans]. Perhaps even more telling, Americans unfamiliar with France seem nonetheless prepared to hold opinions about the country, and many Americans see France as a non-America, a positive or negative counter-model" (3).

[8] Similarly, Marie-Claude Legault argues that, for Henry James, Gertrude Stein, Alice Kaplan, and Adam Gopnik, "'authentic' French moments often turn out to be American moments, as the authors use France to explore American values and identities" (iii). See her dissertation, "Mirrored Surfaces: A Century of American Encounters with the 'real France."

[9] The last selection in Gopnik's anthology is an excerpt of Dorothea Tanning's memoir, "Birthday," which was published in 1986. The earliest works in Durham's corpus were published in the early 1990s.

national, or even perhaps, linguistic. In an increasingly globalized world of constant border crossing and cultural borrowing, notions of national origin and native language no longer retain the same meaning" (23). Durham adds that the fact that these novels have translated and sold well in France illustrates "the interest shared by Francophone and Anglophone readers in exploring literary and cultural constructions set within the cosmopolitan space of postmodernity" (23).

The works Durham treats represent just a small portion of the mainstream American literature focusing on France. The texts of her corpus may pose serious questions about the connections between postmodern literature and globalization (27; cf. Hansen 97), but not all mainstream American literature focusing on France is so serious. The trend cuts across genres, ranging from novels about love and life in Paris to non-fiction works about how "French women don't get fat" or about "how to find your inner French girl"; from cross-cultural guides endeavoring to explain "why we love France, but not the French" to feel-good films like *Julie and Julia* (based on a memoir) which spark a renewed interest in *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. Many of these works are pithy, comical, and lighthearted. They often reinforce old stereotypes more than they share any new illuminations about Frenchness, Americanness, or literature in a global age. Indeed, many re-present "une certaine idée de la France," preferring to present a stereotypical view of *the* French way instead of exploring the realities of an increasingly diverse France today.

Woody Allen's charming 2011 film, *Midnight in Paris*, exemplifies – while ultimately commenting on – the nostalgic bent of recent American artistic engagements with France. Some reviewers of the film have called it "a love letter to Paris" (Porter). And it certainly is. The first few minutes of the film consist of a succession of picture-

perfect shots of Paris that are enough to make a Francophile film viewer fall in love with Paris all over again. But I would argue that *Midnight in Paris* is also about American artists' need to embrace Paris in the present and not just a romanticized view of the Paris of the past. The protagonist of the film, Gil Pender, is a Hollywood screenwriter who dreams of moving to Paris to write his novel about a man who works in a nostalgia shop. His idolatry of the American expatriate writers of the Lost Generation has left him with a longing for 1920s Paris, the "golden age" to which he time-travels each night during his vacation in the City of Lights. He represents a generation of writers (and readers) whose desire to escape to a golden age of the past feeds their romanticized, yet detached view of the Paris of the present. Ironically, the characters who best convey the message that Americans must move beyond simple romanticized views of Paris are the characters the viewer most wants to hate: Gil's fiancée, Inez, and her pseudo-intellectual lover, Paul. Inez tells Gil that he is, "in love with a fantasy," and Paul confirms that, "Nostalgia is denial. Denial of the painful present." Ultimately, Gil chooses to leave the Paris of the 1920s because, as he says, "If I want to live in the present, I have to get rid of illusions." The film ends as Gil and his newfound French love-interest, Gabrielle, walk off into the distance across a bridge in 2010 Paris. As A.O. Scott said in his review for the *New York Times*, "Paris is perpetually alive, not because it houses the ghosts of the famous dead but because it is the repository and setting of so much of their work. And the purpose of all that old stuff is not to carry us into the past but rather to animate and enliven the present." Indeed, the message is clear: Americans need not forget Paris' past, but they must embrace its present if the Franco-American love story (symbolized by Gil and Gabrielle's cross-cultural relationship) is to have any future.

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