

# Identity, Borders and the Environment

## New Political Issues in Contemporary French Noir

*Alice Jacquelin*

*is a Ph.D in French and Comparative Literature specializing in crime fiction and media studies. She currently holds a position as a postdoctoral fellow in the H2020 DETECT program (Limoges team). Her academic works focus on popular culture, detective and crime novel, Country Noir in French and US literature.*

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### Abstract

This article examines the works of two contemporary French crime writers, Colin Niel and Antonin Varenne, whose crime novels are set in marginalized spaces and places in France: rural areas in the Hexagone and French Guiana. Why did Niel and Varenne choose to set their novels in the “margins of the society” (Gorrara 2003, 16)? Do these novels follow the French néo-noir tradition of social critique and politically engaged fiction (Levet 2006)? To which extent do they fall within the spectrum of the *ethnopol*, or under the umbrella of postcolonial fiction? The seven noir novels in our corpus depict French outskirts, both within metropolitan France and in overseas territories, raising burning questions about French identity and national borders. But their divergence on the environmental issue draws a clear political fracture between the two authors.

**Keywords:** Noir novel, French Guiana, Ecofiction, Rurality

Historically, the noir genre was produced in an urban and industrialized context: “the genre’s literary and editorial development as well as that of its readership is linked to the development of cities in the second half of the nineteenth century<sup>1</sup>” (Levet 2018). However, the *néo-polar* of the 1970s and 1980s started to shift the setting of detective stories “out of the big cities to the suburbs and the margins of society; to those places, such as public housing estates, perceived to be a wasteland for social outcasts and rejects” (Gorrara 2003, 16). The geographical shift initiated by the *néo-polar* was also a political move that looked more closely at the social margins of French society. Today, some contemporary crime writers such as Colin Niel and Antonin Varenne are venturing into the outskirts of metropolitan France, pushing narrative borders further back than their predecessors of the *néo-polar*. The seven novels in our corpus are set either deep in the heart of rural France (Niel, *Seules les bêtes*, 2017 and Varenne, *Battues*, 2016 [2015]), or in the faraway overseas *département* of French Guiana (Niel’s Guianese tetralogy, formed by the novels *Les Hamacs de carton*, 2012, *Ce qui reste en forêt*, 2013, *Obia*, 2015, *Sous le ciel effrondré*, 2018; and Varenne’s novella *Cat 215*, 2016).

The aim of this article is to study why Niel and Varenne are pushing back the geographical boundaries of the noir novel and setting their narratives at the new fringes of the French national space. Are there any similarities between the rural setting of the Cévennes (*Seules les bêtes*), or the fictional small town of R. in Auvergne (*Battues*), and the tropical scenery of French Guiana? What contemporary political concerns are these new settings responding to?

The first section of this article will analyze how Niel and Varenne build their main characters as ‘monsters’ in opposition to the traditional figure of the affable, *debonair* French commissaire, and why these ‘misfits’ dismantle the notion of ‘French identity’. The second section will examine how the seven novels question the boundaries of the French national space, including the external borders of former colonial territories and the internal social margins in disenfranchised rural spaces. Finally, the third section will focus on the depiction of natural settings, demonstrating how nature is at the heart of a political battle between the advocates of the environment and the adversaries of the practice known as ‘agri-bashing’. Each in their particular way, Colin Niel and Antonin Varenne explore three political issues at stake in French contemporary noir: identity, borders and the environment.

### Monsters, Outcasts and Misfits: Questioning Identities

A major resemblance between Niel's and Varenne's writings is their fondness for complex characters with problematic identities. In *Battues* and *Sous le ciel effondré*, the main characters, Rémi Parrot, a gamekeeper, and Angélique Blakaman, a warrant officer, share the common trait of having been disfigured after an accident. As a result, they are both regarded as "monsters" and live as outcasts in their homeland: Rémi Parrot, because his family arrived in Auvergne 'only' three generations earlier, which is why he is still considered as a newcomer, and Blakaman, because she left her Guianese village – Maripasoula – to go study and serve in mainland France before coming back. But while Niel's characters are looking for their identities through cultural dialogue, by adapting to a new environment and striving to integrate into local communities – even if adaptation can be painful – Varenne's characters have to fight for their territory and confront others to find themselves. The final duel in *Battues* is typical of this revengeful dynamic:

Parrot' grandson did what he had to do, a shotgun in hand, and no one could misjudge his deeds. Who cared what the police thought? Rémi Parrot walked through the barracks without paying attention to the stares. From now on and until the end of time, Rémi Parrot had become a local. Rémi Parrot, third generation, was no longer a stranger. (Varenne 2016 [2015], 277)<sup>2</sup>

The use of free indirect speech and the anaphoric repetition of the family name, "Parrot", show how the character has acquired his own identity and his own voice by fighting with "a shotgun in hand" and defying the police's authority. Only then does he stop being "a stranger" in his own land. Parrot and Blakaman are the detectives in the novels, even if their professional status is not legitimate to conduct investigations. These physical and professional particularities are narratively significant, since they confer the status of social outcasts upon them. This specific condition brings these two characters closer to the figure of the US hardboiled novel's detective – always oscillating between the positions of the lawman and the outlaw – than to the debonair French police chief whose authority is unquestioned (see Boltanski 2012, 58). Also, these

characters' specificities draw Niel's and Varenne's novels closer to postcolonial and minority crime fiction: "this conversance with a multicultural modernity may be one reason the hardboiled detective has proven so popular a figure in postcolonial and minority detective fiction" (Pearson and Singer 2009, 5).

Niel's Guianese tetralogy's first three books are centered on Capitaine Anato, a Black chief police officer. Anato and Blakaman befriend and collaborate in the fourth volume partly because of their shared Ndjuka origins and black identities, whereas their colleagues are mainly white males exiled from metropolitan France. In the first three volumes of the cycle – *Les Hamacs en carton*, *Ce qui reste en forêt* and *Obia* – Capitaine Anato, who left Guiana as a child and was raised in an urban suburb in metropolitan France, is also looking for his identity by exploring his parents' secrets and families, in an attempt to understand the Ndjuka traditions and fit in his native community. On different levels, Parrot, Blakaman and Anato are all struggling with their identities. On the contrary, the central character in Varenne's *Cat 215* – Marc, a white metropolitan mechanic – who used to live temporarily in Guiana – returns in his host country to fix an engine in the middle of the forest. Both Blakaman and Anato, but also Marc, might be compared to the figure of the "post-colonial detective", defined as "indigenous to or settlers in the [postcolonial] countries where they work: they are usually marginalized in some way [...] and their creators' interest actually lies in an exploration of how these detective's approaches to criminal investigation are influenced by their cultural attitudes" (Christian 2001, 17).

Marc's position as a marginalized outcast depends on a social factor: Marc and his wife are very poor. The first four pages of this very short novella are dedicated to the couple's money problems: "I added up the cost of repairs – what it costs to be broke and only have broken down things. I needed around three bucks, always, that was it. Three bucks" (Varenne 2016, 5)<sup>3</sup>. The paradox in the sentence resides in the fact that being poor is more expensive than being rich, while the repetition of the noun phrase, "three bucks", stresses the anguishing lack of money. The poverty and loneliness of some rural characters is also the starting point of Colin Niel's *Seules les bêtes*. Joseph Bonnefille is a sheep farmer who lives alone on the *cause* (plateau):

He lived alone in his house on the *cause*, no wife, no parents anymore, fewer and fewer childhood friends in the area (*département*), just his dog that went in circles around him and his two hundred and forty sheep that he occasionally took care of. He was the only permanent resident in the small group of houses huddled at the center of the steppe – all the others were holiday homes. (Niel 2017, 18)<sup>4</sup>

The loss of all human connection leaves Joseph alone with his animals, his dog and cattle. The mentions of different administrative and geographical scales such as “the *cause*”, “the *département*”, and then “the small group of houses” show a gradual reduction of Joseph’s environment, which eventually shrinks down to his house. The use of the term “steppe” to describe the landscape of the *cause* evokes both a geographical and a social desertification. The almost oral character of the last sentence, where the negation is omitted (“*c’était plus que des résidences secondaires*”), may be understood as Joseph’s own exasperation at being the last permanent resident in the village. The precarious situation of the characters in both Niel’s and Varenne’s novels confirms that these authors write noir novels where the criminal behavior is always a consequence of economic distress, human violence and emotional isolation. The misfit characters of the seven novels mirror the social and geographical marginalization of the rural and overseas territories explored in the novels.

### **Enclosed Places and Open Spaces: The New Borders of French Noir**

The border, a recurrent topic in all seven novels, can be either symbolic or physical, delineating the French national territory either internally or externally. The way in which Colin Niel and Antonin Varenne describe the edges of their respective fictional universes reflects two very different visions of the world: an open world we need to adapt to in Niel’s case, and a closed world that needs to be conquered in Varenne’s narratives.

The little town of R., where Varenne’s novel *Battues* is set, was once a city but is now compared to “a cemetery”. This deserted place, symbolic of the decline of the working class, predetermines people’s lives in advance: “In the middle school playground, we no longer played with everyone, groups would form by affinity and

resemblance. In R., this shift took a permanent turn” (Varenne 2016 [2015], 31)<sup>5</sup>. This sociological comment about the “groups” of teenagers explains why the characters’ trajectories seem determined, and how they have to fight to overcome the fatality of their destinies. The internal borders of the rural margins draw up enclosed territories that symbolically incarcerate the characters: “The noir novel goes beyond the realistic and mimetic depiction of demographic, economic and social realities: margins are not only a special territory, they are a form of symbolic imprisonment for the characters” (Levet, 2018)<sup>6</sup>. In *Seules les bêtes*, Niel describes the Lozère *département* as a very isolated location from which only one character manages to escape: beef farmer Michel evades through an online chatroom with Amandine – his virtual lover from Abidjan (capital of the Ivory Coast).

The character of Amandine is in fact a fake identity for Armand, a young *brouteur* (scammer) who intends to scam the married white farmer to extort money from him. The very colonial fantasy of a young black girlfriend is the only thing that allows Michel to put up with the boundaries of his wintery and secluded life. Armand, for his part, believes that African people have a right to take advantage of the whites’ gullibility as a fair compensation for slavery and the triangular trade. Armand’s observation is unambiguous concerning this colonial background:

That’s why when they say that Africa has a debt to Europe, I say: no. That’s a lie. It is them who have a debt to Africa for what they have inflicted to our ancestors. This is called the colonial debt. (Niel 2017, 164-165)<sup>7</sup>

Colin Niel’s novels can thus be considered as postcolonial crime fiction, since they are “produced in encounters between nations, between races and cultures, and especially between imperial powers and their colonial territories” (Pearson and Singer 2009, 3). When Niel examines the relations of France with its current overseas *départements* or ex-colonized territories, he never forgets to question domination and the relations between black and white populations. Niel’s Guianese tetralogy also questions the absurd borders of the French national territory with its Surinamese and Brazilian neighbors, only delimited by the banks of the Maroni and Oyapock rivers,

which are mostly located within indigenous territory. The problem posed by these physical borders is at the heart of the investigation in the first volume of the series. *Les Hamacs en carton* (lit. Cardboard hammocks) tells the story of illegal immigrants from Suriname and Brazil, who cross the river to settle in French Guiana and fight to obtain French nationality. The title of the book refers to the asylum application files that indefinitely hang in a civil servant's closet like abandoned hammocks. In this novel, Niel's implicit criticism of France's anti-immigrant policies is linked to the idea that the Amazonian forest belongs to the communities who live in it – the natural border crossed for generations by indigenous people has been turned into a 'national' and closed border. In Niel's novels, the space is never closed: even in harsh territories such as the isolated *cause* Méjean or in multicultural French Guiana, the environment is fluctuating and cannot be policed. Human beings can only adapt to it. On the contrary, for Varenne, rural places as well as the Amazonian forest are enclosed territories that can convey a claustrophobic and violent atmosphere.

These notions of closure and openness are also perceptible in the composition of the novels. *Cat 215* – a very short Amazonia-set story of about a hundred pages – is very dissimilar to Niel's Guianese tetralogy which adds up to more than 1600 pages. In *Cat 215*, Marc's knowledge of the Guianese territory is only very basic: "As if I had forgotten Guiana, its river, its crime bosses, its gold fever and its moral degradation"<sup>8</sup> (Varenne 2016, 22). This quick enumeration of clichés is supposed to sum up the Guianese reality, and the moral judgment sounds a bit like a caricature. *Cat 215* also adds a thriller-like touch, with a psychological tension gradually building up between three characters stuck in the middle of the forest. On the contrary, Niel's enormous series is closer to what Thiphaine Samoyault (1999, 79) calls a "world-novel" (*roman-monde*). The world-novel's specificity resides in both its expansion and dilatation: it is always overflowing and excessive. The topic of the border signifies the closure of places in Varenne's novels, as opposed to Niel's open spaces – both internally, within the stories, and externally, considering the books' dimensions. The narrative divergence between the two literary universes can in fact be explained by their divergent opinions on the status of nature and environmental issues, which is apparent in their stance on questions such as gold panning or 'agri-bashing'.<sup>9</sup>

### **Divergence on Environmental Issues: Gold Panning and ‘Agri-Bashing’**

The control of the land, with its load of grudges and concupis-  
cence, is sometimes the prime motive for the murder and the en-  
suing police investigation. In *Battues*, the narrator Rémi Parrot is  
the son of a farmer who had to sell his land as a result of a real  
estate feud between two industrial and farming entrepreneurial  
families, the Courbets and the Messenets. The victim in the novel  
– Philippe Mazenas, a park ranger from the French National For-  
estry Office – is described by the other characters as an “eco-ter-  
rorist,” and not even Rémi Parrot is as radical as to approve of  
Mazenas’s convictions: “nature, Parrot had always thought, did  
not need to be defended. It would eat us alive if we only turned  
our backs on her for a moment” (Varenne 2016 [2015], 41)<sup>10</sup>. Na-  
ture is a hostile beast that needs to be tamed. In the war between  
ecologists and industrialists, Parrot – and probably Varenne be-  
hind him – sides with the farmers’ cause against ‘agri-bashing’:  
the land can be exploited yet of course not destroyed. Here lies the  
main political disagreement between Colin Niel and Antonin Va-  
renne: a specular vision of the humans’ domination over their en-  
vironment. This dichotomy is particularly vivid in the two Ama-  
zon-set novels that deal with the problem of gold panning:  
Varenne’s *Cat 215* and Niel’s *Obia*. In *Cat 215*, French Guiana is  
described as a violent place, corrupted by gold panning: “This  
place is like an anthill, there are shootings all over the place. Gangs  
from Suriname go down there to rob the gold panners, the Ap-  
prouague ferrymen fight each other and the pirogues are riddled  
with bullets<sup>11</sup>” (Varenne 2016, 13). The metaphorical description of  
Guiana as a swarming “anthill” and the double mention of armed  
assaults suggests that the narrator condemns the social violence  
associated with gold exploitation, but not really its consequences  
on the environment.

In Varenne’s novels, it is other people, rather than the gold pan-  
ners, who are seen as a threat to reckon with, almost as dangerous  
as wild beasts. Throughout *Cat 215*, main character Marc learns  
how to read the signs produced by others. The pattern of the hunt  
is central in Varenne’s writings. Chapter 2 of *Battues*, whose title  
literally means “hunting beats”, is a long scene representing Rémi  
Parrot the gamekeeper silently tailing a female wild boar and its



boarlets. In *Cat 215*, the Brazilians gold panners are great hunters who know how to read the signs of the forest. Here Varenne applies the “evidential paradigm” described by Carlo Ginzburg in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*: the hunter is the one who knows how to read and decipher the animal’s tracks, that is, the original “semiotician” who can “sniff out, record, interpret, and classify such infinitesimal traces” (Ginzburg 1989, 102). This paradigm of the clue as an archetype of the sign waiting to be read is a traditional approach to analyzing the noir genre (Jacquelin 2018): Varenne is an heir of this tradition.

On the contrary, Colin Niel is closer to the ethnographic approach to the noir genre. Before becoming a writer, Colin Niel’s was an agronomist specializing in rurality. He lived for a long time in French Guiana and worked for the Guiana Amazonian Park and the Guadeloupe National Park. His political engagement for the preservation of the Amazonian forest and biodiversity is particularly obvious in *Obia*, which delivers a critique of both the legal and illegal gold panning industry. Niel’s work can be linked to the *ethnopolar*. According to Naudillon (2006, 13), the expression *ethnopolar* was first used in France in 1992. The term also refers to the father of the subgenre, the American writer Tony Hillerman, who sets his novels within the Navajo country of the “Four Corners” (Delanoë 2009) and whose two main investigators, Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee, belong to the Navajo tribal police force. In this sense, Niel’s crime novels also belong to the *ethnopolar* genre, since Anato and Blakaman are both indigenous investigators from French Guiana, but also because Niel’s literary ambition is to explore every inch of Guianese society and unveil all the community’s secrets. *Les Hamacs en carton* delves into the *noir-marron* (black-brown) communities of the Alukus and the Ndjukas, former slaves who escaped the white people’s rule. *Ce qui reste en forêt* is set in the scientific community of an observation station in the heart of the forest. As for the novel *Obia*, it deals with Brazilian *garimpeiros* (gold panners) and drug mules. The last volume of the tetralogy, *Sous le ciel effondré*, explores the traditions and social issues of the Wayanas, a tribe of indigenous people still living in their villages in reserved areas. The peritextual system of the tetralogy is also significant: every book starts with a detailed map of the story setting, while local dialect terms (either in Ndju-

ka, Creole or Wayana) are indexed at the end in a glossary, and the acknowledgments sections demonstrate how thoroughly documented each novel is.

To conclude, Colin Niel's and Antonin Varenne's crime novels are pushing back the boundaries of French contemporary noir, both symbolically and physically: the seven novels in our corpus do not only explore new territories, such as deep rural areas (*Battues* and *Seules les bêtes*) and faraway colonial spaces (*Les Hamacs en carton*, *Ce qui reste en forêt*, *Obia*, *Sous le ciel effondré* and *Cat 215*), but they also question the identity and borders of the French national construction. However, the two writers' approaches differ on many levels: the expansion of Niel's Guianese tetralogy aims to create an open literary universe where spaces are fluctuating and connected, whereas Varenne's novella *Cat 215* is more akin to a tropical thriller in an enclosed space. These Amazonia-set novels also highlight a significant political dissent between the two authors on the environmental issue: the hunting paradigm in Varenne's novels reveals a conception of nature as a thing to be conquered whereas, in Niel's case, the characters adapt to and merge with their environments, in the direct filiation of ethnographic noir. Ultimately, however, Varenne and Niel's moral ideas are quite similar: their descriptions of the gold panners and the poor turning to violence because of terrible social conditions reveal similar ontological beliefs – neither cynical nor angelic – which confirm Jean-Patrick Manchette's description of noir as "the great moralist literature of our times"<sup>12</sup> (Manchette 2003 [1977], 27).

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### Notes

- 1 "Néanmoins, le développement littéraire, éditorial, lectoral du genre est lié au développement des villes dans la seconde moitié du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle." My translation.
- 2 "Le petit-fils Parrot avait fait ce qu'il avait à faire, un fusil à la main, et personne ne pouvait en juger autrement. Qui se souciait de ce que pensait la police ? Rémi Parrot traversa la caserne sans se préoccuper des regards. Rémi Parrot, désormais et pour la fin des temps, était devenu

- un gars d'ici. Rémi Parrot, troisième génération, n'était plus un étranger." My translation.
- 3 "[...] j'ai fait les calculs des réparations, de ce que ça coûtait d'être fauché, de n'avoir que du matériel qui tombait en rade. Il fallait trois ronds, toujours, on en était là. Trois ronds." My translation.
- 4 "Il habitait seul dans sa maison sur le causse, pas de femme, plus de parents, des amis d'enfance de moins en moins nombreux dans le département, juste son chien qui lui tournait autour et ses deux cents quarante brebis dont il s'occupait en pointillé. Il était l'unique habitant à l'année du petit groupe de maisons assemblées au milieu de la steppe, les autres bâtiments, c'était plus que des résidences secondaires." My translation.
- 5 "Dans les cours du collège, on ne jouait plus avec tout le monde, les groupes se formaient par affinités et ressemblances. À R., cela prenait une tournure définitive." My translation.
- 6 "Le roman noir va au-delà d'une représentation réaliste, mimétique, des réalités démographiques, économiques et sociales : la marge n'est plus seulement un territoire à part, elle est une forme d'emprisonnement symbolique pour les personnages." My translation.
- 7 "Voilà pourquoi quand ils disent que l'Afrique a une dette envers l'Europe, moi-même je dis Non. C'est un mensonge. C'est eux qui ont une dette envers l'Afrique pour tout ce qu'ils ont fait subir à nos ancêtres. Cela s'appelle la dette coloniale." My translation.
- 8 "À croire que j'avais aussi oublié la Guyane, le fleuve, les boss, la folie de l'or et la dégradation morale de cette partie du globe." My translation.
- 9 A term used to refer to the criticism against agricultural practices deemed harmful to the environment.
- 10 "[...] la nature, avait toujours pensé Rémi, n'avait pas besoin qu'on la défende. Elle nous boufferait tout cru si on lui tournait le dos quelques temps." My translation.
- 11 "Le coin est une vraie fourmilière, ça tire dans tous les sens. Des bandes du Suriname descendent jusque là-bas pour rançonner les orpailleurs, les passeurs de l'Approuague se foutent sur la gueule et les pirogues sont criblées de balles." My translation.
- 12 "La grande littérature morale de notre temps." My translation.