



Article

A Dark, Inner Life and a Society in Crisis: Nina Bouraoui's *Standard*

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Abstract: Situating close readings of Nina Bouraoui's latest novel *Standard* (2014) within the context of a critique of neoliberalism and of the ongoing geopolitical uprisings in the Arab world, this essay presents the novel as a fine literary and affective exploration of personal concerns relating to sex, gender, and desire as well as a sociohistorical chronicle detailing how representations of personal and intimate relations may illuminate wider social ills together with the mechanism of contemporary political life. Drawing on critical work on affect by Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, and Judith/Jack Halberstam, this article argues that through its focus on affect, the text contributes to the unveiling and critical questioning of the biopolitical maneuvers that dispose life to precarity and of the ensuing desire for freedom, dignity, and rebellion.

Keywords: diaspora; contemporary women's writing; neoliberalism; gender studies; queer theory; affects; desire; embodied history; social uprising

1. Introduction

The present essay situates close readings of Nina Bouraoui's latest novel *Standard* (Bouraoui 2014) within the context of a critique of neoliberalism and of the ongoing geopolitical upheavals in the Arab world. It argues that the novel is simultaneously a fine literary and affective exploration of personal concerns relating to sex, gender, and desire as well as a sociohistorical chronicle detailing the miseries of a young trio, who serve as representatives of a growing mass of people condemned to marginality by the economic rationality governing neoliberalism. More specifically, the article considers how representations of personal and intimate relations help illuminate wider social ills, such as precarity, labor exploitation, social alienation, and loss of protection together with a generalized sense of disenchantment produced by the standardizing forces of neoliberalism. Following Wendy Brown's lucid formulation, I refer to neoliberalism as a normative order that extends economic rationality to every dimension of human life, silently altering democratic political values and practices and conditioning individual behavior (Brown 2015).

A prolific writer born in Rennes, France, and raised in Algeria until the age of 14, Bouraoui remains to a certain extent an author difficult to classify, since she cannot be univocally identified as a French writer tout court nor as a proper Maghrebi one (MacLachlan 2016). Her inwardly focused novels, in which she performs intimate explorations of subjectivity formation and negotiation across national, cultural, linguistic, and gender boundaries, situate her at the forefront of contemporary francophone Maghrebi writing as well as of contemporary lesbian/queer writing in French (Atack et al. 2017; Vassallo 2009; Kosnick 2011; Hackey and Emmitte 2011). Diaspora, as a theoretical term that contests fixed origins, a univocal sense of belonging, and monolithic identities (Brah 1996), is therefore a useful tool to read and interpret Bouraoui's work. In particular, diaspora as a category helps me shed light on the protagonist's in-between and mobile position as shifting between center and periphery, conformity and anticonformity, submission and rebellion; it is precisely this dynamism and elasticity, I claim, that

provide the main character with a way out of the standardizing pressures exerted by neoliberalism and heteropatriarchy on society.

A gifted writer investigating the tense relation between individuality and collectivity, Bouraoui has explored in her debut novel *La voyeuse interdite* (Bouraoui 1991; see English Version in Bouraoui 1995), through a complex approach to Orientalist discourse, the confinement and repression experienced by her Muslim teenage protagonist in Algeria but also her agency and capacity to react to oppressive social forces in non-standard ways, through self-inflicted pain and the reappropriation of her own body (McFadden and Teixidor 2010; Durand 2017). In *Garçon Manqué* (Bouraoui 2000; see English Version in Bouraoui 2007b), Bouraoui analyzes once again questions of identity formation and negotiation through a blend of autobiography and fiction and a mixed style that complicates the distinction between truth and invention. By retracing her own childhood years and her own experience of geographical, cultural, linguistic, and sexual ‘mixité’ (Boidard-Boisson 2003; Fernandes 2005; Moudileno 2013; De Souza and Murdoch 2013), Bouraoui transgresses the strict rules of autobiography and performs an original literary mixture interweaving together subjective plurality, geographical dislocation, and manipulations of gender and the female body (Angelo 2010). Since the year 2000, Bouraoui’s writing has consistently returned to themes of love and has attended closely to the ways in which love shapes and is given form by cultural and political environments. *Avant les Hommes* (Bouraoui 2007a) and *Poupée Bella* (Bouraoui 2004) develop issues of youth, identity belonging, and sexuality by exploring gay and lesbian desire and by giving a new impetus to the debates around sex and gender, the biological and the sociocultural.

In *Standard* (Bouraoui 2014), Bouraoui’s attention focuses once again on the intricate relation between embodied lived experience and sociocultural pressures. In this specific case, however, the global financial crisis of 2008 with the consequent turn to austerity politics forms the dramatic backdrop to the story of the protagonist and his two friends. As we all know, the economic crisis represented a global ‘shock’ but affected with greater intensity the countries on both shores of the Mediterranean, and particularly the Arab countries on its southern shore. Their economic structures had indeed already been weakened by long-term youth unemployment, rising income inequality and wealth disparity, high public debt, lack of economic diversification, and low levels of social protection (WEF 2017). The already precarious condition of many citizens in those countries, particularly the young and the poor, worsened dramatically; as a consequence, thousands took to the streets to protest.

Drawing on critical work on affect and queer theory, I read *Standard* outside the usual psychoanalytic framework with its emphasis on trauma, loss, and melancholy (Van Zuylen 2003; Vassallo 2008), highlighting instead the novel’s inwardly focus on affect but also its politically charged content. In particular, I employ the term “queer” in this article not to refer to actual homosexuality but to highlight the protagonist’s disruptive and non-normative actions and behavior, which deviate from the heteropatriarchal and neoliberal order. The analysis of affects such as frustration, (self-) blame, repressed anger, and hopelessness further helps me disentangle the complex relation between aesthetics, ethics, and politics that is at work in this text.

At first glance, the protagonist of the novel—Bruno Kerjen—is unrelated to Bouraoui’s autobiography and seems to deviate from her usual choice of a young female narrator. He is indeed an average, standard French man in his thirties, who comes from the periphery yet works in the center of Paris and lives in one of its most neglected banlieues—Vitry—with its high unemployment rates, increasing poverty, and widening inequality. That the protagonist’s preannounced failure is a willful act, and not simply a consequence of his passivity, is what makes this novel at the same time heroic and hopeless, utopic and dystopic. The frustration, resentment, and repressed anger lamented by Bruno in these pages is not so distant, as I will show, from the affects that brought thousands of young people into the streets of Tunis, Cairo, and other (Arab) metropolises from the end of 2010 onwards. Since it confounds clear geographical distinctions, by creating new points of contact and alternative forms of affiliation, coalition, and solidarity that exceed the strict contours of the nation, Bouraoui’s novel, I claim, represents a somehow twisted yet powerful reverberation of the Arab uprisings and a

mournful hymn to the desire of freedom, dignity, and rebellion that animated the people participating in the so-called Arab spring.

2. Neoliberal Rationality and Its Impact on Intimate Lives

A Literary Exploration of Gender, Sex, and Desire

The protagonist of *Standard*, Bruno Kerjen, is an unmarried man in his mid-30s, who—as signaled in the preface of the book, “fed the presentiment of a catastrophe” (Bouraoui 2014).¹ Working full-time at a corporate organization called Supelec and living in the outskirts of Paris—in the banlieue of Vitry—Bruno conducts a boring routine life. Like the repetitive, mechanical operations he performs at his workstation, his existence too is a system that works with no big surprises nor great difficulties. At the beginning of the novel, Bruno is represented as a man with no qualities: he has ceased to be inspired by any moral ideal or political aspiration and is no longer passionate about anything; he has neither hopes nor expectations for the future, does not vote nor identifies himself with any particular political party. At least initially, Bruno is outlined as a detached *voyeur*, who witnesses labor precarity and exploitation all around him and beholds the fate of his fellow workers reduced, like him, to the same state of impotent executioners of technical work.

It is only at his father’s death that Bruno extricates himself from his hopeless metropolitan condition and goes back to his provincial hometown, thus suddenly breaking his otherwise stable and monotonous routine. It is precisely in Saint-Malo, at the fringes of the nation, that something in the mechanics of his otherwise impeccable life gets jammed. Bruno’s childhood friend Gilles informs him that Marlène—his teenage idol and a girl he had been secretly in love with for years—is back. Bruno’s belated encounter with Marlène and his decision to pursue his dream of romantic bliss produce a disturbance in the order of things of revolutionary significance.

Bruno, who has so far refused to involve himself in any kind of intimate and affective relationship, preferring instead to have sex via an anonymous hot line, starts to nourish some romantic fantasies of love involving Marlène. At least initially then, Marlène represents for Bruno a utopia, the incarnation of a reverie, as the following comparison suggests: “a postcard from Bermuda that one could take out of the drawer during wintertime to dream of sand and warm ocean” (p. 135).

In opposition to Bruno’s lack of desire, inertia, and stagnation, Marlène appears to be attractive also for another reason. She indeed has the force of “a volcano” (p. 21): she is animated by desire, has great expectations for her future, and dreams “a great and exceptional life” (p. 19). Because she still hopes in the future and is moved by desire, she is an anomaly within the system, as the following passage clearly suggests: “With her nail polish, her red lipstick, her mascara applied in packages that gave her the look of a crazy doll, her outfits and her name that was not her own, Marlène had in herself, on her skin, and maybe even within her flesh, a lack of normalcy that she never managed to correct” (p. 21). Throughout the novel, Marlène is outlined as Bruno’s *doppelgänger*, a gloomy portent, an anomaly evoking imminent catastrophe; in her being *contra naturam*, in that she violates with her ‘abnormalcy’ the established order that would prescribe conformity, she evokes regret for having deviated from the norm. The narrator further compares her to a road that leads one directly to suffering, a road that ends with a wall: “Marlène led straight to suffering, this girl was exactly like a path, a path that leads directly to a wall, better to get rid of her before crashing for good” (p. 222). Embodying both a poison and a remedy, Marlène harbors a liberatory potential for Bruno: she is the incarnation of freedom and rebellion but also the origin of his future delusion. More realistically perhaps, Marlène is simply “a bomb” (p. 132), who explodes in Bruno’s fragile hands, breaking apart the system he had so meticulously constructed to protect himself from a brutal, competitive world in which the strong extinguish the weak.

¹ This and the following translations are mine.

Drawing on the dialogue between Laurent Berlant and Lee Edelman in *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Berlant and Edelman 2013), regarding the entanglement of sexuality, culture, and politics and its ensuing tensions in today's society, I contend that sex, and intimate life more generally, represent in Bouraoui's novel a crucial point of friction, as reflected in Bruno's non-standard masculinity. According to conventional norms and values, for instance, Bruno is a "weak," non-standard man; he, indeed, refuses to conform to the stereotype of virility associated to domination and physical force, as expressed by a woman in a TV program on love: "a real man who takes decisions when needed, who has balls, I mean" (p. 101). Bruno further deviates from the model of heteronormativity with its traditionally reproductive pattern, despite the pressure exerted on him by his mother who sees his affective bond with Gilles, their strange fellowship, as a dangerous deviation from the norm. This is how Bruno's mother expresses her frustration: "At last you'll tell me, you make a good match you two, not married, old boys, what have I done to the good Lord, oh me, at least you won't let me die without giving me a grandson, huh, Bruno? You can't do this to me" (p. 93).

Throughout the novel, Bruno and Gilles move as "two bodies side by side" (Ahmed 2006, p. 169). I suggest that their walking beside is also a walking alongside and constitutes a form of non-conformist political alignment based on collaboration and solidarity rather than on competition. As Ahmed points out with reference to queer phenomenology: "You walk together through such gestures of following, a following in which one is not left behind. Perhaps the simple gesture of bodies that keep up involves a radicalization of the side, when the beside becomes alongside, where one side is not 'against' the other" (p. 169). Only Marlène succeeds in breaking up this radical affective (political) alignment: from friends, Bruno and Gilles become competitors.

In *Standard*, Bouraoui weaves intricate links between sexuality, economics, and politics, showing for instance that the economic rationality that regulates neoliberalism is also implicated in the sexuality of her characters. For example, Marlène uses her seduction and attractive force first to extort money from Bruno, then to destroy his friendship and sense of solidarity with Gilles. As a true *homo oeconomicus*, Marlène knows too well "the importance of maximizing return on investment of affect" (Brown 2015, p. 31) and thus replaces through economization an affective lexicon with a market one. It follows that for her, money is the metric with which she measures everything, and Bruno is reduced from lover to boss, the person in charge of saving her business from the risk of bankruptcy. As she herself explains: "Ah, I love it, it's sexy a boss!" (p. 243). Marlène sees her relationship with Bruno as an entrepreneurial, money-driven enterprise. Still, in a world plagued by stagnation, misery, and frustration, Marlène has an incredible power to enchant; Bruno is transfixed, spellbound by this encounter and Marlène is deeply aware of her capital and decides to invest in it.

Marlène, I suggest, represents for Bruno a desire line that makes him deviate from the path he is supposed to follow and has so far forced himself to follow. The encounter with her functions alternately as a risk and a blessing; it offers Bruno the opportunity to feel moved by desire, to be traversed by a naïve and unexpected optimism, while at the same time disturbing the presumption of his perhaps limited but still existent sovereignty. No surprise then that, as soon as Bruno knows that Marlène is back in town, he revolutionizes both his look and routinary life: he repaints his apartment, buys new clothes, plants some flowers on his balcony, goes to the gym, and gets a new haircut. In sum, Bruno starts to have some personal interests again, to look towards the future with some hope, and to make concrete plans to achieve his goals. He thinks of himself as being important again and reclaims for himself the right to dream.

3. Embodied Lived Experience and the Miseries of Neoliberalism

Chronicling the Downfall of a Standard Man

In *Standard*, the personal and the political, the intimate and the public intersect in the figure of Bruno, who embodies an everyman, while a disenchanting, anonymous mass of people reflects back Bruno's petrified inner life. At the beginning of the novel, Bruno seems to have accepted and

interiorized the order of things. He strictly follows, for instance, the disciplinary protocols and economic rationality dictated by his enterprise. He is, moreover, constantly being surveilled by Charles Levens—his supervisor—who carefully monitors his workers and applies to them a set of economic standards depending on their productive performance and their investment in the enterprise.

Bruno does not rebel to the situation, limiting himself to conform to the system put in place and to register the silent yet creepy changes implemented by his company, among others, what Bruno calls with contempt, “[t]he vocabulary borrowed from the Yankees—*Low performer, Solid perf, Diamond, Pilot*—” (p. 109). Besides being strictly controlled, the workers at Supelec perform technical operations that produce nothing new and can be done by almost anyone. It follows that any worker can be easily replaced with any other, as Bruno sadly realizes when his only female co-worker Sylvie dies and is swiftly substituted by an anonymous other: “They had promptly replaced Sylvie, Supelec being still hiring. A new employee was now using her machine tool, her box, and life went on as if his female friend had never existed . . . it was like the game of musical chairs, except that here, no one laughed” (p. 67).

Before meeting Marlène, Bruno is represented as a man with no feelings except for some kind of indifference and sometimes reproach turned against himself. As the narrator explains: “He had no love within himself, nothing, nada, except for indifference and at times blame” (p. 100). And yet, since the preface with its gloomy presentiment, the reader senses that the repressed anger that Bruno is directing now against himself could very easily and suddenly blast. As the narrator explains: “Bruno had learnt to fabricate a bomb during his hours of permanence in Bernem, he could have blown everything up if he had wished: Supelec, his building in Vitry, the bar and tobacco shop of his parents. But he was the one who exploded from the inside, tight with anger and frustration” (p. 99).

Not only his dark, inner life but also the language that Bruno uses to communicate with Gilles—“the king of losers” (p. 228)—expresses his miserable life; in their exchanges, the two friends use French argot, a nonstandard, subaltern language, which Victor Hugo once defined as “the language of misery” (Thirlwell 2008) and which Louis-Ferdinand Céline also employed to express the aversion of the exploited towards the exploiters. In making her characters speak French argot rather than standard French, Bouraoui “bastardizes” the purity of French and replaces an attractive colonial language known globally for its ‘mission civilisatrice’ with a ‘degenerated’ subvariety that captures the rage, self-contempt, and misery of those who have been condemned to marginality. The linguistic and formal choices in Bouraoui’s novel are therefore intimately and intricately linked to what she describes. The formal changes are indeed inseparable from the existential discoveries that her characters make. Like in Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, in Bouraoui’s *Standard*, the characters gradually realize that their life is filled with miseries, which have however become sadly ordinary and extremely widespread.

By chronicling the miserable affective and working life of a rather non-standard trio, Bouraoui underscores the difficulty of negotiating a good life, a satisfying life, in the context of a broader world that is structured by inequality, labor exploitation, growing competition, and social divisions (Butler 2012). Bruno’s failure to have a good life then is not represented in the novel as a personal failure but rather as a structural problem provoked, among others, by the requirements of a neoliberal rationality that follows economic metrics and sacrifices dignity, well-being, freedom, and social protection on the altar of capital (Brown 2015, p. 211). The world outlined in *Standard* does not reflect back the value of Bruno as a living being with a set of desires, dreams, and hopes for the future. Bruno’s life, like that of so many others, is in fact reduced to two very common, yet unbearable alternatives: “economic servitude or mere survival” (Brown 2015, p. 185).

Bruno’s life, in other words, is one that counts only as far as he invests his life in the firm, keeps high standards of conformity and performance, and uncomplainingly bears up with the decisions implemented by his company. His whole existence is reduced to mere capital. This is why politically, he refuses to engage, since the world outside clearly neglects him and the political institutions that should protect him have ended up effacing him. As the narrator explains: “Out in the world, it was

difficult to be heard, to exist in the eyes of this same world that had organized the city in two parts, the inside which turned its back to the outside. Bruno Kerjen navigated between the two" (p. 30).

At the beginning of the story, Bruno is outlined as a stone: he is unyielding as a way to survive, he has become a stone to protect himself and to withstand a harmful society that has no good surprises in store for him (Ahmed 2014). As the narrator explains: "life lacked horizon, promises, it was brutal like all the gray stones that held the houses on the street of his childhood, which only the hydrangeas colored" (p. 95). The world in which Bruno lives and works has become a horror movie, in which people are first consumed and then discarded, as if they were human trash. As the narrator explains: "It was like in a movie, but a fucking bad movie that Bruno had often dreaded in these recent months seeing the tumble of the world, of Europe, of France, of jobs like his where people were thrown in packets, from one day to the next, because it was the crisis and there was nothing to do about it, it was like that, one had to accept that, we were all in the same boat, which was a bastard lie: there were two camps, the head cutters and the cut heads" (p. 105).

Bruno does not release his corporate company from its responsibilities; he does not accept its hypocritical excuses nor buys the narrative that casts the corporation as a victim of the global financial crisis. On the contrary, he soon realizes that behind the façade of the apparent equality that governs Supelec, the company—and the world at large—is a site of oppression, exploitation, and alienation, governed by the logic of profit and sacrificing human beings on the sacred altar of the economy:

Bruno felt oppressed and avoided thinking that he and the others formed a kind of cellular cluster that nourished an even larger cell, that of an organism sucking their blood every day. That was the world, or rather the organization of the world, the little ones for one big, who was not God but a powerful entity for which everyone worked hard, without pleasure, believing to feed themselves while in fact they were feeding something that neither Bruno nor anyone else could identify, something that was named in the news "capital": that was the power, the crashing machine he was part of at his small level, he was the screw of a vertiginous mechanism that dragged everything on its way in the image of the waves of the 2004 tsunami. (p. 60)

Only towards the end of the novel and after having been informed that Marlène is back, Bruno decides to rebel. Quite unconsciously and rather involuntarily, his body becomes the canvas on which he expresses his dissent. The body is indeed not only the place where the corporate institution inscribes its dominant script, by imposing mechanical operations that leave no room for freedom and creativity and by strictly surveilling its workers, but also the site that reveals his inner metamorphosis and desire for change to the point that his new haircut is immediately registered by Levens as "a radical act" (p. 155), a form of political radicalization that passes through the body. This is why the supervisor immediately asks in alarm: "so Bruno, are we radicalizing ourselves?" (p. 141).

Bruno's rather ordinary bodily change—a new haircut—is immediately registered as a radical political act and therefore instantly sanctioned. Despite its minimal scale, Bruno's new haircut represents a revolutionary change, which anticipates a series of belated yet imminent revolutionary waves.

4. Conclusions

Written in a third-person narrative interspersed with dialogues and internal monologues, *Standard* reconfirms Bouraoui's longstanding fascination for the margins, which in this text paradoxically coincide with the masses. This is why, like Hugo's *Les Misérables*, Bouraoui's *Standard* "improvises a slang version of epic" (Thirlwell 2008), capturing the miseries, frustrations, and courageous uprising of a group of losers, ordinary men and women who would otherwise leave no record in the history of our time even if they represent a growing crowd. I argue that by destabilizing and deviating from economic values and metrics and by showing how biopolitical maneuvers intrude in intimate lives, Bouraoui does not limit herself to mirror a generation in crisis but further denounces and contests

neoliberalism, as a governing rationality that encroaches democratic principles and condemns a vast majority of people—especially the youth—to misery and invisibility.

Maleness emerges in her novel in a completely new guise: by offering central stage to a young man who is not in control of his life, is fooled by a starlet, and is defeated in a world of competing beings, Bouraoui clearly disturbs maleness as “the identity construct most often associated with mastery, wisdom, and grand narratives” (Halberstam 2011, p. 55), while also undermining heteropatriarchal norms that have produced a hierarchical system that preserves rather than challenges inequality, oppression, and submission. Bouraoui, in particular, sheds light on the complexities of relationality, as a site where fantasy and reality, freedom and oppression, utopia and dystopia are intricately entangled. Hers is an account of sexuality and relationship understood within the paradigm of negativity; this is also why she refuses to embrace a linear, triumphalistic vision of history and prefers instead to offer a gloomy account of the corporeal, psychic, and affective costs of neoliberalism on embodied lived realities. In opposition to Hugo’s masterpiece “based on an ethics which believes in the triumph of the defeated” (Thirlwell 2008), Bouraoui’s novel shows some doubts in this regard. By chronicling with the minutiae of her craft the preannounced downfall but also the inexorable, quiet revolution of this standard man, she composes a mournful hymn to the bold and fearless, even if perhaps futureless, uprising of a generation left without hope.

Dark feelings such as frustration, (self-) hatred, resentment, and blame occupy a central role in the novel, with darkness functioning as a mode of reading the world from a marginal and dark position, that of the underdogs, a category of people that, as Bouraoui suggests, is only destined to grow.

Bruno is a loser, a dupe, a person who fears the cruelty of competition. His only heroic act coincides with his decision to abandon his usual indifference and embrace a utopic vision of life as freedom and liberation, while knowing too well that this path will probably lead him to despair. As he explains: “That was the real life, the risk, the fall, the end of everything” (p. 175). Bouraoui’s short phrasing in this line, her repetitions and fast rhythm well reproduce Bruno’s urgency to react and the emergency of the situation, while also linguistically incorporating through its downward tone, the euphoria and delusion that accompany any revolutionary act. Revolution for Bouraoui is indeed both “that which must happen and that which cannot happen” (Love 2007, pp. 142–43); for Bruno, in particular, it is both an impossible object of desire and a source of despair. As we have seen, Marlène’s love—as the embodiment of true freedom and rebellion—is in fact nasty, brutal, impossible (always deferred and never really concretely realized).

Personal and political dimensions overlap in the novel, with intimacy being the alternative vantage point for a sideways observation and registration of history (Berlant 2000). By transforming darkness and misery into her central themes, Bouraoui forces readers to take notice and become aware of the dramatic lived reality of a whole category of young people hit by precarity, exploitation, loss of protection, and social alienation. It follows that her decision to set the story in the banlieue of Vitry is not casual. Banlieues, particularly in France but also in the metropolises of North Africa, together with more peripheral areas, have been historically famous hot-spots, where fighting and political unrest have been going on for years; they are the places where the symptoms of a more widespread social, economic, and political malaise have erupted sometimes in spectacular forms, as demonstrated, among others, by the protests in the Sidi Bernoussi peripheral area in Casablanca (2012), the Parisian riots in the banlieue of Clichy-sous-Bois (2005), the Bab El Oued neighborhood in Algiers (2011).

I suggest that Bruno’s bold reaction to his oppression functions in this novel as a twisted yet powerful reverberation of the uprisings that brought ordinary men and women, particularly of young age, into the streets of Tunis, Cairo, and elsewhere in the (Arab) world. Bruno’s reasons to raise, I claim, partly reflect and certainly help illuminate the claims and demands uttered by the people who took to the streets and joined the demonstrations. It is precisely in the evocation of the possibility of a revolution both here—in France—and elsewhere—in the (Arab) world—that Bouraoui’s Arabness is perhaps more tangible and visible. The inner thoughts of her French protagonist, conveyed through the technique of the interior monologue, powerfully resonate with the euphoria that animated the

people at the beginning of the Arab revolutions. The following passage, evoking the possibility of a radical change, is an exemplary case in point: “He liked to think of the possibility of a revolution, that everything one day could be overthrown, destroyed, and that he would be part of this reversal, of this destruction, that he would finally exist, even for a short moment, that he would cry out all his rage, all his sadness, all that he had swallowed up since childhood, all that he could not articulate but that he shared with the greatest number, launched at full speed towards the exterior zones of the city” (p. 112).

Since she takes sides with her protagonist, in *Standard*, Bouraoui refuses to represent Bruno’s final collapse, favoring instead an open ending, which may even hint at a new beginning. After all, Bruno’s act of dissent, although beaten back and neutralized, has brought to his attention, and perhaps also to the awareness of the general public, that being alive means seeing one’s value reflected in the eyes of others, having a life that is publicly recognized as one that counts, feeling free, being animated by desire, having the possibility to choose, to cultivate one’s passions, dreams, and hopes for the future, and to have a say in the decisions that politicians make. Bruno’s fictional revolution then, together with the real uprisings that involved so many young people like him across all latitudes, may thus not have been totally in vain.

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