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Chapter VIII

Rerouting

 Ça n'existe pas l'Amérique

L'Amérique n'est ni un rêve, ni une réalité, c'est une hyperréalité.

(Jean Baudrillard, Amérique, 32)

Chacun son Amérique.

(Dominique Falkner, Ça n'existe pas, l'Amérique, 39)

L'Amérique est la version originale de la modernité, nous sommes la version doublée.

(Jean Baudrillard, Amérique, 76)

Laquelle?

(Narrator's response when asked what he thought of L'Amérique in Dominique Falkner, Ça n'existe pas, l'Amérique, 64)

A défaut d'identité, les Américains ont une dentition merveilleuse.

(Jean Baudrillard, Amérique, 37)

The more bacon you eat, the closer to heaven you git.

(neon-sign observed by narrator in Dominique Falkner's, Ça n'existe pas, l'Amérique, 57).
At the same time as American academia's enthusiasm for the French critical methodologies lumped under the general rubric of “French theory” began to wane, and the once-dominant theories started to take a place in humanities departments among other critical approaches, a curious literary phenomenon began to emerge in France. Starting approximately from the traumatic events of September 11, 2001 and continuing to the present, more and more fiction written in French, either by authors associated directly with the Hexagon or from the broader Francophone community has begun to concentrate on various aspects of American life and culture in ways that were different from the past. This renewed interest in the States spans the world of contemporary French fiction to include both writers associated with the Hexagon and those lumped together under the rubric of Francophone. My point is to describe a widespread phenomenon which involves writers who publish in French whatever their background. While criticisms of American society remain an aspect of the French novel's version of the States, in recent years the personal has tended to overshadow the political. The American novel itself has become an increasing target of parody and pastiche, yet these are essentially playful approaches, which reflect at least as much respect for the American model as they do a certain bemusement at perceived American literary conventions.

The United States had become a new source of fascination for French writers. Now fascination is not necessarily the equivalent of admiration, and among the texts appearing in the last fifteen years or so, there have been critiques of American racism, politics, religious enthusiasm, and the illusion industry embodied by Hollywood. Yet these critiques have not been as vehement or self-righteous as they had in the past. American faults, social tensions, and hypocrisy are certainly signaled in these books, but they are rarely the main focus. Understanding the country, its accomplishments and failures, its aims and illusions, and its citizens currently seems more interesting than simply chronicling perceived American blunders and recurrences of social injustice.

In what follows I will not observe the usual, if somewhat fragile distinction between French and Francophone writers. The phenomenon I am about to describe is prevalent in both of these general categories, and reflects the relatively recent, widespread interest in the States among writers publishing in French however different their backgrounds might be. I will create, for the purpose of illustration, three broad categories of fiction that embody aspects of this current French interest in the States.
and briefly discuss selected examples from each. I will not argue that these three categories are in any way definitive; they are simply a rather artificial means of providing a structure to a large number of otherwise very different novels whose main point in common is that they deal with the States. The choice of three categories is somewhat arbitrary. I might easily have included several more, but increasing the number would still not convey the variety of approaches to the American experience one finds in the French novel today. My goal is not to simply draw up lists of writings on this subject, but to provide a sense of the nature and variety of contemporary French fiction’s renewed interest in l’Amérique. Since title-dropping is at least as annoying as name-dropping, I will provide in the endnotes a more extensive list of the works that seem appropriate to my subject. These lists will not be exhaustive. After the general discussion of the three groupings of French fiction, I have deliberately chosen to concentrate on a text which does not fit into any of them, first of all to emphasize, once again, that the diversity of these recent texts defies easy categorization, and secondly to explore in some detail how this new writing proposes a different approach to viewing and discussing the United States.

Not surprisingly, the most extensive group of French novels dealing with the United States concentrates on les personnalités américaines from the past and present. This includes, among others, a political luminary who preferred working in the shadows, nineteenth-century folk heroes, stars from the entertainment industry who lit up the stage and screen with varying degrees of intensity, and at least one nascent literary artist.

Marc Dugain’s La Malédiction d’Edgar (2005) is the story of the F.B.I.’s first and most infamous director, J. Edgar Hoover, recounted by Hoover’s second-in-command and longtime lover, Clyde Tolson. The novel highlights Hoover’s closet homosexuality, his racism, and obsession with keeping extensive and compromising files on prominent Americans whose politics or personalities were anathema to him. Dugain also gives credence to the rumor that Hoover had a hand in the assassination of John Kennedy. There is nothing really new here about this mixture of facts and gossip, certainly not to Americans and probably not to the French either. What makes La Malédiction stand out is not any startling political analysis, but Dugain’s effort to make sense of his subject’s myriad contradictions. Hoover becomes a conflicted individual who sought to save the United States by undercutting the nation’s essential values. Dugain flirts with explaining Hoover’s secretive, vindictive nature in terms of his sexual
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identity and visceral jealousy of prominent individuals, but finally leaves
the question open. What emerges in this novel is a man as fascinating and
complex as he was dangerous.

Eric Vuillard’s *Tristesse de la terre* (2014) is an exploration of aspects of
the American character. Initially, it deals with one of the country’s most
successful *cabotins*. Buffalo Bill was an inspired con man. He invented the
“Wild West,” destroyed herds of buffalo, exploited the Indians who worked for
him, made and lost a great deal of money, and proposed a tidied-up version
of the massacre at Wounded Knee. Once again, there is nothing partic-
ularly new about this. Had the story stopped with Buffalo Bill’s demise, it
would have little special about it. Yet after disposing of Buffalo Bill, Vuillard
continues with a brief addendum focusing on the long-forgotten Wilson
Alwyn Bentley, a New Englander who quietly and successfully devoted his
life to the study of snowflakes. He made important scientific contributions
to the field of snow hydrology without having the slightest clue concerning
how he might profit from his discoveries; he died in poverty and obscurity.
In *Tristesse de la terre*, Vuillard draws no startling conclusions about the
American character. He seems content to allow readers to contemplate two
extremes of American comportment, each in its own way incomprehensible.

In *Théorie de la vilaine petite fille* (2014), Hubert Haddad examines a
group of American “stars” now largely forgotten. In 1848, Kate Fox claimed
to be possessed of spiritual powers that would permit her to summon forth
and communicate with the dead. Her sister Margaret soon discovered
similar capacities and the oldest sister, Leah, rapidly grasped the financial
advantages of this “spiritual gift.” For many years the sisters profited from
their alleged talent, Kate more or less believing that she actually possessed
some unique power. The women attracted large crowds and, up until the
Depression, they made lots of money. To the extent that Haddad offers an
explanation for the Fox sisters’ popularity, it is rather modest. For him, the
women proposed a solace which “les confessions traditionnelles” (339)
were unable to provide to a population stunned by a civil war, financial
instability, and natural disasters. Haddad makes no sustained effort to
separate the intertwined strands of the genuine and the fraudulent in
Margaret and especially Kate. He allows the phenomenon of the Fox sisters
to remain a fascinating, yet very American, enigma.

Mathieu Larnaude’s *Notre désir est sans remède* (2015) recounts the life
of an ill-fated 1940s Hollywood star, Frances Farmer, and her brief celebrity.
While he deals with the transformation of the American cityscape by the
omnipresence of movie theaters, “les nouvelles cathedrales de l’humanité” (13; emphasis original), Farmer is the main focus. She was an outspoken leftist but Larnaude avoids the easy temptation to attribute her downfall entirely to her politics. Her social activism did not help her career, but neither did her alcoholism. Farmer emerges in this novel as an idealistic, courageous, and flawed woman.

Perhaps Marilyn and Elvis are currently the greatest American icons. So it is with a certain trepidation that one picks up Caroline De Mulder’s *Bye Bye Elvis* (2014). In De Mulder’s chronicling the King’s early life and success (his talent, his love for his mother, his ineptness with women, and growing addictions) few Elvis fans will discover anything they did not already know. However, when she introduces the reclusive John White holed up in Paris, the story moves to another level. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde opined that when good Americans die, they go to Paris. De Mulder does him one better, suggesting that they might get there a bit earlier than he predicted. Could the mysterious John White actually be the man who departed this life in Graceland on August 16, 1977? De Mulder makes of a great American icon an even more mysterious person than Elvis’s most rabid fans might have imagined.

Frédéric Beigbeder’s *Oona & Salinger* (2014) is about Oona O’Neil and the author of *Catcher in the Rye*. Oona and J.D. met when she was a young society beauty, the daughter of the playwright Eugene O’Neil, while he was struggling to find himself as a writer. They had an affair that proved more tortuous than satisfying, and eventually Oona broke it off to marry Charlie Chaplin. Beigbeder tells their story in a racy manner, drawing a compelling, catty portrait of New York social life after the war. He offers opinions on many things, such as Oona’s relationship with her father, and then with her much older husband, as well as Truman Capote’s role as the chronicler of New York’s rich and idle. What he leaves, probably deliberately, unexamined is the extent to which Salinger’s clumsy affair with Oona affected him as a writer.

The second grouping of French novels dealing with the American experience contains texts where real or imagined Americans react to quotidian events that can be banal or ugly. These works do not eschew social critiques; I maintain simply that these elements are not the central aspect of the novels. Catherine Mavrikakis’s *Les derniers jours de Smokey Nelson* (2012) certainly would appear to strain my thesis that social criticism is not uppermost in the novel. The author dedicates her book to
an American lawyer who has devoted his career to defending indigents accused of serious crimes. A poor, black man brutally murders a white couple and their children. The wrong man is initially arrested for the crime, essentially because he is black. Finally, the real culprit, Smokey Nelson, is arrested and condemned. He remains in prison for almost eighteen years before being executed. Obviously, it is impossible not to see in this novel an indictment of bigotry in the American justice system and the national racism it reflects. Yet the most riveting parts of Smokey Nelson deal with the enigma of Smokey’s model behavior in prison, the opacity of his murderous motivations, and the collateral pain he has inflicted on three otherwise innocent people, who have suffered irreparable damage from his act. Social issues are important in this novel, but the strength of Smokey Nelson lies in the effort at psychological analysis of the culprit and those who will suffer forever because of what he did.

Kitty Genovese’s story is real. She was an ordinary young woman living in Queens, someone who worked hard during the week and liked to play on the weekend. One evening in 1964, when she was returning home from an outing, she was set upon by a man who stabbed her numerous times. Despite her repeated screams, nobody in her immediate neighborhood attempted to help her. This ghastly event is the subject of Didier Decoin’s Est-ce ainsi que les femmes meurent? (2009). Decoin’s interest is not in the murderer, or even in Genovese as a person, although he supplies details about both. What puzzles him is the passivity of the neighbors. It is a tribute to Decoin’s skill as a writer that he avoids all temptations to moralize and to take the ethical high road. What lingers about this novel, as about the crime itself, is the haunting question posed by a woman living in Genovese’s building who was not there the night of the murder. She asks her husband who was also absent, “Es-tu si sûr que tu serais descendu?” (219).

Jocelyn Bonnerave’s Nouveaux Indiens (2009) is the story of a French anthropologist interested in studying a very exotic tribe: intellectuals and artists living in the Berkeley area. His America is that of George W. Bush, a world where the ways in which alleged friends and colleagues consume each other appears to be a metaphor for a new American pastime: the denigration and destruction of those with whom one does not agree. The novel is something of a half-hearted policier where the murderer gets off at the end, but the really striking element is the anthropologist’s conclusions about the States, conclusions that resonate in the text I will discuss in detail. For the narrator of Nouveaux Indiens, there is no single Amérique
but rather a geographical grouping characterized by multilayered contradic-
tions: “Il n'y aura jamais une seule Amérique, barbare ou promise ... Les
Etats-Unis sont parcourus de fictions. Elles sont des centaines, chargées,
contradictoires ... Il suffit d'en produire d'autres” (169).

A subset of this category featuring imagined Americans are novels
about Americans or French that reflect various idées fixes about the two
nationalities at the same time as the authors mock such tendencies. Eliane
Saliba Garillon’s Le Journal impubliable de George Pearl (2015) would
probably assure French people who like their ideas about Americans claires
et nettes. Even in retirement George is crusty, vulgar, and overbearing.
A self-made man, he has zero tolerance for failure: “l'unique obstacle
tà l'ascension humaine était la bêtise” (12). He considers earning money
the major American indoor sport (90). George’s adherence to a profes-
sional life of constant competition has even alienated his colleagues: “Pearl
était tellement insupportable qu'on le surnommait Pearl Harbor” (10).
Unimpressed by culture of any sort, George particularly loathes Thoreau,
even though he grew up in a house where the author of Walden once lived. It
is only at the end of the novel when George, near death, reveals a sentimen-
tality he had always sought to hide. Uncouth, obsessively aggressive in
business, yet with a storeroom of closeted, somewhat vulgar emotionalism,
this for some is the “typical American.”

Lise Charles presents in Comme Ulysse (2015) the portrait of an
attractive, artistic, and intelligent young French woman who is completely
closed-minded when it comes to the States. Lou feels herself to be, rather
like the sixteenth-century poet, Joachim du Bellay, to whom the title
alludes, something of an exile in a foreign world, although she displays no
burning desire to return home. She is relieved to discover that the locals
she encounters are “pas trop stupides” (125). She suffers remarkably little
culture shock because the best aspects of the country are already quite
familiar to her: “quand tu vois quelque chose d’à peu près charmant aux
États-Unis, tu peux être sûr qu’ils l’ont piqué aux Européens” (200). Lou
is an engaging example of someone who never needs to really look, since
she already knows what she will see: “L’Amérique c’est comme ça qu’on me
l’avait décrite ou comme ça que je l’imaginais” (143). Lou intends to return
to France and write a book about her experiences abroad, which is certain
to bring delight to some and consternation to others.

The final, and by far, the smallest category (three principal entrants),
refers to novels written in French that offer a parody/pastiche of American
ficti... Joël Dicker published in 2012 a pastiche of the American detective novel: *La Vérité sur l’affaire Harry Quebert*. In this version, the sleuth is Marcus Goldman, a young Jewish novelist suffering from writer’s block. When Marcus discovers that his mentor, Harry Quebert, has been accused of murdering his then lover when she was fifteen years old, the young writer rushes to his aid. What follows is a series of *aventures rocambolesques* worthy of a *roman fleuve* or a television series intended to run for one season. True to an American T.V. format, Marcus is seconded by a gruff but kind black detective. Eventually, they establish more or less the truth of the affair and in the process more or less prove that Harry is innocent. This novel demonstrates a rather thorough knowledge of small towns in New England. Most of the story is set in non-existent Somerset, New Hampshire, so the reader can only assume an authorial *clin d’œil* when Marcus strolls into a diner and asks the waitress for a cognac.

Antoine Bello appears to maintain that if the great American novel were written today, it would focus on contemporary financial practices and their numerous irregularities. Composed in epistolary style, the story of *Roman américain* (2014) unfolds via email in a gated community in Florida whose inhabitants are making and losing impressive amounts of money through the sale and resale of life insurance contracts. Dan Silver is in email contact with his friend Vlad Eisinger, a journalist who has written a series of *exposés* for a national newspaper. In graduate school Vlad had wanted to be novelist and, as Dan points out, he has become a very American one: “Tu cherches à chroniquer ton époque à travers le négoce de polices d’assurance-vie, comme Steinbeck ou Melville se sont servis de la mécanisation de l’agriculture ou de la chasse à baleine” (95). Particularly striking is the description of the American character: “ce mélange d’optimisme et de candeur, de cupidité et de vertueuse hypocrisie” (113). *Roman américain* describes Americans not simply as contradictory, but as a people completely at ease in their contradictions.

In the first sentence of an essay on Tanguy Viel’s *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan* (2013), Warren Motte wryly remarks that: “These days it takes a Frenchman to write a great American novel” (66). That Frenchman is not Tanguy Viel; rather it is his narrator, who understands that American fiction is pushing its French counterpart off center stage. The narrator begins with the rueful observation that Francophone readers, including himself, seem to prefer American fiction to the French equivalent, a “fact” demonstrated by his personal library, which contains “plus de romans américains que
de romans français” (9). While American novels are not the only ones read beyond their borders, the problem for the narrator is that the French equivalents do not have a comparably broad audience. France strikes him as inspiring little interest outside the Hexagon; he seriously doubts that a work where “le personnage principal ... habiterait au pied de la cathédrale de Chartres” (10) would have much appeal to an international readership.

Jim Sullivan never appears in the novel; he has disappeared into the desert before the narrative opens. The main character is Dwight Koster, an American academic who works on *Moby Dick*. Dwight is married, prone to anxiety attacks, and leads a typical, rather boring existence, until he gets involved with a graduate student. This rapidly devolves into a series of sleazy activities, which terminate with Dwight’s disappearance/death in the same desert where Jim Sullivan was last seen.

Motte points out that “the narrator tends to look toward the principle of event, because if there is one solid and non-negotiable principle in the American novel, it is that something must happen” (73; emphasis original). While this is undoubtedly true, the narrator of *Jim Sullivan* also displays a slightly addled sense of the importance of (what he believes to be) American literary conventions: “j’insiste sur certains détails, non pas qu’ils soient importants en eux-mêmes, mais parce que j’ai remarqué que l’on n’écrirait pas un roman américain sans un sens aigu du détail, que la saleté de la douche ou le ressort grinçant du matelas” (23). He notes the American willingness to engage with current events – “C’est une chose dont on ne peut pas se passer en Amérique. La présence d’événements récents qui ont eu lieu en vrai” (25) – and a predilection for flashbacks, at times for their own sake: “en matière de roman américain, il est impossible de ne pas faire des flashbacks, y compris les flashbacks qui ne servent à rien” (35). Finally, if the narrator of *Jim Sullivan* has had problems dealing with multiple story lines, he has never doubted that it is with these elements that “on écrivait un vrai roman américain” (59).² Both Dicker’s *La Vérité sur l’affaire Harry Quebert* and Bello’s *Roman américain* could illustrate this latter point. *La Disparition de Jim Sullivan* manages to parody aspects of American fiction at the same time as it caricatures Gallic concerns about the growing predominance of this same literature in their country.

The purpose of the initial part of this chapter has been to indicate not simply the extensive amount and variety of French fiction devoted to the States in recent years, but also to argue that perceived American political and social flaws are not the primary concerns of these novels.
Social criticism is always there, but it is not really the centerpiece of the text. It is not surprising that of the three arbitrary categories I have proposed, the one dealing with personnalités is the largest. American icons are for the most part also European icons. This is particularly true of movie stars, given France’s great love for Hollywood and its films noirs. Certain politicians (Kennedy, Nixon, Hoover) have their own notoriety. This new attitude toward l’Amérique is one of fascination, which, as previously noted, need not be confused with admiration, although there is some of that as well. In what follows, by concentrating on one text, Dominique Falkner’s Ça n’existe pas l’Amérique: carnet de route, but with constant references to another, earlier treatment of approximately the same theme, I hope to illustrate in a more concentrated manner that the ways of focusing on the States and the conclusions drawn are going through a subtle transformation in recent French writing.

Dominique Falkner’s Ça n’existe pas l’Amérique (2010) is a work that defies easy classification. It contains elements of auto-fiction, since the name of the narrator is also that of the author, and the events recounted parallel a trip Dominique Falkner actually made. At times it reads like a road novel, but unlike a more canonical work in this genre, such as Jack Kerouac’s On the Road (1957), the narrator’s personal involvements and opinions are secondary to those of the people he meets. Ça n’existe pas l’Amérique might loosely partake of travel literature, but the author’s penchant for detours to backwater areas and apparent indifference to maintaining any time schedule would probably lessen his book’s appeal to tourists. Finally, Falkner’s book is a highly selective, somewhat fictionalized history of the regions his narrator travels through.

 Ça n’existe pas l’Amérique chronicles one man’s trek from Chicago to Missoula, Montana during which he encounters ordinary and extraordinary Americans (at times the same people) and often unusual scenery. Most importantly, it sketches a new way of looking at the United States, and as such it provides an excellent example of French literary efforts to explore alternative avenues to the examination of the American experience. To illustrate better the uniqueness of Falkner’s approach, I will contrast it with Jean Baudrillard’s Amérique, a work which, despite its rhetorical fireworks, presents a rather traditional French view of the States and the alleged threat which the upstart country presents to European culture.

A sign one frequently encounters at rural railroad crossings in France and in small-town stations reads: “Attention, un train peut cacher un
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autre.” What is true about railroads is occasionally true about books. Just to read the title of Dominique Falkner’s Ça n’existe pas l’Amérique makes one think immediately of Jean Baudrillard, because one of his books might well have had a rather similar title. His treatment of the Iraq War, which initially at least seems to make an argument along the lines of “ca n’existe pas la guerre en Irak,” was actually entitled La Guerre du Golfe n’a pas eu lieu (1991). Quite aside from word choices, the true comparability between Baudrillard’s 1991 piece and Falkner’s Ça n’existe pas l’Amérique resides in both titles counter-intuitiveness, irony, and provocativeness. Yet a more pertinent similarity is with another of Baudrillard’s works. Amérique is an account of his voyage through parts of the United States.

Amérique appeared in 1986 and Ça n’existe pas l’Amérique in 2010. Between their publications, the world had changed radically, at least for Americans, due to 9/11, and while the two books display occasional similarities, they are ultimately quite different in terms of concentration, content, and conclusions.

Neither writer attempted to see the entire country. Baudrillard makes some observations about New York and Salt Lake City but his Amérique is essentially California. Falkner travels from Chicago in a northwestern direction into Montana. Baudrillard comments on what he sees from the sky and what he notices when driving around, particularly in Los Angeles. Presumably, he sleeps in hotels or in friends’ homes. Falkner clearly has sufficient funds to rent a car or take a bus and to stay in motels when he likes, but he also hitchhikes. He occasionally sleeps outdoors in a sleeping bag and once finds himself compelled to pass the night in a phone booth. Baudrillard was about fifty-five when he made his trip and Falkner around thirty-nine when he made his. Baudrillard’s observations are of the abstract, philosophical sort; he speaks about les Américains only in a general sense and never as individuals. The ideas Falkner presents most often emerge from people he has encountered and with whom he has discussed concrete, even banal issues. Another factor which might lead Falkner to refuse broad generalizations about Americans is that he has considerable experience living in the States, where he has more or less resided for about twenty-three years. Whereas Baudrillard studies a “people” Falkner has spent a lot of time with individuals.

Baudrillard’s Americans have a certain consistency about them; Falkner’s do not. Finally, both men came to l’Amérique with different sorts of intellectual preparation: Baudrillard with his academic background in
sociology and philosophy, Falkner with a lifelong fascination with the country, and, judging from the bibliography, a decent amount of research. In addition, a keen interest in the States apparently runs in his family. When he announced to his dying grandfather that he would soon be leaving for the States where he hoped to meet a long-lost uncle, the old man surprised the grandson and in the process reversed Oscar Wilde's pronouncement: “J’y serai avant toi ... J’ai tout prévu et je voyage sans bagages” (10).

*Amérique* is a polemic whose view of the United States is primarily drawn from Baudrillard’s pre-existing intellectual assumptions, confirmed by time spent on the West Coast. His perceptions are filtered through his concept of hyperreality, a hypostatized place where reality and fiction are inseparable, yet fiction rapidly outdistances reality. In his usual provocative fashion, because he perceives American society as the most postmodern of societies, Baudrillard declares the country to be “la seule société primitive actuelle” (13; emphasis original). This would appear to brand the States as a backward place, until one realizes that it is “la société primitive de l’avenir, celle de la complexité, de la mixité et de la promiscuité la plus grande, celle d’un rituel féroce, mais beau dans sa diversité superficielle” (13). Simply put, “L’Amérique n’est ni rêve, ni une réalité, c’est hyperréalité” (32). To understand such a place, one must be willing to “entrer ... dans l’Amérique comme fiction ... l'Amérique est quelque chose qui nous dépasse tous” (33).

Baudrillard’s *Amérique* is much more a theoretical concept than a historical reality, a space at once sophisticated and naïve, filled with people “convaincus de tout et qui cherchent à convaincre” (43): a hyperreality so “naturally” artificial that even the desert has no need of Hollywood to display its cinematic dimensions, since “la nature elle-même a réussi ici, bien avant les hommes, son plus bel effet spécial” (69).

Baudrillard’s great contribution to the discussion of the image of the States in France is to identify, and then stress, that – at least in certain parts of the country, notably California – there is an ever-increasing confusion between image and reality and that this phenomenon is of no particular concern to the locals. Another group is deeply concerned, however, if not precisely by the image-reality phenomenon, then by the encroaching dominance of the United States, not just in politics but in culture as well. I am referring to Europeans.

Although Baudrillard’s title is *Amérique*, judging by the space allotted to Europe in this text, it might equally have been entitled *Amérique et l’Europe*, a lowercase *Europe* accompanied by a definite article, which
would draw attention to its absence in front of Amérique as well as the latter's capitalization. Lowercase l'europe would indicate its diminished and diminishing importance with regard to its neighbor across the sea, as well as its geographical limits. In Western Europe at least, cultural and geographical boundaries have been demarcated and show little possibility of change, whereas the upper-case, article-free Amérique suggests a large, expanding force whose limits are not yet in sight. This is essentially the way Baudrillard sees the relationship between the United States and Europe – and, I would add, particularly France. This latter point is crucial. For the most part, Baudrillard speaks in Amérique of Europe and Europeans, but his comments about Europe's fears of the United States strongly echo French concerns about France's slippage in international cultural prestige. In order to avoid any misrepresentation of Baudrillard's comments, I will maintain his use of “European,” but I would ask readers who have followed the arguments in this book since the first chapter to note how what he says reflects a very French malaise.

In the early sections of Amérique, American dominance is far from evident. Baudrillard provides a striking, presumably ironic image of Europeans secure in their intellectual superiority and rather pleased by the rancor they believe it engenders among their country cousins: “Nous avons en Europe l'art de penser les choses, de les analyser, de les réfléchir. Personne ne peut nous contester cette subtilité historique et cette imagination conceptuelle, cela, même les esprits d'outre-Atlantique en sont jaloux” (27–28). Yet this declaration of the grandeur of European thought does not seem to carry much weight in the States, not because it is true or untrue, but because the inhabitants of the New World, as described by Baudrillard, are not particularly jealous of European putative intellectual superiority. They are rather indifferent to it. This is due to: “La conviction idyllique des Américains d’être le centre du monde, la puissance suprême et le modèle absolu” (76). Were this simply a stand-off of continental-sized egos, the matter might not be so important; according to Baudrillard, however, if the Europeans are a tad presumptuous concerning their assumed cultural superiority, “la conviction ... des Américains ... n'est pas fausse” (76).

For Baudrillard, this American complacency is not misplaced since Europe appears to have stopped somewhere in the nineteenth century. “Ce qui saute aux yeux à Paris, c'est le XIXe siècle” (70), a moment when it was indisputably the cultural capital of the West. Since then it has slowly
Rerouting

lost ground before increasing American dominance. While there has been resistance to this trend, the results have been less than positive: “L’Amérique est la version originale de la modernité, nous sommes la version doublée ou sous-titrée” (76). Obviously, Europeans struggle to free themselves from this new cultural hegemony, but “Nous ne les rattraperons jamais ... Nous ne faisons que les imiter, les parodier avec cinquante ans de retard, et sans succès” (78). The Americans’ distancing of themselves from the Europeans is not the result of some superior intelligence and cannot be completely ascribed to technological advantages. In great measure, it is a question of self-confidence coupled with the pragmatic sense that the only important problems are practical ones. While Europeans are free to speculate, Americans exist to achieve: “Le réel n’y est pas lié à l’impossible, et aucun échec ne peut le mettre en cause. Ce qui est pensé en Europe se réalise en Amérique – tout ce qui disparaît en Europe réapparaît à San Francisco!” (83).

Baudrillard concludes by arguing that Europeans have failed to understand that although the Old World may envy aspects of American talent, consciously or not, Americans remain largely indifferent to what Europe has to offer, or if something does strike their fancy, they will simply appropriate it. The European perception of Americans as naive or lacking in depth is of little consequence to the latter. With occasionally important insights (the blending of reality into image) and a great deal of presumably ironic hyperbole – “Le four à ondes, le broyeur à ordures ... évoquent irrésistiblement la fin du monde” (34) – as well as sometimes just plain silly comments – “Les Américains, c’est bien connu, sont fascinés par les Jaunes” (84) – Baudrillard is ultimately making an often-heard argument: Europe (France) is the past, while the United States is the present and the future.

In Ça n’existe pas l’Amérique, Dominique Falkner does not so much reject or accept this argument; he simply pays it no attention. At the onset of his trip, in the airplane heading for Chicago, a German expresses admiration for the American ability to just pick up and go. If one part of the country is not working out financially, personally, or professionally for an individual, perhaps another will. He then adds somewhat ruefully, “C’est une forme de courage qui n’existe pas en Europe, où la fatalité fait partie de la vie” (12). This fatalité is the book’s only evocation of Europe’s alleged inferiority to the United States, but it will prove important.

Falkner’s l’Amérique is quite concrete, a practical place which nonetheless can provide, at times, a rather surreal impression; guns
abound amid landscapes dotted with symbols of piety, “Les églises ... c'est comme les bistrots en France. Il y en a tous les dix mètres” (56). Yet in a commercial giant such as the United States, a concern for salvation is not without its business potential. A neon sign announces: “The more bacon you eat, the closer to heaven you git” (57; emphasis original), reminding the initially puzzled traveler that at least one path to the afterlife is slathered with cholesterol.

A similar entrepreneurial spirit, as well as an interest in leaving this earth in the direction of a presumably better world, is displayed by Dr. Evermore (a.k.a. Tom Every, a retired demolitions expert), the inventor of the Forevertron, built in the 1980s. This contraption, long a staple of the Guinness Book of Records (it was the largest scrap metal structure in the world, until it lost its title to Gary Greff’s Geese in Flight in 2001), is described by Falkner as a “vaisseau spatial de sept cents tonnes qu’il avait entièrement construit avec les pieces de carrosserie et de moteurs de la casse dont il est propriétaire” (57). Its purpose is to function as “une catapulte géante, destinée à les arracher, sa femme et lui, à la terre le moment venu” (58). Dr. Evermore’s response to the obvious question about departure dates is rather vague, except to assure his visitors that, according to his calculations, the world can hold out for about twelve more years before “le Grand Chaos final” (58). The narrator reports this encounter and prophecy without comment. Avoiding explanations and implicitly inviting readers to draw their own conclusions is typical of Falkner’s approach throughout Ça n’existe pas l’Amérique.

Despite Dr. Evermore’s concern about the impending “Grand Chaos final,” the Northwest was, and remained for some, a perfect place they had no intention of leaving; one man established his personal kingdom there. Driving close to Burlington, Montana, Falkner paused to pay his respects “sur la tombe du seul roi que l’Amérique a connu: King James” (31). James Strang, born in 1813, converted to Mormonism at an early age, eventually founding his own community. He then proceeded to emulate the activities of Joseph Smith, finding tablets, having revelations, and ultimately declaring himself “Le Prophète” (31). A final vision told Strang he was destined to be a great king ruling over a new church located on Beaver Island, Michigan, the largest island in Lake Michigan. His pronouncements and self-coronation attracted a following. Unwisely, his first royal decree restored polygamy, which led to his demise: Strang was eventually murdered by two irate husbands. Still, he remains the United States’ only native-born king.
While King James has been largely forgotten in the Northwest, what has not been forgotten is the territory’s violent history. Contemporary politics is a continuous source of frustration for the locals – “Les Bush, c’est des maquignons, de vrais escrocs” (45) – but the real dramas are larger in scope. The narrator encounters racism directed against Mexicans and blacks, yet what dominates is the historical mistreatment of the Native Americans: “Les historiens estiment à plus de trois cents le nombre de traités ainsi ratifiés, signés, puis cassés par les différents gouvernements américains qui se sont succédés à la Maison Blanche” (126). The survivors of these tribes, decimated by governmental dishonesty and alcoholism, attempt to eke out a marginalized existence selling fragments of their largely defunct cultures in museum shops and at powwows aimed at tourists. The theme of what today would be called “ethnic cleansing” is a leitmotif throughout the book; once again, however, the author does not comment directly upon it. He allows the people he meets to illustrate in their stories and lives what the destruction of Native American culture has meant; he supplies some historical background and then permits readers to do the rest.

The French presence in the American Northwest does not escape Falkner’s attention. In 1883, Antoine-Amédée-Marie-Vincent Amat-Manca de Vallombrosa de Morès arrived in the Northwest. After graduating from Saint-Cyr with honors, the marquis married the daughter of a rich New Yorker and moved with his wife to her family’s newly acquired estate in Montana, La Bocca. Once there he engaged in a series of unsuccessful financial ventures, which cost his father-in-law a good bit of money and earned him the title of “the Crazy Frenchman” (118; emphasis original). The marquis’s ideas were not necessarily bad. He built a slaughterhouse and refrigerated wagons to ship meat across country, but somehow the venture failed. Undeterred, he created a stage coach line, but to similar effect: “L’aventure des bad-lands avait coûté deux millions de dollars. Le Crazy Frenchman rentra en France” (119; emphasis original).

More frustrating still from the French perspective was the destiny reserved for the achievements of the explorer Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, seigneur de La Vérendrye. In 1743, he claimed the Badlands in the Dakotas in the name of Louis XV. Unfortunately this proclamation was largely forgotten. It was only in 1913 that some children found “La plaque de metal vert-de-gris où La Vérendrye stipulait, en latin, que les bad-lands appartenaient au royaume de France” (122).
As it turns out, not all the French whom Falkner hears about are dead. People tell him of a fellow countryman who lives in the mountains, largely off the land. In his spare time this loner translates Whitman's *Leaves of the Grass* into French (147). Who once was Jean-François is now Jeff. When initially asked his opinion about the United States, Jeff responds in a tone which projects the cool detachment and wit one might associate with a Parisian intellectual. He manages to distance himself somewhat from the question and interject a slight disdain, but also a hint of begrudged admiration: “Que penser d’un pays ... ou la fumée de cigarette est considérée plus dangereuse que les armes à feu en vente libre” (148). Yet moments later he assumes a different stance. He shows the narrator a letter from his cousin who wants to visit him in his mountain retreat. The cousin is a student at Louvain “qui cherche la vérité” (149). Jeff’s reaction projects more than a whiff of American pragmatism: “Quelle idée! Aucune vérité ne tient la distance face au poids de la vie. Ce qu’il faut, c’est croire avec force à certaines illusions” (149). Jeff first dismisses a form of thinking that has few practical consequences and then, more interestingly, finds positive aspects in illusion. Illusion can deceive, but it can also serve as a stimulus to pursue a goal that may turn out to be achievable. This sense of illusion as a potential asset, a form of ambition, and a willingness to pursue a dream appears to be something that Jeff discovered in the States, since it was here that this man born in the Jura radically changed his lifestyle, moved to a simple cabin in a much more agreeable mountain setting, gave up many social amenities, and devoted his life to cultivating the land, hunting, fishing, and translating poetry. In Jeff’s world, illusion is not necessarily an idle fantasy: it has the potential to serve as a catalyst, an impetus to undertake new projects that will have some practical import. This apparently occurs more readily *en Amérique* than in France.

In *Ça n’existe pas l’Amérique*, a European fatality, initially evoked in the book’s opening pages, is contrasted with an American activism. The discussion centers on the common European assumption that Americans are naïve. Yet in Falkner, and to a degree in Baudrillard, naivety is much more an active than a passive force. Baudrillard found a mysterious power in American naivety (96), while Falkner quotes an anonymous source to the effect that “Oui, l’Américain croit ... au père Noël. Ce qui est étrange, c’est exactement ce qui fait sa force” (151). In *Amérique*, Baudrillard bemoaned the inevitable decline of Europe. At the beginning of *Ça n’existe pas l’Amérique*, a German speaks of “European fatality,” a seemingly weighty concept.
Yet, from an American perspective, fate is nowhere inevitable outside of classical tragedy; indeed, it does not really exist. At best, it is a concept one applies after an incident to create at least the semblance of coherence in a string of events. Fatality might well be a misnomer, a fancy way of explaining away failure or of adding at least the appearance of grandeur to the self. To what extent is *la fatalité* a carefully, perhaps unconsciously cultivated image, which adds a whiff of *profondeur* to individuals since it is intended in large measure for external consumption? Yet it might also be an impressive term for limiting one’s aspirations. And if this fatality is cultivated, might not American naivety be equally constructed? To what extent is fatality in this context a form of passivity, and naivety a derisive term for ambition, for the firm conviction that something can be done, that movement is more desirable than stasis? Criticisms proposed by two Europeans illustrate this possible misconception of American naivety.

At one point, Faulkner’s narrator meets an Italian who complains that “Ces Américains ... ils courent, ils courent ... On se demande où ils vont” (214). At another, a Danish woman repeats the oft-heard comment that “Les gens ont toujours quelque chose à la bouche en Amérique ... du chewing-gum, du pop-corn, un carré de chocolat, une bouteille de soda, quelque chose” (145).

Both the obsessive exercise and the non-stop consumption can be viewed as a form of American gullibility, an acquiescence, unconscious or otherwise, to a media bombardment that dictates what one must do either to be healthy and beautiful or to be in a world of permanently ephemeral gustatory pleasure. From this perspective, American lives are directed by the power of advertising, which individuals follow all too docilely. That running and constant eating push the body in opposite directions is secondary to the fact that each, in its way, represents a surrender of personal choice, a naïve willingness to take pleasure in being led.

The Italian and the Dane both reflect a combination of slight annoyance and bemusement at what Americans are doing and, in each case, imply that it is “typical,” of the denizens of the New World who function happily on the surface of life, an unreflective and media-controlled people. Certainly the two Europeans do not bother to wonder if the constant jogging and eating might reflect, in modest ways, more complex, even darker ambitions.

Exercising and ingurgitating can be considered aggressive activities, which may be performed for good or bad ends. Both involve a degree of conscious choice, a refusal of passivity, as well as a certain restlessness,
the “wanting more” from *Key Largo*, which is discussed in the chapter on *Cherokee*. American advertising can encourage and direct these desires, but an affirmative response to these pressures need not be a purely passive or naïve reaction. It can equally be a channeling of energy, a striving for something more satisfying, however ill-conceived. The Americans whom Falkner describes most often do not see life as an unfolding of some ineluctable destiny but as something to be struggled with and against, however absurd the form that struggle can sometimes take. The choices they make may be pathetic (bulimia) or ridiculous (Dr. Evermore), but they are not motivated simply by naiveté, unless naiveté is redefined as a confidence that a goal can be reached coupled with a willingness to do what it takes to achieve it.

If Baudrillard projects an impersonal caricature of Americans, “À défaut d’identité, les Américains ont une dentition merveilleuse” (37), the Americans who emerge in *Ça n’existe pas l’Amérique* are individuals. Like Jeff, they may sometimes be aware that they are pursuing illusions, but this does not seem to strike them as a particularly bad thing. This rather pragmatic approach contrasts strongly with Jeff’s cousin’s *nombrilisme*, which seems destined to lead nowhere and accomplish nothing.

When the narrator finally finds his uncle in Montana, the older man makes an interesting distinction: “les Européens ont un visage; les Américains portent des masques” (218). Baudrillard draws a comparable conclusion about Americans, or at least Californians, claiming that in Reagan’s state: “On ne juge que sur l’image” (96). Here again is a clear distinction, however dubious, with the alleged European openness contrasting with the American façade. However, to what degree are the words “image” or “mask” simply misleading, expressions used to explain away what the European is unwilling to see? Namely, ambition, a degree of cynicism, and the readiness to do what is needed to succeed? If to speak of the States in terms of naivety is a gross simplification, it might be well to balance that judgment by a darker, yet equal and opposite, simplification. A professor whom Falkner meets attributes to Harold Pinter this rather morose viewpoint: “L’Amérique est un monstre plaqué d’or” (205). Both these judgments appear superficial in the context of Falkner’s book, but Pinter’s comment has the value of pointing to something more potentially complex, even dangerous behind the smiling American façade, namely a striving, a dissatisfaction which can never be totally appeased. *Ça n’existe pas l’Amérique* avoids extremes in its judgments and simply proposes that
Americans are neither Candides, nor Vautrins, but a people who inhabit some sloppy middle area, one difficult to define and resistant to clichés.

What best illustrates the major difference between Baudrillard and Falkner are their respective titles, although on one level they are initially saying the same thing. *Amérique* is a broad philosophical concept with occasional geographic markers (Los Angeles, Salt Lake City, Monument Valley). Yet it is also a place without fixed boundaries, since Baudrillard argues that the expansion of the hyperreality it generates is potentially unlimited. Falkner’s title also began life as a concept, not one drawn from Baudrillard, but from a more unlikely source: “Vous aimez Henry Miller? Il a cette phrase incroyable: ‘Ça n’existe pas l’Amérique, c’est un nom qu’on donne à une idée abstraite’” (51). Where Baudrillard denies the existence of *l’Amérique* by turning the country’s historical and geographical space into a general category dotted with place names, Falkner accepts Miller’s claim that the word *l’Amérique* is in itself a large, empty category, *une idée abstraite*, but he replaces the colossus with many smaller, often very different, *Amériques*. Baudrillard’s *Amérique* begins as an abstraction and remains that way. For Falkner, the abstraction that is *l’Amérique* quickly yields to circumscribed, quite concrete parcels of land and peoples which make up the United States.

For Falkner, there is no single *Amérique*. When a woman asks him, “que pensez-vous de l’Amérique?” (64), he responds simply, “Laquelle?” (64). There is a nation-state called the United States, a country of fixed boundaries with interests extended all over the world. But within the country’s geographical borders, there are not always striking similarities between the inhabitants; indeed the differences seem paramount. Given the variety of regions and backgrounds Americans come from, it is simply impossible to provide a single image of the country or its denizens. In addition to regional differences, there are class, racial, and religious divergences, and while it may be true for some people that “Etre malheureux est un crime aux États-Unis” (60), this much-vaunted American optimism may be a determination, at times at all costs, to succeed. In any case, there are many versions of the States,9 and Falkner makes clear that he is examining just one of them.

He also avoids sweeping conclusions, since neither the areas he passes through nor their inhabitants are completely objective entities. They are visited by tourists (such as Falkner), studied, gawked at, liked, or disliked by individuals with their own ideas, biases, and interests. At the same
time, the locals have their version of why they live where they do, how well they fit in, and what they are striving to achieve in their corner of the country. Most of the Native Americans are broken and bitter due to their history and experiences, yet one, Chippera, became a poet to celebrate his tribal background, while another wears a pin which proclaims, “Je suis fier d'être potawatomi” (36; emphasis original). A truck driver explains to his French hitchhiker that they are currently traversing “God’s Country” (184; emphasis original), and a woman offers a rather folksy, yet enlightening image for the States’ often problematic relationship with the rest of the world: “L’Amérique est un gros chien sympathique dans un appartement trop petit. Chaque fois qu’il remue la queue, il casse quelque chose” (64). Falkner catches something of this diversity of opinion in a succinct, wry comment: “Chacun son Amérique” (39).

The great merit of Ça n’existe pas l’Amérique is its avoidance of universalizing judgments and insistence on the specific, on what can be said with reasonable accuracy and what for the moment cannot be determined. This is the sense of the work’s subtitle: carnet de route. A roadmap provides a rather bare-bones sense of an area: where one is and what one has to do to get somewhere else. Filling in all the rest, determining what should be seen and what is not worth the time, are decisions that can be the product of research and/or whim and in any case are the result of the individual traveler’s choice. Falkner’s text is the product of such a process. It represents a modest effort to explore a relatively small part of the United States and to do so with a mind as open as possible.

Whatever Ça n’existe pas l’Amérique lacks in theoretical perspectives, it makes up for in privileging the complexity of its subject. Baudrillard ends his Amérique with the somewhat lugubrious, or at least melodramatic, question: “Comment peut-on être Européen?” (102). Falkner does not bother wondering how someone can be American, because he has already noted that the possible answers are myriad. Nor does he return to France once he has found his long-lost uncle. Instead, he leaves the airport, goes to the bus station, and boards a bus for Idaho, apparently intending to continue his explorations d’autres petites Amériques by developing and then following another carnet de route.

While 9/11 was a catalyst for the French rethinking of the United States, I believe it is not the only explanation for this change in attitudes, which had its origins in the later twentieth century. This was the period where the French began to realize that while l’Amérique remained a giant, and arguably
the most powerful nation on the planet, it had become a crippled one, and hence somewhat more human. The French witnessed the Americans replicate their own failure in Vietnam. They noted their inability to resolve issues in the Middle East and then with the rest of the world experienced the end of American invulnerability to attack on September 11, 2001.10

The weakened image of l’Amérique also paralleled changes in the ways the French began to see themselves. Long prone to excoriating Yankee racism, the influx of North Africans, both legal and illegal, into the Hexagon, the expansion of Muslim communities and the tensions this provoked, the difficulties and at times unwillingness of minority groups to integrate into French life and culture, as well as the expansion of anti-Semitism and anti-Arab sentiments forced the French to confront the widespread reality of bigotry in their country. It became increasingly apparent that if there were somewhere a moral high ground from which one could judge the racial failings of others, France, no more than the States, had any business standing on it.

Associated with racism is the rise of the extreme right in France. Although the country has always had extreme right-wing politicians, they were essentially on the fringe of the electoral process and had little staying power. In 1953, Pierre Poujade created a movement initially to protect small businesses against the encroachment on their markets by les grandes surfaces. Eventually, it became involved in a variety of reactionary causes and briefly achieved some political success, but faded away after 1958. The Organisation de l’armée secrète came about toward the end of the Algerian War (1952–1964) and for a while spread panic in France through a series of assassinations and rumors of a coup d’état. Eventually it was repressed, and, outside of the fear and, in some instances, support, which the Secret Army generated, it had little lasting effect on the political system.

The Front National is another matter. Founded in 1972 by Jean-Marie Le Pen, it features an inflammatory mixture of xenophobia, anti-immigration policies, and racism. In 2002, Le Pen was one of the two second-round candidates in the presidential elections, and with each election, the Front National’s political importance seems to increase. Its popularity has steadily grown among the French citizenry, particularly after Le Pen was succeeded by his much smoother and politically astute daughter, Marine, as the head of the party. The Front National is currently one of the major parties in France, a fact demonstrated not simply by its presence in the final round of the 2017 elections, but also that it managed to gain over
thirty percent of the vote in a losing effort. In the presidential elections of 2002, Jean-Marie Le Pen managed less than eighteen percent of the ballots cast. If it has often been a commonplace for many French to see the United States as a conservative country, these same people have been compelled to contemplate their own nation moving in the same direction.¹¹

Certainly in recent years the national political situations in France and the United States have become somewhat similar: a loose, somewhat disorganized left or center-left trying to confront conservative and extreme right elements. This, along with the recognition of the somewhat diminished reputation of the United States on the international scene, France’s growing awareness of its own flaws, Islamic terrorism, coupled with both nations’ penchants for simplistic solutions for complex issues (the Patriot Act, l’état d’urgence) have broken down or at least eased tensions dating at least since the Cold War. France and the United States have been forced by circumstances to accept what they have always known, namely that their similarities outweighed their differences. Concerning their effect on literature, these factors have contributed in France to a new openness toward the United States, a phenomenon which had slowly been developing since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Yet, to understand how this willingness among artists and intellectuals to view l’Amérique somewhat more favorably than in the past, or at least with a renewed curiosity, we must address another factor and turn our attention to the election of the forty-fourth president of the United States.

The election of Barack Obama to the American presidency increased France’s fascination with the States. It seemed not like an example of un esprit de contradiction but contradiction itself, that after eight years of a conservative white man with few intellectual interests and no international travel before his election, Americans would choose a liberal Harvard-educated black man with extensive experience abroad. The election of an African American to the highest office in a country often derided for its racism was stunning enough, but perhaps even more encouraging was Obama’s professed desire to move the country beyond its racial divide, to change the way Americans saw themselves and others. Whatever the frustrations and disappointments that would eventually mark the Obama presidency, it began on a note of optimism and hope for a new era, and this enthusiasm was initially shared in France as in most other nations in the world. Coupled with renewed efforts to ameliorate American relations with erstwhile enemies in the Middle East, it appeared for a time that the United
States had embarked in a new direction. Long perceived as a nation of contradictions, with Obama’s election the putative contradictory nature of the United States was beginning to be seen somewhat more positively.

There is nothing particularly new about the French seeing the United States as a contradictory society but, traditionally, this has taken the form of a negative judgment, with implicit or explicit accusations of hypocrisy. As has been noted, in the Cold War era a common assumption of the French left was that the Marshall Plan was primarily a propaganda device, a means of infiltrating American power and authority into French life in the guise of humanitarian aid. The coupling of American religiosity with astonishing violence had always been a cause for scorn, as had American proclamations of social equality in a country ravaged by racism.

Since Obama’s election, there has been a slight but significant change. This American contradictoriness has begun to be perceived as a potential source of strength for the nation and an object of considerable curiosity for French artists. It has made the American character less one-dimensional and, hence, more interesting to writers who no longer appear willing to jump to facile conclusions about *les Yankees*. In several of the books surveyed in this chapter, French writers have chosen to focus on the apparent contradictions in their American subjects without attempting to resolve them. They have taken note of a situation, underscored its paradoxical nature, but left the possibility of some final explanation to the reader’s mind and imagination.

Emphasizing the often complex nature of the American character is obviously not the only motif explored in contemporary French novels dealing with the United States, but it does illustrate a change in attitudes and approaches. In today’s French fiction the United States and its citizens are examined from multiple perspectives. Yet the purpose of this chapter has not been to exhaust the list of possible approaches but to describe some of them and analyze in detail one book that illustrates a different approach to the subject. This process has led to two conclusions. One is positive about the French and the other less so about the Americans. Since approximately 9/11, French fiction has taken a new interest in the American experience, and by doing so it has called into question earlier French cultural assumptions about *l’Amérique*. This represents an openness on the part of French literary artists toward the States, a willingness to reimagine the meanings of being American. The obvious question is whether there is a reciprocal effort on the part of American writers to look at the French
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differently. The response to this question is not particularly encouraging. While there are many prominent American novelists who are quick to proclaim their admiration for France and all things French, American authors, along with the bulk of their compatriots, essentially continue to situate France’s moments of glory in the past and tend to see the country as an elaborate playground. France might well be éternelle, but seen through American eyes, the present and the future still belong to them.

Notes

1 I have listed below novels that express this new interest in the States. The list is not exhaustive. When the title does not make sufficiently clear the relevance of a particular work to this grouping, I provide a brief explanation.

2002
Danny LaFerrière. *Cette grenade dans la main du jeune nègre est-elle une arme ou un fruit*. (Serpent à plumes). A Canadian writer is hired to conduct a survey of American attitudes toward culture, race, and politics.

2003
Frédéric Beigbeder. *Windows on the World* (Grasset). The title is in English and refers to the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers.

2004
Franz-Olivier Giesbert. *L’Américain* (Gallimard).

2005
Michel Schneider. *Marilyn, dernière séance* (Gallimard).

2007
Frédéric Roux. *L’hiver indien* (Grasset). Enterprising Indians on a twentieth-century reservation find imaginative ways to make money for themselves and their tribe.

2009
Catherine Mavrikakis. *Le Ciel de Bay City* (Sabine Wespieser). A little girl living in Michigan has a rather ordinary life until she discovers her grandparents were Holocaust victims. This provokes her to commit a terrible crime on July 4.
2010
Christophe Claro. *CosmoZ* (Actes Sud). The story of what happened to Dorothy and her entourage after leaving Oz.

2011

2012
Nathalie Léger. *Supplément à la vie de Barbara Loden* (P.O.L.).

2013
François Saintonge. *Dolfi et Marilyn* (Grasset). In the year 2060 a clone of Hitler meets a clone of Marilyn Monroe, and they fall in love.

2014
Nelly Kaprélian. *Le Manteau de Greta Garbo* (Grasset).
Catherine Mavrikakis. *La Ballade d’Ali Baba* (Sabine Wespieser). A father, known to his children as Ali Baba for his constant travels throughout the States, eventually moves to Canada in search of the big score he never finds.

2015
Chahdortt Djavann. *Big Daddy* (Grasset). The title refers to a drug lord who is eventually gunned down by a protégé and the ensuing consequences for individuals and society.

I know of no other French novels published in recent years that confront the nature of American fiction as directly as the three I have mentioned *(La disparition de Jim Sullivan, Roman américain, La Vérité sur l’affaire Harry Quebert)*, but there are two others that display a deep involvement with the work of individual American literary luminaries. In 2008 Julie Wolkenstein published *L’excuse* (P.O.L.), which is essentially a contemporary version of Henry James’s *Portrait of a Lady* (1881), where an American girl encounters a fatally charming Frenchman who initially enchants her and then marries her. However, unlike Isabelle Archer, she does not surrender her identity and fortune to the man. In Pierre Senges’s *Achab* (2015), the captain of the *Pequod* was not destroyed by Moby Dick. In fact, he had a full life before and after that
particular incident. The novel provides a prequel and a sequel to what occurred before the battle with the Great White Whale. It includes Ahab’s adventures on the Shakespearean stage in London and in the Hollywood movie industry.

3 Despite the earlier suggestion of Americans being intimidated by Europe’s great analytical and conceptual skills, later in his text Baudrillard argues that Americans are simply indifferent to this theoretical talent, because their perspective “est l’inverse. Non pas conceptualiser la réalité, mais réaliser le concept, et matérialiser les idées” (82).

4 In one of the few direct references to France, Baudrillard maintains that “la banalité française est une déjection de la quotidienneté bourgeoise, née de la fin d’une culture aristocratique, muée en maniérisme petit-bourgeois, de cette bourgeoisie qui s’est rétrécie comme une peau de chagrin tout au long du XIXe siècle” (85).

5 This comment seems an appropriately bizarre version of Robert Dubreuilh’s remark in Les Mandarins: “des jaunes! Ils détestent les jaunes” (I, 373).

6 Baudrillard has a similarly disapproving view of what he perceives as the compulsiveness of Americans’ seemingly ceaseless activity: “Toute cette société ... y compris sa part active et productive, tout le monde court devant soi parce qu’on a perdu la formule pour s’arrêter” (78).

7 With the exception of Jeff, the Europeans whom Falkner encounters tend to have a rather shallow understanding of Americans and their own involvement with them. Earlier in his trip, Falkner meets a man from Krakow who has been living for years in the States. During their short ride together, Piotr details his numerous money-making schemes, but in the end he assures his listener that “non, il n’était pas obsédé par l’argent, enfin pas comme les Américains” (38). Some ineffable quality in his European background apparently separates Piotr from the greedy Americans surrounding him.

8 The only group in L’Amérique n’existe pas who appear to have given up on life are the Native Americans, and this contrast with the other Americans is the most telling indictment of the thoroughness with which the Indian tribes have been rendered marginal in American society.

9 There is a small linguistic problem concerning terminology, which has not been problematic in earlier chapters, but which must be addressed now. It concerns the geographical space occupied by the United States of America. In French, when l’Amérique is employed, it is as an abbreviation of Les États-Unis de l’Amérique, so the proper translation must be along the lines of “the United States,” or “the States,” since “America” is a much vaster space stretching from the North Pole to Cape Horn. Baudrillard’s singular use of Amérique references an idea much more than a country occupying physical area, yet his reference remains the United States.

10 The shared concern about growing Islamic terrorism also brought the
two countries closer together. Never non-allies, a common foe constrained France and the United States to take their alliance more seriously, to forget subjects of tension between themselves, such as Jacques Chirac’s refusal to engage French forces in the war against Iraq, and to work together for a common good.

11 The turmoil created in France by the mariage pour tous controversy also suggests that the French may not be that much more “sexually liberated” than the Americans whose supposed Puritanism they have often decried.

12 The fact that the Obama presidency failed to live up to all of the hopes placed in it does not negate that his election seriously challenged many of the stereotypes concerning American society.

13 The possible implications of the election of Donald Trump to the American presidency will be briefly discussed in the concluding chapter.

14 Jim Harrison’s New Yorker essay “A Really Big Lunch” provides a fine example of the author’s Francophilia, but it also seems to turn France into a national culinary museum.