REVIEW ARTICLE
HÉDI BOURAOUI'S *LES JUMELLES DE L'ONCLE SAM* : THE PILLARS OF AMERICAN SOCIETY

Of Female Towers and Patriarchal Dominance

Les Jumelles de l'oncle Sam (Ottawa: Les Éditions du Vermillon, 2017) evokes immediately the chaos and carnage of 9/11, the destruction of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in lower Manhattan. Bouraoui's evocation of this turning point in American history is deliberate, but he utilizes it principally as a functional metaphor for the positives and negatives of the American Dream. His own twin towers are female, in sharp contrast to the phallic image offered by the World Trade Center, the focus of American capitalism and materialism.

This novel is, in fact, his second transmogrification of phallic structures into female talking towers, or centers of communication, the first being the Toronto CN Tower, in *Ainsi parle la Tour CN* (1999).[1] The CN Tower is usually viewed in the popular mind as a phallic assertion of strength and potency, in contrast to the then-Sky Dome (Rogers Centre), offering a contrasting image of a maternal womb. But Bouraoui reminds us that the antennae of the CN Tower transmit media messages in many languages around the world. From this fact he builds the conceit of the many visitors, from Canada and around the world, who work in the Tower, or visit her as tourists every day – or plot to blow her up – and whom she welcomes into her "womb," as it were.

In French the world "*tour*," or tower, is gendered female, which triggers Bouraoui's imaginative development of the potential role of the female in promoting communication, or even communion, among multicultural peoples. In *Les Jumelles de l'oncle Sam,* the towers are figured as two women, one an embodiment of the American success story turned Presbyterian minister, the other a former Catholic nun turned artisan, or potter. The two women are linked by a lifelong friendship with Saïd Bayou, a North African immigrant first to the United States, later to Canada, who is an academic and translator. Their initial meeting ground is Rosary College, a small institution in a suburb of Chicago, Illinois, where Peggy Windley, a high school teacher, takes a summer course to improve her French. Sister Marie-Madeleine, with Québec roots, heads the language laboratory, and Saïd Bayou, then a graduate student, has a summer position as informant, or native speaker.

[1] Also translated into English as *Thus Speaks the CN Tower* by Elizabeth Sabiston (Toronto: CMC Editions, 2008).

For the most part the two women tell their own stories, in a narrative composed of a journal, letters (suggesting an epistolary novel), fragments of a novel Peggy Windley never finishes before her untimely death, which the "defrocked" nun tries to assemble in tribute to her. Saïd Bayou provides the focalization in the first, fourth, and last chapters of Bouraoui's novel, first as "*un nouvel arrivé ébahi*" in the United States, later as "*l'étranger entre les lignes*," but in a third-person omniscient narration, and finally in an "in memoriam" conclusion in tribute to Peggy Windley and her novelistic ambitions. It is only in this last chapter that Saïd Bayou speaks directly to the reader as a first-person narrator. For the most part he is viewed from the outside, through the eyes of the two women, and appears directly only in remembered dialogue with them.

Through these three perspectives, in their own way a secular but mystical Trinity (Sister Marie-Madeleine is both the Biblical Mary and the Magdalene, or redeemed fallen woman), Bouraoui conjures up a panorama of the triumphs and agonies, the "splendors and miseries" of the United States from the 1960s and the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, to the early 2000s, including 9/11 and the George W. Bush's administration's often ill-conceived and destructive attempts to wreak revenge in Iraq and Afghanistan, on the perpetrators of the quasi-apocalyptic rain/reign of terror from the air, whereas most of the perpetrators were, in fact, Saudis.

<u>Peggy Windley: In Memoriam</u>

Perhaps because of her very disappearance from the text, as from life, Peggy Windley becomes the star, the "*vedette*," to be recaptured and brought to life again by her two friends. A native of aristocratic New England (Cohasset, Massachusetts), birthplace of the nation, settled by the Founding Fathers, she makes her life and career in the diametrically opposed Heartlland, the Middle West, or the first frontier for the original settlers. Its southern fringes have come to share the title of the Bible Belt with its southeastern neighbors in the deep South. Joan, or Sister Marie-Madeleine, on the other hand, is a product of working-class Detroit, the automobile capital of America. But she has Québécois blood, and is therefore also related to one of the founding peoples, the first French explorers of the New World. So the two "towers" between them cross boundaries of class, history, and religion.

Along with Saïd, we first become acquainted with Peggy in the bosom of her family. Married to lawyer Quentin, a "*réfrigérateur ambulant*," as Saïd describes him, she and her

husband invite the newcomer to a Middle Eastern Chicago restaurant, and Saïd has difficulty explaining that he is Maghrebian, and not Middle Eastern. For a crowning touch, all they need is a belly dancer, an American bleached blonde. In spite of all, Peggy feels a magnetic attraction to Saïd.

Peggy's true self is revealed through her journal and her letters, both forms which marked the original steps of 17th- and 18th-century women towards the novel. Indeed, Peggy takes as her role model the great 19th-century French woman novelist George Sand, whose rebellious spirit presides over her own attempts at writing. When Peggy is dying of cancer, her last wish is to find the statue of George Sand, the *Dame de Nohant*, which she has heard exists in Paris. After Saïd's fruitless efforts to find it, the two come by chance on the statue, by an unknown sculptor, in the Jardin du Luxembourg. The silent statue seems to say, "*Après tout, j'ai réussi à maîtriser mon destin . . . et mon œuvre laisse des traces qui marqueront les générations futures ! »* (205). Her lesson for Peggy is to denounce the puritanism that almost succeeded in destroying her life.

Peggy, daughter of the New England Puritans, had never been able to come to terms with her own illegitimacy, much less with that of her son, born of a brief liaison with her husband's business partner. (In fact, he isn't "illegitimate," technically, as long as her husband accepts the role of father). In the imagined words of the George Sand statue, "*Ton puritanisme t'a fourvoyée! Regarde-moi, j'ai brisé tous les tabous... Et si aujourd'hui, je suis célèbre, c'est parce que j'ai osé... détruire les barrières, malgré médisance et avilissements ! »* (206). Peggy imagines an interior dialogue with her son Robby, who first disappeared, and then committed suicide, now speaking from the beyond : "Don't worry, Mom! *Ne t'en fais pas! Je t'ai construit une statue dans mon coeur de l'au-delà . . . . Toi, la Battante du siècle, tu t'es fait des crocs-en-jambe sans relever le défi de les effacer... peu importe ! »* (206).

In the context of American literature, her own illegitimacy, covered by her "family cell," in which her biological mother pretends to be her aunt, concealing her adulterous relationship with Peggy's adoptive father who is, in fact, her biological father, echoes the Puritan hypocrisy denounced so well by Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, which is, however, referenced as a negative role model in Peggy's journal. An important difference, however, is that Hester Prynne is proud of her illegitimate child, dresses her gaudily like the scarlet letter "A" imposed on her as an emblem of guilt. It is the father, the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, who lacks the courage to acknowledge the child. Moreover, Hester becomes a kind of Protestant

preacher – to the unhappy, the dispossessed, particularly women. Her preaching would have been considered a greater sin than that designated by the scarlet letter, as it was for one of Hawthorne's models for her, Anne Hutchinson, expelled from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for preaching. Peggy could well be taking Hester as a role model, when women were finally allowed to become ministers in the Presbyterian Church, among the earliest churches, in the 1960s, to permit females to assume pastoral leadership.

Of the three principal characters in Bouraoui's novel, only Peggy exhibits the autobiographical impulse: "My journal is my mirror!" (37). She views Saïd as an enabler, a mentor, permitting her to speak another language, French, but more importantly the language of creativity. Saïd explains that with the *tréma*, his name signifies "the Victor," or leader; but that Americans, by omitting the accent, reduce his name to the English "Said," setting aside his strength or power, but emphasizing language. Both Peggy and Sister Marie-Madeleine project their own personalities and aspirations on to him, until we hear his perspective on both women in the final chapter, in his own voice.

Peggy, from the outset, embodies many of the positives and negatives of the American Dream, going back to the Puritan work ethic, with its concomitant proof of salvation through material success, its ambition to create[2] a "City on a Hill" for the world to admire and emulate (providing fodder for Ronald Reagan and other Presidential speakers). Peggy epitomizes a feminine version of this Dream, taking pride in society's view of her as "*une femme de tête, une force invincible prête à conquérir le monde"* (39).

Her ideal view of herself and of America resembles a ship (perhaps the Mayflower) which floats easily, until it breaks up on the Plymouth Rock of reality. Haunted by her own illegitimacy, and that of her son, she begins to doubt her free will, as history repeats itself. Moreover, her relationship with Saïd leads her towards the existentialism of Camus and Sartre, and particularly Sartre's assertion that "existence precedes essence," a view diametrically opposed to the essentialism of her church. It leads her to examine her inner self in daily action.

Peggy also finds herself in the self-examination of 19th-century French romanticism, especially in the relationship of George Sand and her sometime lover Alfred de Musset: "*vague à l'âme, mélancolie, aliénation*" (46). But her active work life is directly contrasted to this vague,

[2] Her situation is reminiscent of a male version of the American Dream gone sour, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925).

dreamy romanticism, and she vacillates between romantic love and Puritanical pragmatism: "Business is business" (47). Any Romantic self-fulfilling expansion of the soul must be hidden hypocritically: "*En Amérique, seul le bon côté des choses* can be shown!" (49). The image of a unified happy family is sustained in part by a loyal black housekeeper from Alabama, who becomes surrogate mother to the whole family. Bouraoui hints that the foundation of middle-class American "white" success is the exploitation of an under-class, that started with the institution of slavery. The reality is that each family member is locked in the isolation of their own rooms, never showing affection publicly.

Peggy seeks salvation through her church, and through the written word, counting on Saïd to guide her towards the proper form. Her projected title is the Biblical *Through a Glass Darkly* (First Corinthians); but the mirror, which is her journal, leads only to a partial truth. While her career advances by leaps and bounds – she comes to direct a French language project for the prestigious *Encyclopedia Britannica* – her private life is haunted by guilt. This cleavage is reflected in the schizophrenia of her country, obsessed with itself, isolated like her family, deluded by materialism in this "*civilisation de gaspillage*" (63). Living in the Midwest, the Bible Belt, which is Trump Country today, it is easy for Peggy and family to forget there is another world out there. Peggy's vision is finally opened and extended by her admiration for the French 19th century, and her reconciliation with her son Robby is to come through their mutual admiration for George Sand.

In her epistolary fragments to Saïd, she moves from the interiority of the journal to an attempt at communication with the Other, however partial and elliptical. While she describes herself as a "*Femme libre en pensée et en action*, » her contemporary feminism is belied by her Calvinist past [3]-- or what Saïd would refer to as "Mektoub," another link between the two religions of Christianity and Islam. She suffers from a "*binarité infernale*," as Bouraoui calls it, between free will and determinism (or, as Huck Finn puts it, "preforeordestination"), between the

[3] There are a couple of possible false notes in Bouraoui's version of Peggy's Calvinism: a Presbyterian church would not be surmounted by a cross, and portraits of Christ are rare outside of Sunday School. These factors are attributable to the Calvinist rejection of "Catholic" graven images, and generally of ritual. But the Presbyterian form of governance was a model for the structure of the U.S. government as a representative democracy, another link to Peggy's background.

U.S. and France, which she tends to idealize, between French 19th-century romanticism and 20th-century existentialism. Her projected novel, by the same token, suffers from a creative tension, and it is finally up to the Catholic Joan/ Sister Marie-Madeleine, to give it creative coherence after Peggy's death. If its first title focuses on perception, her second, G*o, and Sin No More*, focuses on her sense of guilt and repentance. Its sole manifestation, in her lifetime, is a draft chapter prepared for a writers' conference. She never quite learns Saïd's lesson, "*on ne peut confondre écriture et vie* » (123). Both her life and her letters are fragments.

Peggy's correspondence with Saïd vacillates between love, almost adoration, and jealousy, seeing the much younger man as "*un peu trop voué au carpe diem*" (113). Her Protestantism is similarly torn: she stresses the theme of guilt: "*un monde puritain qui ne pardonne jamais le péché de la chair!*" (124). At the same time she complains that it crushes individualism, but in fact it is the Protestant, unlike the Catholic, who claims to speak directly to God. Coming back to the role of Hester Prynne, she stresses that "*le péché reste indubitablement gravé dans la mémoire*" (130). Hawthorne's Hester, in fact, does not consider Pearl's conception a sin according to nature, and she transcends any sense of guilt by converting the letter "A" from "Adultery" to "Angel," in the eyes of the community. Peggy's preoccupation with guilt also taints her reading of the existentialists, whom she admires. If Sartre writes to "*donner mauvaise conscience aux non-engagés*, » she writes « *pour expurger le mal qui me ronge »* (131). In the conflict of Self and Other, she never manages to create a dialogue, build bridges between the two, and although she never mentions it, her preoccupation with Robby's suicide echoes Camus' assertion that the only philosophic question is suicide. It is noteworthy that we are never really *shown* her in the role of Protestant Pastor, but only *told* about it, including a line from one of her sermons.

Freedom and the Defrocked Nun

Joan Madren, or Sister Marie-Madeleine, also speaks in her own voice, but very timidly. While she asserts, "*Je voudrais être l'auteur de ce roman*" (74), she is in effect not the author, but the translator and editor of Peggy's projected novel. Without her, the novel would never have seen the light of day, which raises the question of whether in the creative process the content can exist without form? If Peggy is a descendant of New England Puritans, Sister Marie-Madeleine's ancestors are the French explorers such as Samuel de Champlain and Jacques Cartier, who opened much of North America, including what was New France and is now French

Canada, but also much of the northern American Midwest, including her native city of the French-named "Detroit," in English the strait connecting two bodies of land (the U.S. and Canada, or symbolically herself and Peggy, or Peggy and Saïd).

Sister Marie-Madeleine claims modestly only to unify Peggy's "*texte patchwork aux vagues ondoyantes*" (75). She seeks to "*rendre la voix à celles qui se sont dissoutes dans le* 'thin air'" (75). She sees herself as a "*bricoleuse conteuse musicienne*," and one is reminded of the "*faisances*" of Théo Deviau in Bouraoui's *Paris berbere* (2011). Her audience is addressed as "*vous*," but it is left to the reader to determine whether the "*vous*" is Saïd, or a readership in general. Like Bouraoui, she invents a new term, a "*mot-concept"* to define the narrative she creates from Peggy's patchwork: it is a "*promanème*" (76), which she defines as "*une promenade dans les écrits les plus divers*" (78).

Like Peggy, Sister Marie-Madeleine experiences a kind of imaginative attraction to, or love for, Saïd, who is the catalyst converting her from religious vocation to life (77). Peggy, to the contrary, chooses finally a religious vocation, though Protestant, over a formidably active life. Sister Marie-Madeleine, however, is somewhat jealous of Peggy's secular glamor and apparent success. Nonetheless, both women have had unfortunate, unhappy childhoods. The comfortably middle-class Peggy, as we have seen, suffers an identity crisis all her life, tormented by her illegitimacy; while the working-class Joan grew up with an alcoholic father unhappy with his job on a Detroit auto assembly line, who vents his frustration on her mother, whom he abuses physically, and on Joan, whom he abuses psychologically. Joan compensates by excelling at academics, trying to satisfy her ambitions, and for want of any better outlet, throws herself into religion and becomes a nun, or "bride of Christ." Her technological expertise, together with her Québec accent, lead her to the language laboratory of the NDEA Institute at Rosary College, Illinois, where the friendship of the new Trinity, or Three Musketeers, is born.

Joan presents herself, like Peggy, as a witness to the peak of American power in the 1960s, about to crumble as its pillars, or twin towers, collapse. If Peggy's literary roots are in French romanticism (and her less certain existentialism), Joan's, appropriately for a Catholic, are in the Middle Ages and the 16th century. If Peggy's ideal author is George Sand, Joan's is the poet Ronsard. Both periods, medieval and romantic, are often celebrated by Bouraoui, especially in *Paris berbère*.

The temptation Joan experiences through Saïd is not only visceral, but also literary: he gives her a copy of Laclos' scandalous 18th-century epistolary novel, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, forbidden fruit since the Vatican placed it on the Index. While she admires the epistolary form, with which she will later engage in the guise of editing Peggy's correspondence with Saïd, she is shocked by the sexual acrobatics of the novel (82). Through Saïd, she experiences the "dark night of the soul" of the mystics, and "*les espaces infinis des émois*," a variation on Pascal's infinite spaces which terrify. She fears the open road Saïd describes: "*La vie est ouverture aux voies infinies*" (83) – but he leads her to know evil in order to choose between good and evil – the dilemma of Adam and Eve who must be expelled from Paradise in order to rise to a higher state.

If Saïd leads her to choose the active secular life over the cloister, she nonetheless retains her religious beliefs, persuading herself that God sent Saïd to direct her future path. Like Peggy, she begins an epistolary correspondence with him, which he can read "*entre les lignes*," the title of the later chapter devoted to Saïd, "*L'étranger entre les lignes*" (as well as of Hédi Bouraoui's 2002 novel, *La Femme d'entre les lignes*). The reader is invited to read in the gaps, the "*béances*," the interstitial non-text.

The two women's paths cross again when Sister Marie-Madeleine loses her abused, and now homeless mother. She must finally confront the reality that escaped her in the convent, as her mother, dying of cancer, did not want to trouble her daughter who she thought was at peace, cloistered and protected. This confrontation with a brutal reality reinforces the other main thread of Bouraoui's narrative: the critique of American life. The private and the public go hand in hand, or, as feminists would have it, "the personal is the political." In her mother's fate Sister Marie-Madeleine recognizes that in the American system, "*Le plus fort doit écraser le plus faible... le plus riche affame le plus pauvre*" – or, as we know today, 1% of the population holds 99% of the wealth – and Sister Marie-Madeleine's family belongs to the poor 99%. America has chosen, consciously or unconsciously, to follow the material part of the Puritan tradition, which dictates that a fortune at least provides evidence that you *may* be among those fated for salvation. Sister Marie-Madeleine, on the other hand, chose the way of poverty supposedly leading to paradise, "*alors que notre glorieuse Amérique ne célèbre que le succès materiel de l'individu... et ne l'honore que s'il est à la tête d'une fortune sauvage*" (91). The materially successful and

pragmatic Peggy does, however, come to her rescue and arranges the mother's funeral, cementing their tentative friendship, and underlining ethical paths for the "privileged" to take.

Both women give evidence of creativity: Peggy wants to write a novel à la George Sand for her dead son, and Sister Marie-Madeleine *does* write a poem in tribute to her mother. While the modest, self-effacing former nun denies that she is a real artist – "*Tout au plus, une artisane!* – or an "*Autodidacte*" like Hannibal in Bouraoui's Mediterranean trilogy, she nonetheless produces concrete works of art, in addition to the poem, as a gifted potter who works with the earth, and it is finally she who manages to shape a coherent whole out of Peggy's fragments of journal entries and letters. Sister Marie-Madeleine would probably call them (as well as her pottery) "*faisances*," at the most, like those of Théo Deviau in *Paris berbère*. If her writing is a kind of "*bricolage*" she accomplishes, her pottery is itself aesthetically expressive, as Saïd reminds her. She has sent him a sugar bowl whose lid depicts a dolphin plunging head first into the ocean. Two silhouettes, perhaps the two women, the "*Jumelles*," stand on its back with arms reaching upward, making the sign of the cross. Meanwhile, the dolphin's tail displays a moving eye with three branches ending in a ball: "*Est-ce le fruit de la quête?*" he asks, praising her subconscious instincts. She has embodied the fate of all three "*en donnant forme à ce qui n'a pas de forme* » (167), as she does later with Peggy's fragmentary confessions. Her modest response is characteristic of an artist faced with a sensitive critic: "*Je n'ai jamais pensé à tout ça"* (167).

The "*jumelles*" are twinned in more ways than one. Peggy is never recognized by her biological mother, while Joan loses sight of her mother's sad fate. Both are deeply religious, though they move in opposite directions. Joan has buried herself young in religion "*pour ne pas faire face aux troubles du quotidien* » (95), but assumes a secular life when she leaves the convent. The ambitious, active Peggy, "*Femme d'action triomphante*" (93), rediscovers her Protestantism and becomes a Presbyterian minister. Peggy's earlier activity Sister Marie-Madeleine rightly equates with her own escape into the convent. One flees into meditation, the other into non-stop action. Peggy finds Joan a position in the language laboratory of a school near her home in Oak Park, Illinois, where, not coincidentally, Ernest Hemingway was born and raised, and which Malcolm Cowley called "the middle-class capital of the world." Quentin Windley is at home there, whereas Peggy (like Ernest Hemingway) is restless, and wants to travel and see the world. In their own way, Joan's parents, like Peggy's, conformed to "the American way of life": "*toute deviation du modèle n'est point tolérée*" (96). Anglophone

Quebeckers, they soon lost the primary language of their native province, and were swallowed up in the American "melting pot." Sister Marie-Madeleine sees herself as marginal in a society that despises the marginal, though bell hooks famously reminds us that the center is perceived most clearly from the margins.

Once she has rejected the convent, is "defrocked," as she puts it, she tastes liberty: " . . . *je cultive ma sensibilité artistique ... et, qui sait, littéraire*" (97). Peggy, on the other hand, never quite liberates herself sufficiently from the Puritan work ethic to produce her projected novel. Sister Marie-Madeleine more realistically accepts her limits and is able to seek truth in the gaps, or what Bouraoui calls the "*interstices*": like her creator, she uses and abuses "*ces points de suspension... qui m'octroient le droit de suspendre ma pensée... de respirer à ma guise... de reprendre mon soufflé... de vous offrir une glissade … des entrelacs … pour que vous y installiez ce qui vous touche au cœur* » (97).

Both women have marriages that are not based on romantic love. The defrocked Joan eventually marries a widower, Paul Willis, who shares many of the same tastes, but both are too old to produce a family. Both women settle for conventionality rather than passion.

The private lives of the *"jumelles*" and Saïd are enacted against a backdrop of American history ranging from the Vietnam War of the 1960s to the attacks on the World Trade Center, September 11, 2001, and the reaction of American President George W. (Dubya) Bush, an evangelical Christian who is not the world's brightest, and who notoriously aimed at some of the wrong targets, namely Iraq and Afghanistan, in the second Gulf War. Sister Marie-Madeleine trusted a good Christian to be a benevolent President, but loses faith in politics as she has in the convent life. Not only were " the weapons of mass destruction" a fictional construct, but Bush failed, equally disastrously, domestically in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (2005-06) This "mess" was followed by the global financial crisis, finally brought to an end by the Obama administration (despite Donald Trump's later claims of credit for the financial recovery).

Bouraoui does reference briefly the advent of the Obama administration in 2008, a hopeful sign even if it took a century and a half "*pour qu'un African-American puisse être élu à la Maison Blanche!*" (100). Unfortunately, thanks to the notorious slowness of publishers, Bouraoui does not carry us forward (or backwards thematically) to the reaction embodied by the Trump administration in 2016, with its appeal to the most retrograde elements of American life.

Saïd's gift with both women was to enable them to confront their true individual identities, apart from their family life, class, and religion. Sister Marie-Madeleine, at least, lives long enough to acquire the wisdom that comes with age (as does Saïd). She recognizes that the chronology she imparts is subjective and personal, as American history seems to repeat itself, and one war flows into another: "*Je laisse l'eau couler sous les ponts du hasard qui embrume toute la chronologie*" (108). Sister Marie-Madeleine admits it is impossible to endow it with any final cohesiveness.

Peggy, Sister Marie-Madeleine tells us, died before the disasters of the Bush administration, for which she would have voted as a loyal Republican. After her husband's death, Sister Marie-Madeleine moves to a retirement home in New Orleans, where she encounters Peggy once again, in town for a religious conference. The two women discuss the art of composition. Peggy admits her difficulty with following "*le chemin ardu du voyage en ligne droite de l'autobiographie,* » and Joan suggests cutting the narrative into little segments (172). Peggy's guilt over her son's illegitimacy, as well as her own, takes the form of the "dark night of the soul" (179) more identified with Catholic mysticism than with Puritanism, whose adherents mostly find mysticism suspect because irrational and uncontrollable. She is "*une femme religieuse qui a péché!*" (183). Peggy sees herself as « a bird in a gilded cage," but contradicts the metaphor by her constant travels in Europe, especially France, as well as America, where she visits the home of Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Bowdoin College in Maine, where Nathaniel Hawthorne and future President Franklin Pierce were undergraduate classmates. A believer in American progress, she refused to see the impending "clash of civilizations": "*Vivre dans ce cocon idéal, sans voir ses défauts, telle la tyrannie de la majorité* [Tocqueville] *imposant ses propres valeurs, démocratiquement parlant* » (185). It follows that she hates the Eastern bloc countries, because she believes simplistically that "*le communisme est l'ennemi du capitalisme*" (186), failing to see that capitalism can be its own worst enemy. She dies just before the destruction of the Berlin Wall, which she would have celebrated.

Sister Marie-Madeleine admits that she is mingling two intertwined plots, Peggy's projected novel, and her own vision of the relations of herself and Peggy with Saïd. Saïd's is to be the third and climactic point of view she invokes to complete this picture of an America she sees as labyrinthine, but also eternal.

Saïd: From Naïf to Sage

Saïd's story both begins and ends the novel. The young Fulbright recipient who arrives wide-eyed in 1958 New York becomes the experienced and sage academic/ translator of more than language of the final chapter, dedicated to Peggy Windley's memory. Thus the novel comes full circle.

One could easily imagine this text as a film told from three shifting perspectives, perhaps on the model of the French New Wave. We first encounter Saïd Bayou as a "*nouvel arrivé*," but the United States is also introduced in this very first sentence as "*une Amérique prospère des années soixante*" (7). Saïd is "*ébahi*" by this prosperous country of Uncle Sam, but the drama of memory also glances forward immediately to the destruction of the Twin Towers in 1001, almost a half century later. Peggy Windley and Joan Madren, or Sister Marie-Madeleine, Saïd's personalized Twin Towers, are also introduced in the very next sentence (9).

Even his first meeting with the two women has a political background: the NDEA Institute at Rosary College, where Peggy, a high school teacher, is improving her French, and Sister Marie-Madeleine is in charge of the language laboratory. Bouraoui takes care to remind us that the NDEA started out of the 1960s impetus to promote the study of Russian during a period when the Russian threat loomed large (Cuba and the Bay of Pigs invasion, Khruschev versus John F. Kennedy, etc.). That impulse soon extended to other languages in a country that had been rather isolationist linguistically, tied to the English of the majority culture.

Much of this chapter draws on Hédi Bouraoui's initial experience as a young Fulbright scholar, but distanced and fictionalized. Saïd is "*ébahi*," overwhelmed, at first by the fact that America is writ large, by "*le gigantisme des êtres et des choses*" (14). His easygoing Mediterranean soul is also forced into unwonted activity by the American slogan, "Time is money." He lands first in the Bible Belt of southern Indiana with his friend Paco, both free thinkers in the days before the cultural and sexual revolutions of the 1960s, and at the very beginnings of the '60s Civil Rights activism. Saïd's nostalgia for his Mediterranean past is often evoked throughout the text by water or sea images, such as his vision of himself as an octopus trapped in the arid American Midwest.

From the Midwest he moves to its American polar opposite, an Ivy League university in the snowy Finger Lakes region of upstate New York, obviously Cornell. He intertwines real names – Rosary College, Professor Whitehall (from Indiana University), William Riley Parker, creator of the MLA Style Sheet (also at Indiana University), Oak Park – with fictitious (Paco and

Maria). Peggy is a real first name of a friend, Sister Marie-Madeleine a fictional one, probably created for symbolic purposes. The serious socio-political critique is enlivened by humorous touches, such as the catastrophic Moroccan dinner in Chicago, and the anecdote of the old Chevy bought by Paco and Saïd, which needs to be pushed to start, but once in motion won't stop, and which Paco absentmindedly forgets to drive home one evening, leaving it parked he forgets where.

In Chapter 5, also a third-person narrative, Hédi Bouraoui echoes Camus in seeing Saïd as "*L'Étranger entre les lignes*" (133). The two women, perhaps women in general, see him stereotypically as "*un Valentino méditerranéen*" (133), while his relationship with them in fact remains largely platonic. His emotional swings as a young man are paralleled by the wild adventurism in American policy: the technical triumph of Desert Storm during the first Bush administration, viewed aesthetically from the air, but which was to lead to the Iraq War and incursion into Afghanistan of the second Bush administration, under the son George W. Bush. Peggy and Sister Marie-Madeleine share a hatred of Communism, but Saïd has no political party: he is "*plutôt ouvert à toutes les cultures*" (144). The two women fear his visit behind the Iron Curtain, to Sofia, Bulgaria, in the 1980s, though his interest is in Bulgarian poets, artists, and sculptors, not in their politics: " . . . *Il adore les échanges, les contacts, les relations publiques... et déteste la routine et la monotonie. Être tout le temps en mouvement pour rattraper le dynamisme de la vie* » (145).

Saïd is a « stranger, » not only in the U.S., but in all the countries and regions he visits. If there is one country where he feels more at home, it is Canada. The U.S. would demand that he return "home" to his birth country to promote the American way of life there, but "*Le Nif de Saïd a décidé autrement!"* (157). He opts for Canada because of its reputation as a peacekeeper, its relative neutrality, and of course its bilingualism. His Mediterranean self navigates, again a water image, "*comme le poisson dans l'eau*" among different languages, which he is able to read "*entre les lignes."* So he has chosen the Canadian mosaic over the American melting pot, though he recognizes that the "mosaic" can encourage a kind of ghettoization, or lack of dialogue between cultures that become entrenched in their own neighborhoods. Hédi Bouraoui uses throughout Pierre Elliott Trudeau's metaphor of "living next to an elephant" to describe the sometimes precarious relationship between Canada and the United States, all the more cogent today with the presidency of the elephantine Trump (and Trudeau's son Justin as Canadian prime

minister). In Canada Saïd "*navigue en pleine voile*" (163), especially among his fellow Mediterraneans in Little Italy, as he has "swum" among different languages: "*Saïd a fui l'unicité problématique des Américains . . . , voguant [au Canada] dans la mer mitoyenne de cultures plurielles* » (164).

If there is one overriding insistent theme in this work, it is the necessary but problematic relationship between art and life, « *le rapport écriture / vie*, " a space Peggy, the "*romancière en herbe*," is never able to traverse. As Saïd (and Hédi Bouraoui) know, "*Ne s'écrit que ce qui a été vécue. Mais la vie . . . ne peut être captée littéralement par le meilleur des textes* » (147). A colleague once described criticism as « veiled autobiography, » but the phrase captures equally well the creative process. Hédi Bouraoui reminds us that there is a "*distance irrécupérable entre vie et écriture*, » and that « *Décoder un texte devient un travail d'amour* » (167). « Life Writing, » often in the form of autobiographical fiction, or what is sometimes today called "autofiction," has become a widely recognized subgenre: one thinks, for example, of Hemingway's *In Our Time* (1925), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971). We recognize, however, as critic R.P. Blackmur put it, that "Art is life at the remove of form and meaning." Thus, Ellison was never so naïve as his young man who moves from the South to Harlem, Alice Munro never so unsure of herself as her Del Jordan.

Finally, in the last chapter devoted to the failed novelist Peggy, Saïd speaks in his own voice. Both women have passed, like the literal Twin Towers, "*aujourd'hui décimées et disparues*" (192). This is *their* novel, and the novel of their country, and Saïd modestly claims to be only their "translator." Not for him the ego-driven immortality of the hero of the *Chanson de Roland*. He calls his own work a "communal creation" – more common usually, like the art of quilting, among female creators. Communal creation among women, however, is sometimes anonymous. And Virginia Woolf remarked that she often thought "Anon." was a woman. In fact, Saïd, like Sister Marie-Madeleine, refers to his text as a "patchwork" (192), or "*bricolage*" (193). Again, he evokes a water image to describe his role in creation: "*Je suis un grain de sable sur les plages de vos lacs, véritables mers d'eau douce* « (193) – unlike his salty native Mediterranean. The three characters together become the Three Musketeers of creation, but he gives credit to the female: "*La femme n'est-elle pas à la base de toute création littérale et symbolique?"* (209). One thinks of Henry James's line from *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881): "The ladies will save us."

He recollects two of his last meetings with Peggy, five years apart. The first, at Rockefeller Center in front of the iconic Prometheus statue, is the setting for his advice to her to give more to art, less to life, It is framed artistically, not only by Prometheus, "*l'initiateur de la première civilization humaine"* (195), but also by the recollection of Diego Rivera's controversial mural, "Man at the Crossroads," celebrating the Russian Revolution, in the lobby of the RCA Building, replaced by another mural, "American Progress," depicting Lincoln, Emerson, and Gandhi – no women, but at least one South Asian. Saïd quotes generously from Emerson's "Self-Reliance," which the American Peggy has never read.

Five years after the New York meeting, Peggy and Saïd meet in Paris during the French Bicentennial of 1989, where the stress is on *her* culture heroine George Sand, instead of the males celebrated in New York City. Usually viewed as a realist, Sand distinguished clearly between reality and truth, an underlying theme of Hédi Bouraoui's exploration of life versus art: "*L'art n'est pas une étude de la réalité positive, c'est une recherche de la vérité idéale*" (201). As a writer, Hédi Bouraoui is at least as much an idealist as Sand, a seeker after ideal truths. His novel concludes with the 9/11 memorial, interrogating the precariousness of capitalism. It ends with a call to diversity: "*le Verbe de toute couleur*," and the affirmation of the new Obama administration of 2008: "Yes, we can!*"* (211).

Published in 2017, but composed a decade earlier, *Les Jumelles de l'oncle Sam* raises hopes that Hédi Bouraoui will turn his talent again towards a celebration of art and diversity in this post-2016 era where we seem to live in an alternate reality. Meanwhile, this text offers an at times humorous, often trenchant, but always sympathetic and touching view of American society at the end of the 20th century and on the cusp of the 21st where life threatens to overwhelm art – and truth.

Elizabeth Sabiston
York University, Toronto