

Elizabeth Sabiston. Transcultural Migration in the Novels of Hédi Bouraoui. A New Ulysses

Simone Grossman

Number 120, Winter 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1089988ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1089988ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Department of French, Dalhousie University

ISSN

0711-8813 (print)

2562-8704 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Grossman, S. (2022). Review of [Elizabeth Sabiston. Transcultural Migration in the Novels of Hédi Bouraoui. A New Ulysses]. *Dalhousie French Studies*, (120), 154–156. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1089988ar>

is rooted in the reality of African rural women, and is informed by a feminist praxis that is in constant negotiation with different notions of belonging. In chapter 6, Eslanda Robeson brought together all the aforementioned articulations of citizenship to craft her own vision of transnational feminist Global South solidarity and resistance. Having visited more than forty countries, Robeson interpreted mobility as resistance to imperialist surveillance and advanced a broad definition of citizenship for African Americans that acknowledged both geographical belonging to the Global North and "solidarity with, or even belonging to, the Global South" (174). Finally, the epilogue looks at a later generation of women writing on the journal *Awa: La revue de la femme noire* to attest to the continuation of Black women's critical commitment to citizenship in the francophone world in the 1960s and '70s.

Selected as the 2019 *Cite Black Women* top non-fictional book and the 2020 *Black Perspectives* best black history book, *Reimagining Liberation: How Black Women Transformed Citizenship in the French Empire* is an exhaustively researched, groundbreaking, and unique must-read for academics and enthusiasts alike. By casting a light on the mostly unexplored lives, writings, and political actions of seven Black women, Joseph-Gabriel celebrates the achievements of these extraordinary activists and intellectuals while inspiring readers to persist in their efforts to envision, and potentially realize, a decolonized world.

Anna Rocca

Salem State University

Elizabeth Sabiston. *Transcultural Migration in the Novels of Hédi Bouraoui. A New Ulysses*. Leiden-Boston: Brill-Rodopi. Francopolophonies, Vol.30, 2021. 216 p.

Following *The Muse strikes back: Female Narratology in the Novels of Hédi Bouraoui* (2005), Elizabeth Sabiston analyzes Bouraoui's novels from a geopolitical and historical perspective. Sabiston points out that while migrants' mobility, a postmodern avatar of Odysseus' journeys, bear their language expression, thus, the creation of a new mythology of the poor immigrant implies also a linguistic experimentation in which, from "word-concepts" to lyricism, poetry becomes a "quintessential language".

"*Cap Nord: Mythopoeia and the Quest for Language*", describes the search of identity of the modern Hannibal whose origins as the same as the author, while he speaks better French than Arabic. The reincarnation of Du Bellay's Ulysses, Omer-Homer, who is driven by his love-hate towards his father, is a stranger in his native Maghreb where he abandoned his wife and child. The search becomes an oedipal quest. (→p.15)

The next chapter, "Penelope Liberated: the Female Quest in *Les Aléas d'une Odyssée*", is devoted to the double search for the mother and the fiancée, who are both poets. Laura is not a passive muse as in Pétrarque, but the female incarnation of unchained Odysseus. She represents the immigrant from the Maghreb, the "anti-hero" of "The primordial adventure of our time". While reversing the Odysseus structure, Penelope/Laura's return to the origins of Western civilization which means for her Syracuse and Sicily, is inspired by "the man of [her] heart," a male muse.

"Adventures of a Young Man: the Initiation of Télémaque in *Méditerranée à voile toute*", is dedicated to the intertwining of the past, present and future. Télémaque is represented as a postmodern Don Quixote, and his virtual reality. Supposedly born in Majorca or Malta, Télé and Hannibal, are both European and African. Hannibal, a Maghreb native who doesn't like couscous, is not only "the immigrant looking for work, but the alien in search of his "first strangeness", echoing Albert Camus. However, his, positive, solitude, encourages him, like the doves, "to shine (his) feathers so to fly with

(his) own wings". When he returns to Sicily, to the great joy of his parents, the end, inconclusive, turns the Mediterranean islands, such as Malta and Majorca, into the heart of an open spiral, symbolizing brotherhood and tolerance as aspired by Hannibal, Laura and Télémaque, and which will extend one day to the whole world, island of the cosmos.

In "*Sept portes pour une brûlance: Mad Move and Poetic Creation*", Sabiston describes in detail the seven booklets, conceived as the seven days of creation and the seven pillars of wisdom, a work based on of Henry James' model, *The Turn of the Screw*. In a rich mix of genres, wandering and passion are intertwined within the creative process, which is assimilated to a kind of madness in a narrative that reveals the Homeric setting of the trilogy, which takes place in the Mediterranean islands. The last booklet unveils the burst linked to the genesis of a kaleidoscopic work that the reader is invited to reconstitute.

The chapter "Berber Girl in Paris: Illusions Lost and *Faisances* Found" refers to the novel *Paris berbère* where Bouraoui explores the themes of migration, desire, love and artistic creation. The protagonist, an Ulysses of a different kind, is a provincial immigrant in Paris who meets an "unchained Penelope", a young Berber supporting French occupation in Algeria. His illusions fade away but he receives in return the power to create a work. Sabiston places the most active part of the novel in the decade between 1968 and 1978. She points up how meaningful was the May 68 events for Bouraoui as they imply a literary as well as a cultural revolution. She shows how the couple accomplishes its own revolutions in "Paris berbère" inspired by the omnipresent photo of the famous Algerian footballer Zidane.

In "*La réfugiée (Lotus au Pays du Lys): a Transgeneric Poetic Voyage*", Sabiston focus is on the novel's particular generic status swinging between narrative and poetry, and called "Narratoème". In a mixture of colors, religions, cultures and languages, the novel brings to verbal the language of flowers. In a kind of reversed anthropomorphism, characters and political parties are described as flowers. DorBoa-Lotus, a Laotian immigrant, is "transplanted" in an alien culture unaware of her existence. Like Ulysses, she leads her life "on the edge" in the "Land of the Lily"/"Land of Ulysses". Exiled and alienated, she inspires the author to "Laugh/Write" emanating from the "Favorite Jasmine".

In "*Puglia with Open Arms: Otherness Embraced*," Sabiston discusses the oral source of Bouraoui's later work, his ties with the past of North Africa and with Oriental tradition. Mediterranean heart and spirit are manifested in Puglia, imbued with joie de vivre. The protagonist, Samy Ben Meddah, a storyteller from the North African shore, creates his own transcultural and transcontinental culture, binding together his native Maghreb to Canada, his country of adoption and beloved Italy to the Western past. This picaresque novel in miniature, focuses on immigration enlightening the artistic dimension of a reading in fusion with the author.

In "Wandering Words: tracing the Ulyssean Cycle in *Le Conteur*", Sabiston emphasizes the verbal dimension of wandering assimilating it to a search for "living words" as opposed to dehumanizing technology. The structural framework of the novel, the connections between Canada and the Mediterranean are emphasized by the expression "Puglia –trait d'union - Ontario". The novel is a hymn to Canada, to the glorious Ontario autumn, a tribute to the First Nations and a reverence to the Group of Seven, who promoted Canada's art in the world.

In the chapter "*Les Jumelles de l'Oncle Sam: Immigration and American Women*", Sabiston notes that in Bouraoui's work, while the destruction of the Twin Towers is a metaphor for both positive and negative aspects of the American dream, their feminization turns them into centers of communication like Toronto's CN Tower as they

deliver media messages around the world. In the novel, the Twin Towers represent two women, a Presbyterian pastor embodying American success, and an ex-Christian potter. Both are in a friendly relations with a North African immigrant working as a translator in Canada, a teacher eager to improve her French, a nun of Quebecois origin and a student representing the autochthones. While opening a debate about the fragility of capitalism, the novel ends with a call for diversity, "the Word of all colors", and the "Yes, we can" statement of Obama's administration in 2008.

In the final chapter of the essay, "Beyond the New Novel: *Faisance, Narratoème, 'Slice of Life,'*" Sabiston points out the poetry collections, *Mutante la poésie* (2015) and *Nomadivivance* (2016), the fruit of Bouraoui's writing willing to leave the literary space to his readers. The "Interstitial writing", between the lines, fluid expression of imagination, withstand any appropriation of the literary tradition. Conventional narration hardly exists anymore, and thus, an expanding relation between art and life might be taken into consideration. In place of the novel genre, submitted to preset rules, Bouraoui creates "volatile and paradox fluctuations whose outcome no one can predict". These texts, of unprecedented purpose, serve as a testimony on the new century and its "tragic-political non understandable convulsions" while Bouraoui assimilates the written word to a mosaic re-presenting, in *Retour à Thyna* (1996), an almost forgotten past but finally rediscovered in order to open new paths to the future.

According to Sabiston's conclusion, the heroes and heroines of Bouraoui's narratives are modern world immigrants either by constraint or by choice. But hasn't this always been the case among humans ? In his works, Bouraoui revises the history of humanity. Hannibal Ben Omer, the hero of the trilogy composed of *Cap Nord* (2008), *Les aléas d'une odyssée* (2009) and *Méditerranée à voile toute* (2010), evokes his Carthaginian namesake of the past crossing the Alps with elephants in order to conquer Rome. The surname Ben Omer suggests Homère the epic poet, as well as *la mer* (the sea) ("ô mer") and *la mère* (the mother). The modern hero is also Ulysses, an eternal wanderer who, being unchained, brings to men the gift of language, polished by female mentors, his mother Mounira, and his wife Laura. His quest, from south to north and from east to west, goes on with his son Télé(maque), whose name is both a reflection of his mythical origins and of postmodern world technology. The circular quest of Ulysses is completed with Samy Ben Meddah (meaning the storyteller), representing the North African oral tradition. Bouraoui tirelessly questions, in his work, the power of the written word versus the spoken word, when the audience is invited to take part in the verbal creation, and its sustainable and accessible dimension. Sabiston also notes that, in Bouraoui works , the problematic related to verbal communication joins other crucial issues emerging in the 21st century, essentially related to affectivity. She points out that other essential questions arise, such as the invention of new forms that will expand national, cultural and interpersonal boundaries.

In conclusion, Sabiston's essay, with its richness, immeasurable precision and erudition, is a magnificent tribute to Bouraoui's whole work, bringing opposites together in a new humanism. The reader, she says magnificently, is invited to "immigrate" into these texts, breaking down the boundaries between genders, sexes, nations and cultures.

Simone Grossman

Bar Ilan University
