

Translation Jousts and Translation Genres

Translating Culture and Style at the Quais du Polar

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TRANSLATION JOUSTS AND TRANSLATION GENRES: Translating Culture and Style at the Quais du Polar

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ABSTRACT

The Quais du polar book festival in Lyon is more than a site of commerce. Instead, the category of the polar, which brings together the mystery and roman noir, reveals the potential to destabilize literary hierarchies, foreground translation, and transform the role of place in a globalized genre. Using the insights of Lawrence Venuti, Benoît Tadié and Luc Boltanski, this essay examines how, within the polar category and in the context of the festival, foreignizing translations may upend linguistic and cultural hierarchies and transform genre categories. The communal and local experience of festivals events, its rewriting of southern American authors, and its reframing of the role of readers and translators all reveal the transformative potential of the polar and its cultural reception.

RÉSUMÉ

Le festival littéraire Quais du polar à Lyon n'est pas seulement un lieu de commerce. Plutôt, la catégorie du polar, qui unit le récit policier et le roman noir, a la capacité de déstabiliser les hiérarchies, de mettre en avant l'acte de traduction et de transformer le rôle de l'espace local dans le contexte d'un genre globalisé. Prenant comme point de départ certaines idées de Lawrence Venuti, Benoît Tadié et Luc Boltanski, le présent article explore, dans la catégorie du polar et dans le contexte du festival, le dépaysement par la traduction, et sa capacité de renverser des hiérarchies linguistiques et culturelles, et de transformer des catégories littéraires. L'aspect collectif et local des activités du festival, sa réinscription d'écrivains du sud des États-Unis dans le cadre du polar, et sa valorisation du rôle du lecteur et du traducteur font partie du pouvoir transformateur du polar et de sa réception culturelle.

Keywords

Genre fiction, mystery, translation, crime novel, Southern fiction

Mots-clés

Littérature de genre, polar, traduction, récit criminel, littérature du sud des États-Unis

The Quais du Polar literary festival held each spring in Lyon, France brings together enthusiastic readers and authors of a specifically French literary genre, the *polar*. Over the course of several heavily programmed days, the city becomes both a backdrop and a participant as festival-goers interpret for themselves this geographically adaptable form, discussing its recent manifestations and acting out its questions. At the heart of the festival's book discussion panels, author signings, readings, film series, lessons in real-life crime-solving, and interactive mystery scavenger hunts lies the concept of the *polar* genre. It is a remarkably malleable one, so although its name derives from the French word *policier*, which means "police" (in its adjectival form, as in "police drama" or "police procedural"), it includes not only the *roman noir*, crime novels, police procedurals, hardboiled detective novels, mysteries, and thrillers, but also what in an English-speaking context is called gothic, Southern, or simply literary fiction. In practice, this means that translation into and out of English plays a foundational role in the Quais du Polar. Translated books abound, many non-French authors speak through simultaneous interpreters, and the festival features displays of translation skill called *joutes de traduction*, "translation jousts." In order to understand the interplay between translation and the *polar*, this essay will follow three intertwined threads at the Quais du Polar: first, it will consider the festival as an expression of the egalitarian elements of the carnivalesque, second it will examine the *polar* as an anti-hierarchical genre, and third, it will trace the unsettling potential of translation in the context of both the *polar* and the festival.

At the Quais du Polar, mediated and unmediated forms of communication unite to create an exceptional set of experiences that recall Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the subversive power of the carnivalesque.¹ In his work on Rabelais, Bakhtin sees the carnivalesque as a timeless and universal force which briefly levels hierarchies and presents a vision of an egalitarian world.² While for Bakhtin, this force was laughter, the disruptive potential of *polar* in the Quais du Polar lies in its potential seriousness. This essay will historicize Bakhtin's concept, focusing on the egalitarian potential of a festival which,

while not wholly subversive in its nature, is organized around a potentially subversive genre and partakes of its effects. The *polar*, focused as it is on violent ruptures in the social fabric and borrowing from sources in multiple national literatures, offers an opportunity to question the existing order. Sociologist Luc Boltanski notes that the *polar* emerges simultaneously with the nation state and concerns itself with the chasm between the ordered, predictable, “official” reality, and the chaos of lived experience.³ The *polar*, as we will see, responds to the existence of social and political conflict and thinks through the meaning of those tensions. Unravelling the full meaning of the *polar* will be key to understanding its productivity as a genre and to comprehending some of the anti-hierarchical elements of a festival that celebrates it.

Translation, too, releases possibilities by creating new opportunities for interpretation in both the translated and source text. To understand the potential of translation, this essay will rely on two concepts developed by Lawrence Venuti. The first is the hermeneutic approach to translation, which views it as an “interpretive act that inevitably varies source-text form, meaning, and effect according to intelligibilities and interests in the receiving culture.”⁴ Using this approach I will consider translated texts and the *polar* genre in terms of the interpretive acts that make them legible in the “receiving culture,” whether that is France or the US. The second concept is Venuti’s idea of translation as potentially “foreignizing” and “minoritizing,” that is, introducing “a heterogeneous discourse, opening up the standard dialect and literary canons to what is foreign to themselves.”⁵ This means that nonstandard language from what he calls a minor literature—that is, a non-canonical one—can, when it is translated, destabilize the standard and dominant language. Venuti considers languages as collective systems of forms, “positioned hierarchically ... with the standard dialect in dominance but subject to constant variation.”⁶ In that space of variation Venuti discovers the productive potential of certain kinds translation. A standard dialect sets the norms, excludes regional dialects, and structures the hierarchy of the language itself. Venuti is focused on whole texts and the encounter between conceptual frameworks that happens when an imaginative world is brought from one cultural context into another. Contact between two languages can be profoundly destabilizing, particularly in the case of literary texts that submit “the major language to constant variation, forcing it to become minor, delegitimizing, deterritorializing,

alienating it.”⁷ In this as in many other instances, translations do not need to hide cultural difference or make the fact of translation invisible in order to be successful. They are successful, though, when they “engage readers in domestic terms that have been defamiliarized to some extent, made fascinating by a revisionary encounter with a foreign text.” This analysis of the *polar* will consider how translated literature may unsettle literary canons and language.

This essay thus employs multiple analytic strategies to interrogate elements of the carnivalesque and to identify the generative potential of the festival and of translation. Attentive to the multimedia nature of the contemporary literary festival, it will begin with a descriptive analysis of the Quais du Polar, using personal observations, audio recordings of author panels from past years, weblogs, and promotional and informational materials generated by the festival organizers.⁸ Next, the literary genre of the *polar*, the framework for the festival’s existence, will be considered as a category constituted through translation. I will consider the potential of translation to unbalance hierarchies and disrupt stable relations within a language. The unique French and American roots of this category will be explored, and here, too, author interviews will play a role, as will the interactive spectacle of the translation joust as part of the festival program. The analysis will then return to the issues of genre and translation, reflecting on the insights provided by the contents of the festival.

The Festival in the European Context

The Quais du Polar in Lyon is one of the more than 20 non-Parisian French book festivals created since the 1990s and dedicated to the *polar* genre. To get an idea of their relative significance, one can compare the festival landscape in France to that of its European neighbours. As of 2017, France, Germany, and the UK were the three largest European book markets both in terms of publishers’ turnover and in new titles published per year.⁹ In addition, Germany’s Frankfurt Book Fair and the UK’s London Book Fair are events of global importance for book rights, marketing, and prize-giving. In all three countries, genre fiction is the top-selling category of fiction.¹⁰ Yet, in number and size, crime literature festivals in France outnumber those in Germany, despite Germany’s larger population, strong publishing sector, high number of bookstores, and appetite for crime fiction.¹¹ And the

UK, despite being home to many internationally known mystery writers, can claim only a handful of festivals devoted to the genre. Further, the Quais du Polar is unlike the international book trade fairs centred on the activities of publishing professionals. Though international in the selection of books at its stands and authors at its events, the Quais du Polar foregrounds the local reader and the fair's host city. This urban festival reinterprets the world of the mystery novel within a local context, inviting readers, as we will see later, to view the city through the lens of an international genre.

The Festival Experience

Participation in the Quais du Polar may take many forms, from exclusive to egalitarian. Regional art museums invite *polar* readers to apply their decoding skills to pieces in their collection and, working with the Institut Lumière and local cinemas, the festival presents a film program in order to bring written work into dialogue with classics of police drama and film noir. There are special screenings accompanied by discussions, as well as cinema concerts uniting silent film and live music. Cultural institutions define the experience, offering their interpretations of the *polar* and creating the events in which the public can participate. Only in those parts of the festival where crowds of ordinary people, along with their favourite writers, all occupy the halls of the great and powerful does the festival offer something like an alternative social order. The entry point for the Quais du Polar, and the site of most of the bookselling and book signing, is the Palais de la Bourse, an opulent belle-époque structure in the heart of the city. Not only does the festival fill its vast central hall, but the thematically organized panels and discussions take place in handsome upper rooms once reserved for the business of the region's wealthiest merchants. Nor is there any need to skimp on luxury once one leaves the Bourse, as the festival's events also spill over into the magnificent seventeenth-century city hall. This is likely the only opportunity readers will ever have to ask questions of their favourite authors in rooms decorated with gilded panelling, lit by glittering chandeliers, hung with satin drapes, and overseen by portraits from the last three centuries (see Figure 1). Here, the festival both celebrates Lyon and temporarily shuffles its social hierarchies. The rooms featuring seats outfitted with individual microphones make plain that they are usually occupied by those whose voices matter in local politics. On this occasion, though, questions about art, the craft of writing, and the experience of reading displace the usual

business of these spaces. Events expected to attract the largest audiences are housed in the Chapelle de la Trinité, a seventeenth-century religious edifice that once belonged to a Jesuit college. Such repurposing of a sacred space for public use is unsurprising. Still, it proposes a revised hierarchy, for the time of the festival, in which large groups of readers occupy spaces usually available only to the moneyed few—most festival spaces can be rented, but none cheaply—and an art form often regarded as unserious claims centre stage.

Elements of carnivalesque egalitarianism can be seen, as well, in the ways that participants negotiate this exquisitely organized series of literary events. One could consider the luxurious setting as an aspirational gesture aiming to give the genre an air of respectability.¹² However, the festival's website offers a description of *polar* readers that suggests they may also be classified as unserious, and happily so. They need not be the kind of literary editors, critics, or academics who have access to the most prestigious literary events. Instead, the genre draws readers of all kinds. According to the festival organizers:

Le polar touche à la fois les lecteurs habituels de romans, mais également les « petits lecteurs » ou lecteurs occasionnels. Il rassemble un lectorat tant féminin que masculin, du plus jeune au plus âgé, les lecteurs ayant parfois un « sous genre » de prédilection comme le thriller, le polar historique, le roman d'espionnage, le roman à énigme.¹³

They may be regular readers of novels, but are just as likely to read infrequently. They are men and women, old and young, and might prefer a sub-genre such as thrillers, historical mysteries, spy novels, or puzzle mysteries. Readers of genre fiction cannot be called an elite or select group. Furthermore, they need not pay or present any credentials in order to attend. Whereas the trade fairs in Frankfurt and London sell passes at two levels, for professionals and non-professionals, and offer different levels of access for each group, the Quais du Polar is free and open to anyone. In 2019, the festival drew more than 100,000 visitors who purchased in the course of one weekend some 40,000 books, up from 90,000 visitors and 35,000 books the year before. If there is any evidence of carnivalesque excess at the festival, it would be at the booksellers' tables, where, unlike at trade fairs, books can be purchased by anyone at any time. Visitors crowd

into main hall of the Bourse, rebaptized as the Giant Bookstore (*La Grande Librairie*, see Figure 2), where some of the 11 independent booksellers have their stands. Here, too, hierarchies are levelled, as no Amazon or giant retailer such as the French chain FNAC crowds out the local vendors. Visitors line up in this same area in order to meet their favourite authors and request a signed copy of their books. In fact, lining up is so much a part of the festival that the only special pass available for purchase is a supporters' membership in the Gang Quais du Polar that, along with a poster, a pin, and membership card, includes a ticket that allows the holder to cut to the front of the line (one time only). Most of the lines form outside of the rooms hosting panel discussions on all sorts of topics related to the genre: politics and the *polar*, regional writing, historical writing, food and the *polar*, and so on. There are not, as at the trade fairs, designated private areas or standard offsite meeting places where the real business of the fair—negotiating rights—takes place among agents and publishers. This fair's business is the meeting of authors and readers.

Writers, too, are affected by this levelling of hierarchies. While certain events highlight a single, bestselling or internationally renowned author, the panels do not class authors according to their sales numbers or movie deals. Writers present their first novels next to others who have long publishing careers, a television series, and perhaps a movie or two to their names. The festival publicity does not play favourites either: all invited authors appear on the festival website in alphabetical order, posters highlight events rather than names, and neither book displays nor book signing events give an outsized space to the celebrities of the publishing world. One may see well-known authors not only sitting on the dais, discussing their work, but also in the bakery around the corner or sipping a coffee in the foyer of the Bourse. There are no VIP-only spaces here. This extends to the media, as well, so that bloggers and vloggers increasingly share in the work, previously reserved for large-circulation journals and television, of interviewing authors or reporting on the daily goings-on of the festival.¹⁴ Here, fandom and refined literary criticism mix, as when a blogger with a site dedicated to an author secures an interview with that same author at the festival.¹⁵ But these ordinary readers can respond to the genre with more sophistication than some professionals. Outside the context of the festival, a professional journalist for the online journal *LitHub* displays unease about which category James Sallis belongs in: “Let’s take on the sticky genre subject. Do

you think of yourself as a genre writer?”¹⁶ When Sallis is introduced as a panelist to readers at the Quais du Polar, however, there is no genre anxiety. He is presented as a poet and the translator of Raymond Queneau, among others, and as an author of crime novels. For the space of the festival, ordinary readers are treated as potential experts, and genre writers as literary artists. At the same time, readers may participate by seeking to educate themselves, and, by taking the status of the work seriously, elevate and validate their own interest in it. As will be seen later, this status-shifting is partly facilitated by the *polar* genre.

The *Polar* in Place: The *Grande Enquête* and Other Games

The festival’s participants are not simply passive fans and consumers. Its events allow them to act out the decentring potential of the *polar*. For a time, this minor literature, a relative of thrillers and gangster movies, occupies the place usually given to canonical literature and official history. Teens compete in a live book review, the “Battle *polar*,” by preparing a verbal defence of their preferred book (from a list prepared by the festival), or write their own fiction in order to win a “*Concours de nouvelles*.” Some years the local police offer workshops on forensics, mainly aimed at younger audiences. There is also a distinctly French event, a dictation contest, with a *polar* text as template. After the festival’s end, vacation season activities, under the title “*Polar en vacances*,” encourage reading and keep the festival’s spirit alive during the summer months through creative writing and art workshops for teenagers. One of the largest events, though, allows visitors to participate in the transformation of the city of Lyon into a crime scene in which they play the role of detective. An interactive mystery, the *Grande Enquête* (see Figure 3), takes place over several days during the festival and spreads across the city. The game allows the *polar* to unsettle the view of the city inscribed in tourist guides and historical tours as participants pause before buildings transformed into clues. Nearly 20,000 people in 2019 followed trails through the old city, Vieux Lyon, the former silk workers’ quarter, the Croix Rousse, and the Renaissance neighbourhood wedged between the Rhône and Saône rivers, the Presqu’île. The game consists of a booklet with a map, an introduction to the “case” to be solved, itineraries to follow, and pages of questions and puzzles solved by looking for clues in the urban landscape. The cases, different each year, create fictional links between Lyon and the featured country or region (for example, in the year

when Nordic countries were featured, the mystery involved an enigmatic reindeer). In this sense, too, the *polar* and foreign texts can be decentring, turning local sites into points on the map of a larger world.

Setting a mystery in Lyon also serves as a means of recovering some of the city's obscured past, encouraging a reimagining of the city's officially sanctioned history. The festival explains the connection between the *polar* and this site as follows:

Lyon a vu naître le cinéma avec les frères Lumière, l'anthropologie criminelle avec Alexandre Lacassagne, les méthodes d'enquête scientifique et la médecine légale avec Edmond Locard et des grands du polar à travers la littérature, le cinéma ou l'illustration avec Frédéric Dard, Jacques Deray, Bertrand Tavernier ou Jacques Tardi. Capitale européenne de l'imprimerie, du livre et de l'humanisme à la Renaissance, Lyon est aussi une cité marquée par les révoltes populaires et les grandes utopies politiques.¹⁷

In other words, the roots of this celebration of the *polar* lie in the sciences which developed at the same time as the detective story, and in the artists of the book and screen who have shaped this form over the past century-and-a-half. On the one hand, the evocation of Lyon's illustrious past seems like pure image-polishing, a marketing strategy. The founders of medical forensics, Lacassagne and Locard, are named, along with authors of mystery series, like Dard, and popular film directors, like Deray and Tavernier. Yet Lyon's past contains many darker passages, glancingly evoked by the phrase "popular revolts" (*révoltes populaires*), which might refer to the revolt against the Convention in 1793, the silk workers' uprisings in the 1830s, the activities of the Resistance during the Second World War, or all of the above. Similarly, Lacassagne's accomplishments also include his investigation of the assassination of President Sadi Carnot in Lyon—another of the city's darker moments. Not mentioned is the most famous criminal case ever seen in the city, the trial of the war criminal known as the Butcher of Lyon, Klaus Barbie. In any case, as we will see, many works of crime fiction deal with exactly these themes. The *Grande Enquête* may be a harmless bit of puzzle-solving, but it connects readers to real places and activates the space around them. The potential and past violence inscribed in the city becomes visible as readers play with the idea of crimes whose

clues permeate the urban landscape and as they see other landscapes revealed through the *polar*.

Southern Writers Intepret the *Polar*

James Sallis: “I think the American crime novel is extremely sociological and political at heart.”

Chris Offutt: “I see the genre of crime fiction in America as the best opportunity for social commentary.”

—Podcast recording. Quais du Polar panel discussion: *Eternal Flame: le grand roman noir américain*. May 30, 2019.¹⁸

The Quais du Polar provides the perfect stage for exploring how translations between the American and French versions of the *polar* have altered both literary landscapes. It is particularly illuminating to examine the role of writers from the American South at the festival through the lens of genre translations between the American novel and the *roman noir* or the *polar* and the resulting cultural disruptions. The participants in the 2019 panel cited above were three Southern writers, Sallis, Offutt and Ron Rash, all of whom delved into the distinct literary roots of the Southern novel and its expression as understood through the form of the *roman noir*. Sallis is best known for his series of mystery novels set in New Orleans, but Offutt is no mystery writer; *Country Dark* and *Kentucky Straight*, set in his home state of Kentucky, deal with violence and crime, but not detective work. When Sallis and Offutt were asked what the *roman noir* meant for them, they explained that the form allowed them to cross the boundaries set by contemporary literary fiction. Their answers employ the English terms “crime novel” and “crime fiction,” attempting to fashion an equivalent for the *roman noir*, but also shaping the definition of the *noir* to encompass particular varieties of American fiction. In their characterization, the *roman noir* goes against the grain of contemporary fiction by reinventing the social novel, the narrative of deep societal conflicts told through the lives of individual characters. However, this American social novel has regional specificity. Their analysis again recalls Venuti’s “minor literature” in translation, introducing itself into the dominant language and questioning its status. In this case, the subordinate form is Southern writing, one category of regional literature in English. Yet these writers claim a larger brief, connecting their geographical limits with a sophisticated literary tradition. In the words of Rash:

I continue to write about one place. One of our great writers, Eudora Welty once said, “One place understood helps us understand all other places better.” And I see part of what I’m trying to do being somewhat like a farmer drilling for water, if I can go deep enough into this particular place, I kind of hope I’ll hit the universal. I’m kind of out of that [tradition of] Joyce and Faulkner, not that I’m at that level, just that I cannot exhaust this one place.¹⁹

By citing a revered Southern writer, Welty, along with Joyce and Faulkner, Rash places his work in relation to classics of international modernist fiction, while simultaneously claiming the authority to create from a tradition of Southern writing. In this frame, regionalism, going “deep enough into this particular place,” rather than limiting the scope of the work, allows it to make universal claims. The minor literature which is the Southern *roman noir* undermines the dominant forms of prestigious literary fiction by reclaiming its territory and its aims.

Called upon to speak of their work within the category of the *roman noir*, all three writers expound on the structures of the genre, which enable them both to find freedom and to inhabit the dimensions of the social novel it potentially contains. Each insists that the exploration of geographical place includes a critical reckoning with history. In his response, Sallis refers to Joan Didion’s idea that Americans reject historicity for a sort of “eternal present” in which the self can be endlessly remade and the past has no importance. Sallis does not name a specific Didion text in his remarks, but is likely referring to “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream,” her essay about a Californian murder. The text is particularly apt in any case, since it compares the events in a real murder case to “the novels of James M. Cain,” and sums up the effects of the murder on those involved with the phrase “time past is not believed to have any bearing upon time present or future, out in the golden land where every day the world is born anew.”²⁰ In other words, *noir* fiction uncovers the potential violence embedded in American life and serves as an antidote to the narrative of an innocent present. Rash’s comments on the potential of the genre build upon Sallis’s, but distinguish between Northern and Southern literature, and draw the line directly from the author of the first mystery to the origins of the Southern *roman noir*.

I think that's one of the most disturbing aspects about America, that idea that starts with Whitman, you know, the idea of the New Adam, we're going to start all over. A fresh start. We don't need history. ... But one thing I find very interesting and one reason I think we might be here is that I think in the South there is in some ways a more European sensibility—I'm making a vast generalization now, I know that—but I think the South has always had a darker vision of humanity. Look at Poe, Poe starts this. He's the antithesis of Whitman. And then as we get into the twentieth century, we see Faulkner, so fascinated with history, with the past in these areas.

All three authors have participated in the Quais du Polar more than once, and Rash suggests that there exists a fundamental connection—“one reason I think we might be here”—between this particular French festival and its genre focus and their vision of themselves as Southern writers. He proposes not simply an affinity, but a philosophical foundation common to the Southern novel and the *polar* as a category. Both are based on what he calls a “darker vision of humanity,” but also share a “sensibility,” which he characterizes as European, or at least as emerging from European traditions. Notably, Rash does not suggest a heritage passed down through existentialist thought or literature. Instead, he and Sallis see the Southern novel as rooted in local and national history, something they feel it shares with non-American writing. During the same discussion, Sallis explains that he writes about New Orleans because “the entire history of America is right there and it's right in front of you... I thought that no one had really dealt with that and I wanted to reach down and touch that history.” On the one hand, he follows Welty's lead, finding the larger story in the smaller one. At the same time, he returns to the strength of Southern writing as a minor literature, given that “the South has always felt that it was a colonized country, and it still does.” Despite the global dominance of American culture, in other words, Southern writing still carves out a position as a subordinate (or insubordinate) category, a Southern exception to American exceptionalism. Embracing the past, bound by history and by place, the Southern *noir* alters the perceived distance between American and European fiction and the hierarchy of literature and genre fiction. Southern writing succeeds in translating local experience for foreign audiences and in transforming the *polar* into an American form. This process is enabled by both generic and linguistic translation.

Translation Jousts and the Popular Experience of Reading Translation

Thus far, this discussion of translation has concerned conceptual translations of genre and content, movements of categories and abstractions across time and space. But in bringing together writers from around the globe with a French public, the festival relies upon textual translation into and out of a host of languages. This material dimension of translation, the work of editors and translators who create the books around which the festival revolves, is featured prominently in the Quais du Polar, where literary translation is a visible, interactive process. Every year, there are several “translation jousts” hosted by the French Association of Literary Translators (ATLF), featuring a moderator, who may also be from the ATLF, two translators, and an author whose work is to be translated into French. Though “joust” suggests a competitive display, in practice these events feature presentation, comparison, and analysis of the finer points of sample literary translations. The original work may be in any language, so that, for instance, an author from Italy may be featured when that country is the special guest at the festival. Given their dominance in the genre, however, English-language writers appear most regularly, and Americans such as Ron Rash, Craig Johnson, Michael Farris Smith, and Jamey Bradbury have appeared along with translators of their work. Usually an invisible process, translation becomes, in these events, central rather than peripheral, and translation’s threat to the dominance of a certain idea of standard dialect becomes explicit.

In their structure, the translation jousts alter the status of translation in several ways. As already noted, they make it visible, and they do so in settings that place the translator on equal footing with the author. In general, these events feature an unpublished text by the author, who usually reads an excerpt. After that, the translators dominate, taking turns reading from their translations and discussing challenges faced and decisions made, offering a technical analysis of the source text’s morphological, syntactic, and semantic structure as it relates to the French translation. The author may be asked to clarify an aspect of the original or to voice an opinion on the options chosen by the two translators, which can result in a surprising shift in the hierarchy of the original versus the translation. When flanked by

competing French texts and surrounded by a French-speaking audience, the original text diminishes in authority. It becomes instead the source of problems and challenges, or the starting point for a successful or unsuccessful French text.

When Farris Smith, from Mississippi, appeared in 2018 on a panel with two translators who had not previously translated his writing, his often Faulknerian style presented a range of challenges. The resulting French texts differed substantially in places, sometimes sharing no more than a few words (mainly articles and prepositions) in common, and provoked intense debate between the panellists on one side and certain audience members on the other. The general tenor of the argument consisted of the translators arguing for a text filled with ambiguity and complex, often unorthodox syntax, and audience members contesting their choices in favour of a more familiar style. Audience criticisms ran the gamut from not understanding the syntax of a phrase to declaring a sentence simply unacceptable, either in French or English. The translators and moderator responded by defending the choices that had been made, even going to so far as to say that the problems identified by audience members weren't problems at all. In one case, the explanation was that a phrase seemed to one translator, "bizarre en anglais et il fallait laisser la bizarrerie en français."²¹ Here is an instance of a destabilizing translation in action, an eruption of non-standard language that highlighted something the dominant form, in this case a grammatically standardized, literary French, would have erased. Other audience members worried about the possible existence of "Americanisms" in the translated text. Did the translators take care to avoid them? In response, the moderator deflected criticism: "C'est peut être pas un anglicisme, c'est peut-être un Smithisme."²² And one translator insisted: "Je persiste à ne pas voir le problème," since the word in question was of French and Latin origin, "À la limite, c'est Michael qui a fait un gallicisme."²³ Most remarkable in this exchange is the constant change in equilibrium: which language dominates, French or English? What norms dictate the final text? From what sources is disruption and discomfort accepted and when is it unacceptable? In this open debate over translation, readers and translators together explore the most fundamental questions about the effects of translation. The Faulknerian style seems to disrupt the dominance of literary French, but it may be permitted to do so, because this disruption is

happening in a marginal literary form where the bizarre and the foreign are admitted.

De-centring the Novel in Translation: The *Polar*

The above exchange enacts what Venuti means by the decentring and deterritorializing capacity of translation, its unsettling effect on art in both source and destination languages. The *polar* genre here performs one of the actions key to Venuti's foreignizing translation process, as one sees the "standard dialect and literary canons" of French invaded by "the substandard and the marginal" in the form of Farris Smith's prose.²⁴ Venuti is critical of the "shallow sense of the foreign" which all too often "comes to be what readers expect of the translated crime fiction."²⁵ Yet the *polar* can succeed in its destabilizing function, as we will see, both by introducing foreign realism and by presenting an image of reality that is quite familiar.

The French term *polar* may be said to have been born translated, having grown out of an association with the genre of *film noir* as produced in Hollywood in the 1940s and 1950s.²⁶ As seen in the discussion among Sallis, Offutt, and Rash, the *noir* and the *polar* are part of the same genre family. In a rather complex transatlantic genealogy they overlap to such an extent that the best-known and longest-lived publishing series of the *polar* category is the *Série Noire*, published by Gallimard and launched by the translator and editor Maurice Duhamel. Most of the books in that series are easily recognizable by an English-speaking audience as mysteries, and many are translations of American or English detective novels, such as James Hadley Chase's *Pas d'orchidées pour Miss Blandish* (*No Orchids for Miss Blandish*, published as number 3 in the series in 1948) or Raymond Chandler's *La dame du lac* (*The Lady in the Lake*, number 8 in 1948). Yet that same series pushes the boundaries of what might be considered a mystery, including, for instance, an adaptation of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*. The complexities of the *noir* are exemplified in the case of publisher Gallmeister, a major presence at the festival. Its roster of American writers includes not only Edgar Allan Poe, often considered the author of the first mystery, and James M. Cain, but also Tim O'Brien and James Dickey. There is no clear distinction between *noir* and *polar*, and neither do national literatures help to define the categories. It might be more helpful to think of

the *polar* as a genre hostile to centralization and hierarchies, born of borrowing, imitation, and inspiration.

The ability of the *polar* and of translation to upset literary hierarchies is evident in the creation of literary phenomena that exist purely by means of translation. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, writers, publishers, and readers in Europe and the US participated in the cross-fertilization of ideas in the mystery category. Benoît Tadié has noted the way in which economic factors, including mass market literature and the concentration of cultural production, led to clear divisions in mystery novels on both sides of the Atlantic into highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow. However, transatlantic distinctions quickly emerged. The most lasting concern was the position accorded to the works included in the *Série noire*, works which attained a higher status in France and Italy than in their country of origin:

Parfois, des différences notables apparaissent dans la valeur accordée à un même auteur suivant le côté de l'Atlantique où il se trouve : ainsi, des auteurs de *paperback originals* sous-estimés aux Etats-Unis (par exemple David Goodis, Jim Thompson, Charles Williams) connaîtront, grâce à la Série noire ou aux collections de *gialli* Mondadori ou Garzanti, une sorte de renommée en France ou en Italie dans les années 1950 ; certains romans américains, de Chester Himes à Jerome Charyn, ont eu leurs éditions originales en français ; d'autres n'existent plus aujourd'hui que sous la forme de traductions en français.²⁷

In other words, not only are some classics of the *noir* novel now only available in French, many are only classics in French. Authors such as Goodis, Himes, and Thompson acquired a higher social status, which they still retain, and their work continues to be read as literary expressions of French existentialism, centred on a moral struggle against insurmountable forces in an indifferent, brutal world. The translations have, in an important sense, become originals in that they are foundational and representative only in translation. While novels from English-speaking countries play a central role each year at the Quais du Polar, even in years when the featured countries are Italy or Norway, they do so as the French versions, that is to say as the French readings, of themselves. Translations can make peripheral voices into central ones, as Venuti says.

A particularly remarkable displacement effected by translation occurs in the movement of the *polar* into a specific geography. Theorists of the mystery see the genre's origins in the feelings of alienation that arise within an anonymous crowd, and in the state-generated need for control over fluid populations massing in the growing cities.²⁸ Its genealogy seems decidedly urban, from Sherlock Holmes's London of the 1880s right through the Hollywood versions of 1940s and 1950s Los Angeles. Yet another regional affinity develops when French existentialist writers begin to read authors who engage in the same struggle with identity and alienation, but are rooted in the rural landscape of the American South. Just as much as the hard-boiled detective novels of Cain and Chandler, Faulkner's works depend on a geographical location which has witnessed different forms of exploitation, physical violence and economic devastation. Shared concerns about the seeds of present anguish in the history of place made these works instantly and urgently readable in the French context, and this, along with the common story of urbanization and alienation, has made American detective fiction canonical for French readers and writers in the *polar* genre. The reception contemporary Southern writers find at the Quais du Polar results from the parallel literary tradition created in translation.

As noted earlier, this reconfiguration of the *polar* through the translation of the Southern American novel into the category of *roman noir* undermines literary hierarchies. Jean-Paul Sartre noted: "There is one American literature for Americans and another for the French," and the French version of American literature placed writers like Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell not in the minor category of regional writers, but in the ranks of serious artistic accomplishment.²⁹ These writers in turn define the category of the American *roman noir* which continues to form a substantial part of the *polar* category. Tadié's description of the different status attributed to the same author in France versus the US demonstrates the French *polar* category's ability to alter the status of the American novels it embraces. This is especially true in the case of American genre fiction. One does not have to entirely accept Jonathan Rose's claim that modernist fiction has been propagated as a means of drawing boundaries between classes of readers in order to agree that using the structures of the nineteenth-century novel, as these works do, can earn the label of artistic and even political backwardness.³⁰ His argument seems particularly valid in light of critics such as Fredric Jameson, who take it as a given that the

“detective story” offers the most perfect example of “contemporary commercial art,” which one reads merely “for the ending.”³¹ It is a claim which makes little sense when applied to a category that contains not only Faulkner and Thompson, but also Patricia Highsmith and Gillian Flynn. The *polar* is a commercial category, but it retains the potential of art.

It is true that, in the broader French literary culture, “anxieties over the cultural legitimacy of the genre persist and may still influence its critical reception.”³² The most prestigious literary prizes, for instance, still consider only works of literary fiction and exclude the *polar* as well as science fiction, horror, and so on. However, the *polar* frees the mystery from the constraints of puzzle-solving and from its reputation as a soothing fairy tale of the detective as restorer of peace and social order.³³ No distinction is made at festivals such as the Quais du Polar among the various forms of the genre, and books whose protagonists confront contemporary urban malaise share the stage with stories of the victims of Southern historical nightmares. In both cases, the subject matter differs little from works that regularly receive the Prix Goncourt or Renaudot. One might even wonder if the rising current of the *polar*'s popularity may be creating a reverse current, helping the Goncourt's jury to look more favourably at books such as Leïla Slimani's *Chanson douce*, based on the true crime story of a child-murdering nanny, or the *roman noir* author Nicolas Mathieu's *Leurs enfants après eux*, inspired in part by James Agee's southern portraits in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. The fluid expansiveness of the genre is validated both by readerly impulses and by the nature of the genre itself.

French readers may find in the American *polar* not simply the violence of Los Angeles or Mississippi, which may have an exotic or voyeuristic appeal, but the representation of individual alienation from home, family, work, and nation and the devaluing of human life in all its root and flower by the forces of modern society. This social critique resonates with that taken up by French writers and transposed into their own narratives, as in the case of Slimani or Mathieu. Such stories are the opposite of the kind of social solidarity found in the popular fiction of writers such as Eric-Emmanuel Schmidt (*Monsieur Ibrahim et les fleurs du Coran*), Valérie Perrin (*Les oubliés de dimanche*), Philippe Claudel (*La petite fille de Monsieur Linh*), Muriel Barbery (*L'élégance du hérisson*), and other novelists who transform the lives of the marginalized, poor, and politically excluded into

bittersweet tales of friendship and redemption. In this strain of contemporary popular fiction, violence occurs at some remove, either of time or space or both, and financial or social precarity naturally engenders empathy and mutual aid. Perrin's *Les oubliés de dimanche* features a caregiver in a nursing home who loves to work overtime, even for free. Claudel, Schmidt, and Barbery offer tales of intercultural and interfaith friendships that are largely fables of tolerance, in which initial incomprehension or mistrust gives way to alliance and amicability. The development of the narrative in a *polar* traces the opposite trajectory, one in which apparent security and structure crumble into the reality of moral decay and faithless institutions, for which this fiction offers no remedy and no consolation but action.³⁴ For example, Hannelore Cayre's crime novel *La Daronne* (*The Godmother*) follows Patience, an underpaid public employee who turns her skills as a legal interpreter into criminal capital, heading a drug ring to pay her bills and her mother's nursing home care. Characters like Cayre's Patience do not fall into the warm embrace of benevolence and goodwill in multicultural, urban France; in this instance, a fraying social safety net cannot be repaired, only replaced with illegally earned cash. The novel's plot relies on the audience's familiarity with the era of government budget cuts, austerity measures, and a justice system unwilling to use the same measure for the crimes of poor and those of the rich. In France as elsewhere, crime fiction proposes an examination of contemporary social conflicts, sometimes globalized ones, in the context of a particular place.³⁵

Translation and the Transformative Potential of Genre and Festival

One can thus see in the *polar* and in festivals like the Quais du Polar the potential for resistance to contemporary social and political realities. First, it is a literature born out of the experience of alienation and isolation being read in a sociable setting that mitigates against just that alienation. Second, it is a popular, mass market fiction which, in contrast to the literary fiction of its time, often centres on working-class characters, the marginal, clandestine, precarious, and socially excluded. The *polar* constitutes a literature about powerlessness and the failure of institutions, but it presents these themes in a way that is open to new voices, new ways to interpret history. It may even be argued that this less prestigious genre places fewer barriers before readers, who are allowed to become experts, interpreters, and co-participants in its inquiries. *Polar* readers may in fact be found engaging

with that history in the present, connecting across national boundaries through texts that, though foreign in their cultural and historical specifics, are familiar in their larger patterns. One could add to the examples of Offutt, Rash, and Sallis writers such as Sara Gran, Ace Atkins, and Don Winslow to compose a vision of the *polar* as the successful form of the American proletarian social novel, a working-class literature (not only in its subject matter, but often in its authorship) of uprooted individuals facing the consequences of a violent history. A festival like the Quais du Polar makes such a vision possible; a foreign lens turned on literature from one nation can produce a foreignizing translation of that literature as a body more legible, more coherent, and distinct in its historical rootedness. At the same time, the space of encounter offered by the festival presents an alternative to the condition of voicelessness and powerlessness the *polar* depicts. It reveals the presence of an at least imagined alternative to the existing hierarchies, and a real network of voices that call into question official reality, and it promotes the destabilization of existing hierarchies of language and cultural capital.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTICE

Maria Snyder is Associate Professor of French and German at Central College. Her research interests focus on media history, especially the history of reading and of the printed book. Her work on translation has explored concepts of authorship in early modern France and England, as well as the contemporary effects of literary prizes on translation publishing. She is also a contributing editor to the journal of German literature in translation, *No Man's Land*, and a contributor to *Asymptote Journal*.

Notes

¹ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975); Millicent Weber, "Conceptualizing Audience Experience at the Literary Festival," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 29, no. 1 (2015): 84–96.

² Caryl Emerson, *All the Same the Words Don't Go Away: Essays on Authors, Heroes, Aesthetics, and Stage Adaptations from the Russian Tradition*, Studies in Russian and Slavic Literatures, Cultures and History (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2011), 30–33.

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- ³ Luc Boltanski, *Énigmes et Complots. Une Enquête à Propos d'enquêtes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012).
- ⁴ Lawrence Venuti, *Contra Instrumentalism. A Translation Polemic* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 3.
- ⁵ Lawrence Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 11.
- ⁶ Ibid., 10.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Weber, "Conceptualizing Audience Experience at the Literary Festival," 84.
- ⁹ "European Book Publishing Statistics 2017," accessed December 25, 2019, <https://fep-fee.eu/European-Book-Publishing-995>.
- ¹⁰ "The Six Largest Book Markets Globally," *European Parliamentary Research Service Blog* (blog), February 11, 2016, <https://epthinktank.eu/2016/02/15/e-books-evolving-markets-and-new-challenges/the-six-largest-book-markets-globally/>; "Book Publishing Market Overview for Authors – Statistics & Facts – Book Ad Report," accessed December 25, 2019, <https://bookadreport.com/book-market-overview-authors-statistics-facts/>.
- ¹¹ Peter Nusser, *Der Kriminalroman*, 4th ed., Sammlung Metzler; Bd. 191 (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2009).
- ¹² Beth Driscoll, *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 154–61.
- ¹³ "The *polar* reaches regular readers of novels, as well as 'light readers' or occasional readers. It addresses a readership of women as much as men, from the youngest to the oldest, and includes readers with a preferred 'subgenre' such as the thriller, the historical *polar*, the spy novel, or the puzzle mystery." Vincent Saisset, "Qui sommes nous," *Quais du Polar* (blog), accessed July 11, 2019, <http://www.quaisdupolar.com/2018/le-festival/qui-sommes-nous/>. All translations are mine.
- ¹⁴ MarinaSofia, "Special Report: Live from Lyon's Quais du Polar Crime Fiction Festival," *Crime Fiction Lover* (website), April 2, 2013, <https://crimefictionlover.com/2013/04/special-report-live-from-lyons-quais-du-polar-crime-fiction-festival/>; "Quais Du Polar 2017: Day #1," *Book Around The Corner* (blog), March 31, 2017, <https://bookaroundthecorner.wordpress.com/2017/03/31/quais-du-polar-2017-day-1/>.
- ¹⁵ Tannhauser, "Interview with Tim Willocks," *Tannhauser's Gate* (blog), April 15, 2012, <http://tannhausersgate.over-blog.com/2018/08/interview-with-tim-willocks-vo.html>.
- ¹⁶ Lisa Levy, "American Noir and the Outlaw Lit of James Sallis," *Literary Hub* (blog), June 17, 2016, <https://lithub.com/american-noir-and-the-outlaw-lit-of-james-sallis/>.

¹⁷ "Lyon saw the birth of cinema with the Lumière brothers, criminal anthropology with Alexandre Lacassagne, the methods of forensic science and forensic medicine with Edmond Locard, and the greatest names associated with the *polar* in literature, cinema, or illustration with Frédéric Dard, Jacques Deray, Bertrand Tavernier or Jacques Tardi. Once the European capital of printing, books, and Renaissance humanism, Lyon is also a city whose past is marked by popular revolts and great political utopias." Saisset, "Qui sommes nous."

¹⁸ "Eternal Flame : Le Grand Roman Noir Américain. Quais Du Polar," Sondekla, accessed July 17, 2019, <https://www.sondekla.com/user/event/9695>. All quotations from this recorded event are from my own transcription.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Joan Didion, "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream," in *Slouching towards Bethlehem* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1973), 3–28.

²¹ "Strange in English, so I decided to keep the same strangeness in French." "Joute de Traduction. Quais Du Polar," Sondekla, accessed September 8, 2019, <https://www.sondekla.com/user/event/8777>.

²² "Perhaps it's not an anglicism, but rather a Smith-ism". "Joute de Traduction. Quais Du Polar".

²³ "I still can't see a problem... perhaps it's that Michael who has used a Gallicism. " "Joute de Traduction. Quais du Polar. "

²⁴ Lawrence Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation*, 11.

²⁵ Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*, Second ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008.), 160–61.

²⁶ Benoît Tadié, *Le Polar Américain, La Modernité et Le Mal (1920–1960)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2006), 1–26; John G. Cawelti, *Mystery, Violence, and Popular Culture: Essays* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press/Popular Press, 2004), 351.

²⁷ "Occasionally there is a substantial difference in the status accorded to a single author depending on which side of the Atlantic he is on: this is how the authors of 'paperback originals' were underestimated in the United States (for example, David Goodis, Jim Thompson, Charles Williams) but achieved a certain renown in France or in Italy during the 1950s thanks to the *Série noire* or the *gialli* collections of Mondadori or Garzanti; some American novels, ranging from Chester Himes to Jerome Charyn, were first published in French; others only exist in the form of French translations." Benoît Tadié, "Espace Du Récit Criminel Transatlantique: Esquisse d'un Champ de Recherche," *Transatlantica : Revue d'Études Américaines*, no. 1, (2012): 25, <https://doaj.org/article/804c9380586940dfa6d7329e52400212>.

²⁸ Boltanski, *Énigmes et Complots*; Jean-Claude Vareille, "Préhistoire Du Roman Policier," *Romantisme*, no. 53 (1986): 23–36.

²⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, “American Novelists in French Eyes,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (August 1946), 114.

³⁰ Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

³¹ Fredric Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” *Social Text*, no. 1 (1979): 130–48, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466409>. [NO VOLUME #]

³² David Platten, *The Pleasures of Crime: Reading Modern French Crime Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 14.

³³ David Platten, “Into the Woods: The Contemporary ‘Roman Noir’ as Modern Fairy Tale,” *Yale French Studies*, no. 108, (2005): 116–30.

³⁴ Tadié, *Le Polar Américain*, 3–4.

³⁵ Anissa Belhadjin and Ruth Larson, “From Politics to the Roman Noir,” *South Central Review*, Hard-Boiled, 27, no. 1/2 (2010): 61–81.

APPENDIXES: Quais du polar images

Figure 1: Salon Justin Godart, Hôtel de Ville, Lyon. 2017. Photo: Elodie Bonin, *Quais du Polar*.



Figure 2: Grande Librairie. Palais de la Bourse. 2017. Photo: Sandrine Thesillat, *Quais du Polar*.



Figure 3: Grande enquête, Municipal Archives, Lyon, 2017. Photo: Luc Maillot, *Quais du Polar*.



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