CHAPTER 11

How Does Crime Fiction 'talk politics'? Figures of Political Action in Contemporary French Crime Writing

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Contemporary French crime fiction bears the legacy of 'literary leftism', epitomized by the *néo-polar* generation that thrived in the 1980s and 1990s until the turn of the twenty-first century (Collovald and Neveu 2001). Inaugurated by Jean-Patrick Manchette who maintained close connections with the Situationist movement, this generation included writers associated with the Communist Party (Jean Vautrin, Frédéric Fajardie, Didier Daeninckx), Trotskism (Thierry Jonquet), Maoism (Patrick Raynal) and anarchism (Jean-Bernard Pouy). In the 1980s, these authors converted their political activity to embrace the creation of politically engaged literature, inspired by the models of the 'novel of intervention' and 'crisis literature' coined by Manchette (1996: 12, 81). At the turn of the 2000s, when the *Le Poulpe* series featuring an anarchist detective as its protagonist still enjoyed broad success, French scholars started

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to investigate how literature approached the ambiguous task of "bringing enchantment into political disillusion"[1] (Collovald 2001: 16–21; Collovald and Neveu).

Today, the literary scope of crime fiction has widened. The writers who embody the genre are no longer those who constructed the *polar*'s political posture. The best-selling names are not the creators of the *néo-polar*: they now include Fred Vargas, Jean-Christophe Grangé and, more recently, Franck Thilliez and Michel Bussi. A new generation of writers, whose publications span for the most part the mid-2000s and today, coexist with the heirs of the *néo-polar* movement while distancing themselves from the politically engaged ideology that was associated with the *polar* at large until the early 2000s.

Elsewhere in Europe, the market for crime fiction mostly reflects the globalization processes, drawing on the nomadic trajectories of famous writers such as Donna Leon, Georgio Scerbanenco and Henning Mankell, and opening up fictional universes to areas like China in Peter May's or Robert Van Gulick's works (Erdmann 15), but also to global crime and complex geopolitical interplays between state, extra-state and non-state actors (Pepper and Schmid 5). Although contemporary crime fiction from around Europe continues to be associated with a critical outlook—and in some cases with political dissent—at the turn of the twenty-first century, it also became a space for the expression of 'political disenchantment' (Collovald and Neveu), as noted in the work of Vásquez Montalbán (Walsh 59–60), Andrea G. Pinketts (Pezzotti 151) and Ken Bruen (Kincaid 57).

In France, it is even sometimes associated with a shift from the political Left (Ledien 2020). The case of Cesare Battisti, an Italian activist during the Years of Lead (and crime fiction novelist) who received the protection of the French state until 2002 and the support of many French crime fiction writers after the repeal of the Mitterrand doctrine, emblematized the French 1990s *polar* scene's divisive relation to political affairs and once more highlighted the traditionally strong links between crime fiction and political activity. However, this political involvement no longer forms a strong consensus and is increasingly presented as a problematic legacy, as thematized and discussed by contemporary novels.

In the context of the reconfigurations brought about by the post-1980s mutations of political culture and of the decline of traditional political participation models (Rosanvallon 426), this chapter will explore how crime writers narrativize the fields of political participation. What can

these stories tell us about the contemporary imaginaries of political activism and action? In contrast with the joyous anarchist detective of 1990s series *Le Poulpe*, twenty-first-century thrillers seem populated by disillusioned and disoriented police officers, hazardous political trajectories, and hesitant yet deadly engagements. Rather than exploring the political issues conveyed by crime fiction (e.g. political or economic crises, environmental issues, social banditry), this chapter focuses on representations of political attitudes, examining fictional militants and depictions of political commitments and sensibilities to characterize contemporary figures of political action. How do crime novels also reflect on the contemporary evolutions of social movements, and their consequences for political subjectivities? This study investigates a wide selection of novels by French authors in which protagonists must face political choices, drawing from a representative repository of eighty French novels, to encompass a wide anthology of contemporary fictional activists and agents.

Politics in Crime Fiction: From Militants to Situations

Can fiction 'talk politics'? Does it address 'the political sphere' in the same way the media does, thus contributing to demarcating the scope of its activity? From the perspective of political science, the constructivist tradition, grounded in French sociology and cultural studies, understands political activity as a process and a cultural phenomenon, a symbolic operation that appropriates and 're-qualifies' diverse practices through the political imaginary (Lagroye 360). This approach gave rise to seminal studies on the production of political meaning through social and media discourses (Gamson). From the perspective of literary theory, literary 'themes' can be approached from a dynamic, narratological point of view, analysing how the fictional narrative contributes to the construction of concepts and their uses. Narrative themes are plural and reciprocal: they are "elements of a lexicon from which the narrative draws its components, and to which the reader can refer in order to determine the narrative significance of the facts that form the plot"[2] (Ryan 24). They are devices that contribute to the characterization process, combining narrative functions (i.e. the canonic actions in crime fiction, including the murder, the investigation, the revelation, etc.) with abstract categories of meaning to which these actions are associated to construct the reader's understanding of the

text (crime, justice, engagement, activism, etc.), therefore contributing to discursive qualification processes. Elements drawn from the political lexicon thus contribute in fiction as in other texts—and more specifically within a realistic tradition based on a closely referential relation to the real world—to the 'politicization' of the different forms of action depicted.

By studying how crime fiction thematizes the political, and elaborates what is assessed as political, we can document the contemporary imaginaries of political participation. This study investigates fictional activism through the judgements introduced by the narrative into the diegesis through the articulation of narrative structures (situations, actions and protagonists) and semantic qualification. Using a corpus built from a pre-established selection of the most successful novels published on the French literary market between 2000 and 2019—that is, considering both the importance of symbolic rewards and the growing influence of commercial considerations in our late modern consumer culture, the novels that received the most awards and had the largest print runs—I have examined the political lexicon in these novelist universes. This has allowed me to identify novels where politics are significantly present, either through the recurrence of the concept itself or through occurrences of specific qualifiers referring to ideas and actions associated with social movements.[3] For the purpose of the comparison, I have complemented this corpus with a concise selection of earlier award-winning novels that provide an overview of novelistic universes in the most popular crime novels of the 1970s to 1990s, to provide a point of comparison and in some cases a counterpoint to the contemporary novels under study.

From the outset, this preliminary research suggests that the imaginary of political participation (as conveyed through the lexicon of activism) has not altogether disappeared from novelistic universes, in spite of what could be presumed from the disengagement of contemporary crime writers from institutional politics. The specific lexicon of the 1960s and 1970s has of course perceptibly receded. Jean-Patrick Manchette, for example, was fond of the term 'leftist', which he often slipped into descriptions of his characters (*Nada* 1972; *Morgue Pleine* 1973), as did some of his contemporaries (Pierre Magnan, *Le Sang des Atrides*, 1977; Jean-François Vilar, *C'est toujours les autres qui meurent*, 1982). During the *Le Poulpe* years, fictional activists were still recognizably portrayed as militants, according to the traditional distribution of social movements between trade unions and parties: anarchists, communists, libertarians and so on. However, this concern with politics has not vanished from contemporary novels. The

corpus even suggests a recent resurgence of interest in figures of activists (Greens, Basque independence fighters, jihadis and pro-migrant activists), although political activism has become more diverse, disparate and detached from the Marxist tradition, in line with the underlying mutations of what the European social sciences once referred to as the "new social movements" (Neveu). A diverse range of radical actions, from people smuggling to murder, robbery or hacking, remain invested with political meaning. But where institutional activism is still present, it is depicted retrospectively in historical noir novels that immerse themselves in the history of the twentieth century—and more specifically, the origins of the French Fifth Republic, including the Algerian War of Independence, the conflict between the OAS (anti-independence organization) and the FLN (Algerian liberation movement), and the turmoil caused by the Algerian question amongst the French institutional Left and in particular in the Communist Party (in Varenne and Cantaloube's works). However, when figures from this period are present in post-2010 novels—such as *Après la Guerre*, *Le Mur, le Kabyle et le Marin* or *Un Avion sans elle*—they mostly form part of the background and appear as secondary characters. This major difference is not reflected in Table 11.1: on the contrary, the activists who featured in *néo-polar* narratives were often their main protagonists.

Political Militancy as a Background Element

This move of institutional militancy to the background hides a more fundamental shift affecting the construction of novelistic universes. In late twentieth-century novels, diegetic characteristics indicate that politics are thematized according to a system of references associated with the French social movements of the time: the protests of 1961, the autonomous movements of the 1970s, the strikes of 1981. The novels' main characters often belong to militant groups involved in these events—for instance, Victor Blainville (Vilar 1982), a 'former activist' who is surrounded by Surrealists and Trotskyist militants; Manchette characters Buenaventura Diaz in *Nada* (1972) and ex-Socialist Party member Georges Gerfaut in *Le Petit Bleu de la côte Ouest* (1976); socialist bar owner Fonfon in *Chourmo* (Izzo 1996); the protagonist in *La Belle de Fontenay*, a retired rail worker and anarchist (Pouy 1992); and the entire gallery of characters in *Le Poulpe* novels, a mix of anarchists and neo-Nazis (*Nazis dans le metro*, 1996). The political lexicon works as a characterization principle for

Table 11.1 Corpus of crime novels

Author	*Title of novel*	*English title (if any translation)*	*Year of publication*	*Setting*	*Activists (if any)*	*Decisive commitment (if any)*
Jean-Patrick Manchette	*Nada*	*Nada*	1972	1970s terrorism in France ('Years of Lead')	Anarchists	Kidnapping
J.-F. Coatmeur	*Les Sirènes de minuit*		1976	1970s terrorism in France ('Years of Lead')	Bretagne liberation front	
Pierre Siniac	*L'Unijambiste de la côte 284*		1980	France from 1917 to 1970	Deserters, collaborationists, communists, members of the French Resistance	
Jean-François Vilar	*C'est toujours les autres qui meurent*		1982	Radical Left in Paris in 1981	Trotskyists, communists	
Didier Daeninckx	*Meurtres pour mémoire*	*Murder in memoriam*	1983	Algerian War of Independence		
Jean-Bernard Pouy	*Belle de Fontenay*		1992	A high school in the suburbs of Paris	Workers on strike, unionists	Clandestine investigation
Hervé Prudon	*Ouarzazate et mourir*		1996	Anarchist circles, Boulogne-Billancourt	Anarchists	
Didier Daeninckx	*Nazis dans le metro*	*Nazis in the metro*	1996	Neo-Nazi circles in Paris	Antifascists, 'Left-Wing Nazis'	

Jean-Claude Izzo	*Chourmo*	*Chourmo*	1996	The Left in Marseille in the 1990s	Communists, socialists	
Jean-Hugues Oppel	*Cartago*		2000	End of Mitterrand's presidency, the Bastille Day parade	Terrorists (Left Wing extremists, Muslim fundamentalists)	Assassination attempt on the President
Hervé Le Corre	*L'Homme aux lèvres de saphir*		2004	1870 War	Communards	
Caryl Férey	*Utu*	*Utu*	2006	The Maori question in the post-colonial context	Maori activists	Murder
DOA	*Citoyens clandestins*		2007	2001, emergence of the jihadi terror threat in France	Jihadis	Investigation the DGSE (French secret services)
Caryl Férey	*Zulu*	*Zulu*	2008	Post-apartheid conflict in South Africa		Clandestine investigation
Antonin Varenne	*Fakirs*	*Beds of nails*	2009	The Gulf War		Clandestine investigation
Pierre Lemaître	*Cadres noirs*	*Inhuman resources*	2010	The 2008 financial crisis		Hostage-taking
Marin Ledun	*Les Visages écrasés*		2011	France Télécom scandal		Murder

(*continued*)

Table 11.1 (continued)

Author	*Title of novel*	*English title (if any translation)*	*Year of publication*	*Setting*	*Activists (if any)*	*Decisive commitment (if any)*
Dominique Manotti, DOA	*L'Honorable Société*		2011	French anti-terrorist units	Green activists	Cyber-espionage
Antonin Varenne	*Le Mur, le Kabyle et le marin*	*Loser's corner*	2011	Algerian War of Independence	Communists	Murder
Jérôme Leroy	*Le Bloc*		2011	French Far Right circles	Neo-fascists and antifascists	Fascist activism
Michel Bussi	*Un Avion sans elle*	*After the Crash*	2012	Dieppe, Communist city	Communists	
Caryl Férey	*Mapuche*	*Mapuche*	2012	Scandal of the stolen babies, Argentinian dictature	Argentinian grandmothers	Assaults, kidnapping
Olivier Truc	*Le Dernier Lapon*	*Forty days without shadows*	2012	Geopolitical tensions in Swedish Lapland		Murder(s)
Antoine Chainas	*Pur*		2012	Far Right in France	Far Right groups	Assaults
Romain Slocombe	*Monsieur le Commandant*	*Monsieur le Commandant: a wartime confession*	2013	World War II	Militiamen	Denunciation
Emmanuel Grand	*Terminus Belz*		2013	The migrant crisis and Romanian mafia in France		People smuggling

Hervé le Corre	*Après la Guerre*	*After the war*	2014	Bordeaux in the 1950s, Algerian War	Communists	Refusal of military enrolment
Marin Ledun	*L'Homme qui a vu l'homme*		2014	The Basque conflict		Clandestine investigation
Ian Manook	*Yeruldelgger*		2014	Geopolitical tensions in today's Mongolia		Clandestine investigation
Nicolas Mathieu	*Aux Animaux la guerre*		2014	Union struggles in the industrial region of Lorraine	Unionists	People smuggling
Colin Niel	*Obia*		2015	Geopolitical tensions around the Ndjuka people in French Guyana		Clandestine investigations
Olivier Norek	*Entre deux Mondes*		2017	The migrant crisis		People smuggling
Frédéric Paulin	*La Guerre est une ruse*		2018	Terrorism in the 1990s Algeria (the 'dark decade')		People smuggling
Hervé Le Corre	*Dans l'Ombre du brasier*	*In the shadow of the fire*	2018	The Paris Commune	Communards	Armed conflict
Caryl Férey	*Plus jamais seul*		2018	The migrant crisis		Armed conflict
Thomas Cantaloube	*Requiem pour une République*		2019	Algerian War		Terrorist attack

characters, who are identified through their affiliation. For example, in *Ouarzazate et mourir* (Prudon: 14), Tchang is characterized as an "anarchist by training" and is recruited to assassinate a man described as "a fascist and a pimp". The novels' backgrounds are also determined by this political characterization, with stories mostly set in activist or former activist circles. Political engagement is thus defined via the degree of an individual's involvement with a militant organization.

Over the following decades, it became more and more difficult to identify characters who could be referred to as militants. Political characterization is mostly present in the novels' spatial and temporal backdrops, which are often captured by a single denominator (current affairs and politics, security and politics, finance and politics, etc.). The term militant alludes to the exercise of power, describing the socio-political configurations that form the characters' backdrops. The plots navigate the political spectrum through historical and social situations, but militancy is no longer through the character's initial or key characterization. For example, when the protagonist of *Entre deux Mondes* (Norek 2017), a police officer, helps unaccompanied minor Kilani make the crossing to England, it is not out of pro-migrant political beliefs but because he was unwillingly assigned to the Calais migrant camp and becomes attached to the young boy. In *Cadres Noirs* (Lemaître 2010), the recruitment of executives turns into a kidnapping and, in the context of the 2008 financial crisis, blows up into a media scandal, fast-tracking the protagonist into an unplanned political career: he becomes "the most famous jobseeker in the world", whose story is expected to provide "food for thought for politicians" (Lemaître: 429). In novels like *L'Homme qui a vu l'homme* (Ledun 2014), *Zulu* and *Mapuche* (Férey 2008, 2012), *Après la guerre* and *Dans l'Ombre du brasier* (Le Corre 2014, 2018), but also *L'Honorable Société* (Manotti and DOA 2011) and *Fakirs* (Varenne 2009), the plot is not only associated with a conflict, but more broadly with a national or international historical and political context: the 2008 financial crisis, the French presidential elections, South Africa's political wars, the Afghan conflict and the Commune in Paris. There is a shift in scale and point of view: the characters move away from institutional activism but, although they are not labelled as political actors in the diegesis, their actions can take on a political value.

This does not mean, of course, that in novels from the 1970s to 1990s, characters like Victor Blainville and Buenaventura Diaz (in Vilar's *C'est toujours les autres qui meurent* and in Manchette's *Nada*) are described as having a stable and unwavering political activity, or that activism is

ubiquitous in all novels from this period. Conversely, a number of contemporary crime novels do feature characters who are involved in organized political activities: the grandmothers or *abuelas* in *Mapuche* (Férey 2008), who are figureheads of civil resistance against the Argentinian dictature; the Green activists in *L'Honorable Société* (Manotti and DOA 2012, 2011), during the French presidential election campaign; or the contemporary Far Right extremists in *Bloc national* (Leroy 2011). However, the main protagonists are rarely political activists and never Marxists: the multifold and diffuse nature of their activities often only eludes the notion of 'militancy'. In contrast, in *néo-polar* novels, when activism forms part of a character's past (e.g. in Vilar's novels) or when it is jeopardized by the diegesis (in Manchette's novels), institutional activism still provides the starting point for a meditation on political engagement, grounded in post-May 1968 nostalgia and generating ambiguous figures of 'enchanted disenchantment', as analysed by Collovald and Neveu (2001). As explicit mentions of activism become increasingly sparse, and the political circumstances take on a growing importance, the focus shifts to the conditions of political engagement, thus enlightened as a process: How do specific situations generate engagement? When does a person translate this engagement into action? At what point does an action become political? These changes reveal a more fluid understanding of political action, echoing the social sciences' recent interest in a wider, 'process-centred' approach to political engagement (Fillieule 2001)—an approach that considers the participation of 'ordinary people' in critical moments of History and the intrinsic dynamics of events (Deluermoz and Gobille 2015). This evolution goes along with a global de-nationalization of critical theory: political action is now considered through the exploration of diverse situations of crisis, which novelists often find beyond their respective national history.

Internationalizing Political Action

In *Mapuche* by Caryl Férey (2008), the condition of the Mapuche people collides with the *abuelas* movement in a plot that begins with the abduction of babies during the Argentinian dictatorship. Jana, a young Mapuche sculptor and sex worker, investigates alongside private detective Ruben (the son of an Argentinian opponent and a supporter of the *abuelas*) to find the biological brother of a stolen baby who has been adopted by an influential wealthy family. Jana breaks into the Navy archives, steals a suspect's military file, kidnaps the perpetrators, and manages to keep them

captive until they are arrested and the two brothers are reunited. While the "1810 Constitution has […] purely and simply denied the Mapuche who "only account for three percent of the Argentinian population today" (98), Jana, who "carves her dreams" into wood, brings the *desaparecidos* back to life thanks to her investigation and, more importantly, thanks to the fearlessness she inherited from her status as a survivor.

The Zulu, Mapuche, Ndjuka, Mongol, Sami and Maori communities are at the heart of six of the most awarded French novels between 2005 and 2020: *Zulu*, *Utu*, *Le Dernier Lapon*, *Obia*, *Mapuche* and *Yeruldegger*. This interest in native populations who live as minorities on their own land can be associated with the many French novels that revisit the history of relations between France and Algeria (*Le Mur, le Kabyle et le marin; Requiem pour une république; La Guerre est une ruse*), and others that question France's colonial past and its consequences for these territories and their populations, including Colin Niel's trilogy set in Guyane, as well as Michel Bussi's bestsellers set in La Réunion (*Ne lâche pas ma Main*) and in the Marquise islands (*Au Soleil redouté*), and other novels exploring highly divisive regional independence movements in Corsica (Michel Bussi) or in the Basque Country (Marin Ledun). The popularity of such geopolitical settings marks an 'ethnographic' turn in French crime fiction over the last few years (Erdmann 22–24), also observed in other crime writing traditions, expanding on the space of geopolitical struggles and conflictual national identities, like the Spanish or the Irish (McGuire; Walsh 59). In these stories, according to Erdmann, the investigation becomes a pretext for an ethnographic survey which unfolds according to the genre's specific structure, where a series is built on chrono-spatial variations (affecting the *locus criminalis*) rather than on the elements of the plot (Erdmann). The tension between stereotype and singularity that sits at the core of popular literature is thus revisited as a tension between the lure of folklorism and the critical assessment of cultural particularities. For instance, Walsh analyses the recent rise of Catalan noir fiction, whose singular posture and critical approach to national politics can be explained by recent Catalan history in post-Franco Spain (59). In another study on the representation of the foreign in crime fiction, Pezzotti shows how Andrea Camilleri's work articulates Sicilian folklore and a critical outlook on a fictitious national Italian identity (185)

Our French novels are all based on a similar narrative structure: in each of them, the investigator is faced with a criminal event (theft or murder),

and from this particular crime develops a personal interest in the case's cultural dimension, often because of this character's native origins (Ndjuka in *Obia*, Mapuche in *Mapuche*, Lappalainen in *Le Dernier Lapon*, Basque in *L'Homme qui a vu l'homme*). Most novels introduce a relation of causality between these two narrative features (*Le Dernier Lapon*, *Yeruldegger*). Rather than explaining this shift by the genre's intrinsically 'ethnological structure' (Reuter 2015), I interpret it as a symptom of the de-nationalization of novelistic universes in recent years, to respond to the decline of the traditional categorization of the political as constructed and unified by the nation (Keucheyan 2017). In the past, the serialization of narrative patterns was based on variations on political *action*; the shift towards location-based series responds to a contemporary interest in locating political struggles and examining their stakes and proceedings. The ethnographic dimension in these narratives confirms the focus on the conjuncture and on the 'diversity' of situations (Knight 2003).

Political Subjectivities and Engagements

In the boundless universe of these de-nationalized, plural and diverse struggles, the novels in my corpus also appear to deploy diverse modalities of participation in collective action. What drives Mapuche-born Jana to risk her life to find the people who murdered her colleagues, other than "a tingle […] in her Indian veins" (Férey 2008: 223)? What causes Zulu police officer Ali Neuman to chase two murderous generals into the desert despite his hierarchy's instructions, in the hope of putting an end to abject pharmaceutical tests conducted by Western corporations, thus sacrificing his life? Why does Iban Urtiz, a humble French freelance journalist, decide to chase the army men who brutalized ETA activists, in the name of a regional cultural minority to which he does not really belong (Ledun 2014)?

The popularity of this genre with cultural studies suggests that crime writing lends itself to a reflection on cultural identities, and that its success has paralleled the rise of identity-centred approaches to social issues (Krajenbrink and Quinn 2009; Anderson et al. 2012; Mills and Julien 2005). It is difficult to conduct a diachronic study of the role played by motive in the narrativization of political actions. However, a fair number of novels in my corpus clearly articulate politics with a constellation of themes pertaining to the characters' identities. In DOA's spy epic *Citoyens clandestins* (2007), journalist Amel agrees to take on an investigation into

the 'jihadi phenomenon' passed on to her by eminent reporter Bastien Rougeard. A "French citizen of Moroccan origin", as she insists during her job interview when people keep referring to her as 'Moroccan', she willingly takes risks in order to meet her own standard of what it means to be 'a good journalist'—that is, a journalist who "fights" (DOA 88–89). In the dialogue quoted above, Amel has to turn down the job offer or cancel her wedding trip. But behind the journalist's invocation of professional standards, which borrows from the vocabulary of political struggle, what is actually at stake for this woman—the child of immigrants from a country associated with religious fundamentalism—is recognition. Like other authors, DOA builds a universe where choosing political engagements is also a way of finding one's place in a world of stigmatization, where action is a way of countering discrimination, of finding one's place professionally or culturally. In Colin Niel's *Obia*, the police investigation led by Anato, a Ndjuka who grew up in the Paris suburbs, collides with the character's quest for his true identity as he returns to his home village and reconnects with his *Noir-Marron* origins. At the other end of the genre's spectrum, *Un Avion sans elle*, Michel Bussi's bestseller (2012), narrates an investigation about a young woman, Lylie, whose biological identity has become uncertain after she survived a plane crash as a baby, and who is claimed by two families from two very different backgrounds, including a Communist family living in the industrial city of Dieppe. In this social parable, the character's social identity remains forever undetermined: in spite of the social sacrifices it would involve, its elucidation is an irresistible quest for the various characters (the private investigator, the two putative families and Lylie herself).

By making the understanding of a character's identity a key aspect of the plot, these novels are recoding the imaginary of political engagement from the perspective of self-construction, de-centring the narrative of choice onto the characters' intimate motivations, and thus echoing the rise of autobiographic and polyphonic writing (Gefen 2017). The characters' actions are rooted in today's 'third culture of emancipation' (Rosanvallon 2018), split between the appeal of collective action inherited from the recent tradition of social movements and, on the other hand, the desire for individual autonomy. In the diegesis, 'political engagement'—that is, actions that are likely to be labelled as political in the narrative—is fugitive and contingent, both necessary and accidental, imperious and uncertain.

Involuntary and Tragic Commitments

As shown by the story of the Mapuche woman who declares "I'm coming with you" to the detective because something is stirring in her "Indian veins", or that of Ali Neuman in *Zulu* who carries on with what he knows to be "a suicidal plan", the intimate reading of the political act involves an emotional and sensorial characterization, in contrast with an existentialist understanding of subjectivity and action. In *Plus jamais seul*, another novel by Caryl Férey (2017), the explanation of the commitment made by Zoe, Angélique and Marco, and ultimately by the protagonist McCash, in favour of clandestine immigration obliterates the possibility of a deliberate choice:

> Setting up a clandestine immigration operation is punishable by years in jail, McCash reminded her: Marco is a tax lawyer and visibly leads a settled life, you have a child, why did you follow Angélique in this adventure?
> — I've already answered your question: out of human dignity. I was reticent at first, only because of our daughter. But eventually, I changed my mind without anybody forcing me. I don't mind the risk.
> He nodded gently.
> — What about Marco?
> — Marco is a pirate, Zoé replied. Just like you (195, EPub).

McCash is not a sailor but a travelling detective who lost an eye in a riot during the Irish conflict. For him, piracy is a "temperament", which could also be described as "nostalgia for the possible", felt by a man who "never had anything to lose" since he beat up his father, lost an eye and broke up with Angélique. "Self-destructive instincts", "rage by the cubic meter" (Férey 2017: 17, 220): the characters are constantly questioning their motives, and reasserting the role of instinctive, meaningless and sometimes desperate choices. Impulsive reactions are imbued with the same moral urgency in Marin Ledun's *Les Visages écrasés* (2011) where the main character, Carole Matthieu, an occupational health doctor, is struck by the necessity to murder one of her patients. Because her job is about "listening, auscultating, vaccinating […], but also relieving, reassuring. And curing. Using the right treatment", she grabs her Beretta handgun, which she had been keeping "for emergency use only" (22). She wants Vincent, a patient who has been bullied by his management in his everyday work and is suffering from severe depression, to "go away with dignity" (33–34). This novel also shows political action not as the product of a free and informed decision, but as

> the outcome of a slow and painful series of causes and effects, a knobbly tangle of ins and outs, where [Camille Matthieu is only] one link in the chain. (33–34)

The same sense of inevitability is present in *Le Bloc* (2011) by Jérôme Leroy, a novel that retraces the story of a writer named Antoine Maynard, who "became a fascist because of a girl's sex" (1) according to the first words of the novel. In Thomas Cantaloube's *Requiem pour une république* (2018), Sirius Volkstrom, who in a short diegetic interval is involved in the OAS-led terrorist attack on a Paris-Strasbourg train in 1961 before dying by mistake when trying to save an Algerian during the police killings of 17 October 1961, seems mainly driven by the death of his lover, who is killed by the secret services, and his desire to avenge him: "I don't give a fuck about the OAS. I just want to make the bastards suffer! This new Republic is rotten!" (543).

Sirius Volkstrom is not the only character who commits a fatal political gesture: in Le Corre's *Dans l'Ombre du brasier* (2018), during the 'Bloody Week', police officer Antoine Roques decides to stay in Paris to support the Communards, in spite of his wife's plea to leave while he still can, on 21 May 1871:

> —Why aren't you coming with me? We could be with them, and protect them. What do you think?
> —I can't. I must…
> He stopped, out of breath. He could no longer tell where his duty lied.
> —You must what? For whom? For what?
> —I have made some commitments. You encouraged me to do it, remember. You were proud of me for doing it. Now I must go all the way, do you understand? (427, EPub)

And because Antoine's choice forces him to remain locked inside the walls of Paris on 21 May, during the first days of the Bloody Week, this choice is irreversible and tragic: Antoine is shot by the Versailles army at the end of the novel, as he (finally) attempts to run away.

Whether they lead to a murder, to a situation of danger or to civil disobedience, critical actions in these novels are deliberately approached in reverse of the positive Sartrian definition of political engagement, considered as a deliberate and carefully thought-through choice leading to the protagonist's institutional affiliation. On the contrary, these actions are

brief tipping points, taking place during moments of acceleration in the narrative, and associated with the build-up of suspense. They are not described as rational *decisions* (in the Sartrian sense of the term) but as imperatives, shaped by circumstances, fuelled by the characters' determinisms and negative affects, and endured in the course of the thriller.

A Place of Disarray

Described as impulsive, instant, personal and emotional, these gestures ultimately challenge the representation of political rationality. Echoing recent understandings of 'noir' as an aesthetic of affective negativity (Breu and Hatmaker), contemporary French novels highlight a form of affective fatality, invoking affects like doubt, fatigue or despair, when justifying the narrative action. Many of them stage hesitant subjectivities at the moment of action, the character's hesitant political goals, the uncertainty of their political values and motives regarding actions that could otherwise take on a political meaning. In the extract quoted above, Antoine Roques expresses the sense of duty that derives from his choices, but he is no longer able to articulate the political purpose of this decision. Similarly, Sirius Volkstrom has no particular convictions regarding the OAS or the Algerian War in general: it is only in retrospect that his terrorist attack, despite its historic impact, is associated with a 'political struggle' (Cantaloube 2018: 539, EPub). *La Guerre est une ruse*, the first volume of Frédéric Paulin's successful trilogy retracing the emergence of jihad in Algeria (Paulin 2018: 253, EPub), stages two characters who are like mirror images of each other: Tedj Benlazar, a French-Algerian man who works for the secret services in Algeria and shares his disillusioned perspective on both countries, and Raouf, a key member of the Front islamique du salut, a fundamentalist group, who can't really explain his conviction:

> [Raouf] 'can't quite remember how he found himself socializing with some friends who were close to the FIS, how he became a member of the party, and how he found himself in the street in 1991, fighting the police, the army and the authorities.'

Finally, Jérôme Leroy's *Le Bloc* (2011), Antoine Chainas' *Pur* (2012) and Romain Slocombe's *Monsieur le Commandant* (2011) all stage characters who are hesitating when faced with the discourses and actions of the Far Right. Stanko in *Le Bloc* finds himself caught in the movement without

any real conviction; Alice considers that the fascist group 'Force et Honneur' could be instrumentalized for the benefit of the police; the writer-protagonist in *Monsieur le Commandant* is split between his loathing of the Gestapo's wrongdoings and his antisemitism, while the fictional afterword of the novel stresses that this character did play a part in collaboration (Slocombe 2011: 264, EPub).

Whether staging identity, morals or psychology, or volatile value systems, these narratives appear to undermine the representation of political agency. While they continue to stage political engagements, the characters' subjectivities are often a bit 'off-centre', circumspect and indecisive. When these characters do on occasion connect with a militant organization through their actions, it is the product of fortuitous circumstances, of a personal quest or of poorly controlled emotions (the 'rage' mentioned in *Plus jamais seul*). The protagonists are not initially referred to as 'militants' (they 'do not do politics anymore', to quote a character from *Zulu*), but they do happen to change the course of spatial and temporal frameworks characterized as political. By emphasizing the role of indetermination and determinism, of chance and affects, these novels question the rational foundations of institutional political action, and defeat the "very model of organized action" (Rancière 2007). To an existentialist understanding of political engagement (pictured as rational, or at least deliberate, lasting and nominable), they oppose the contingency and fragility of political determinations. They document diverse forms of political engagement that do not follow the legacy of institutional culture, but instead take on multifold and uncertain directions, thus widening the scope of political action and the spectrum of historical 'protagonism' (Burstin 2010; Deluermoz and Gobille 2015). Last but not least, by resonating with contemporary attempts at delineating new social movements, they contribute to the expression of a common concern as to the very conditions of possibility of political engagement in contemporary times.

Conclusion: Towards a Typology of Contemporary Political Figures and Actions

A typology of the figures engaged in political action in contemporary crime writing could be broken down into three categories. The first comprises the neo-militants, who appear to continue the tradition of the *néo-polar*'s representation of activism but are transfigured into new identities such as the hacker or the activist-migrant smuggler to reflect recent

reconfigurations in the social movements landscape: their diversification, their detachment from organized activism, their de-centralization and their (trans)culturalization. Another category comprises 'followers' who are dragged into political action through no will of their own: they include self-searching individuals such as detectives, journalists, police officers or doctors, who perpetrate political actions, sometimes beyond the point of no return, without really grasping their full implications. Finally, a third category that would be worth exploring in more depth is made up of members of the police: as representatives of power bound by the duty of confidentiality, they embody the conflict between professional responsibility and political belief. However, all three categories share a common feature in the novels where they are sometimes mixed together: they reveal the often hazardous dimension of political action, and disrupt the narrative based on the theory of political engagement according to which the course of events is the product of conscious, rational and reliable choices. Through this preference for the active/passive agents of social movements rather than for militants, contemporary crime writers explore and symbolize their ideological and aesthetic reluctance for the militant model that prevailed until recently in representations of crime writing. In doing so, these authors also represent their own hesitations and political shifts. By opening up the spectrum of political meaning, they elaborate a *raison d'être* for writing that eludes the militant metaphor, and invest hesitation, sensitivity and even unintentionality (a notion that evokes the artistic value of intransitivity) with a political weight. While *polar* as a social group remains marked by the political engagement of some of its actors, contemporary crime writing is confronting the last remains of a political consciousness that has long drifted away from its militant roots.

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Notes

1. All translations mine, unless otherwise stated.
2. Translation of a French original: « les éléments d'un lexique où le récit va chercher ses ingrédients et que le lecteur consulte pour déterminer la signification narrative des faits dont se compose l'intrigue ».

3. I searched the corpus for occurrences of the following terms: *politique* (politics/political), *activisme* (activism), *militer* (to campaign), *militantisme* (campaigning/activism), *engagé* (politically engaged), *communiste* (communist), *anarchiste* (anarchist), *libertaire* (libertarian), *maoïste* (Maoist), *fasciste* (fascist), *syndicaliste* (unionist) and *grève* (strike).

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