France's 'elites', Islamophobia, and communities of friendship in Sabri Louatah's *Les Sauvages*

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Abstract: Sabri Louatah's *Les Sauvages* (2011-2016) joins an ongoing discussion over the French political class's relationship with the racial and religious divides in contemporary French society. Louatah portrays the political class as imposing from above a divide between French descendants of Muslim immigrants and their majority culture compatriots, and suggests that the functioning of the modern state makes this necessary: states are founded upon communities of belonging which require the exclusion of given minorities, and will reimpose that exclusion with force if a more inclusive model of community threatens to emerge. Two readings of how *Les Sauvages* suggests we should respond to this are possible. One suggests that subjects should reject the state entirely, seeking to form inclusive communities escaping its control. Another suggests that the structures of the modern state should be appropriated to promote inclusion, but that the nature of modern democracy will prevent such action from succeeding completely; as such, traditional political engagement must work in conjunction with more radical attempts to form communities free from exclusion. Both readings, however, hold in common the idea that racial and religious divides are imposed from above and that these divides cannot be completely overcome while working within mainstream political structures.

Main Text

The idea that a political 'elite' is imposing its wishes upon society, and particularly in matters relating to immigration, integration, and Islam, is commonplace in French political discourse. Its association with far-right populism was neatly demonstrated when Front national (FN) general secretary Nicolas Bay claimed that Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 American Presidential election represented 'la victoire du peuple contre ses élites' (@nicolasbayfn, 8 November 2016). The far right typically accuses these elites of enabling Muslims to undermine the secular Republic, usually blaming their incompetence or blindness to the putative Muslim threat. Some polemicists, however, accuse them of having more sinister motives: Renaud Camus claims that the political class are deliberately allowing what he labels the 'grand remplacement' of France's people and society with an Islamic alternative (Camus 2011, 41, 50-51, 103-104).

Not only the far right, however, criticises 'elites' for their role in structuring debates

surrounding racial and religious divides in contemporary France; academics and anti-racism campaigners accuse them of imposing political and media discourses which stigmatise postcolonial immigrants and their descendants, assumed to be Muslim, as a threat to the nation. Thomas Deltombe (2007) claims that this started as early as the late 1970s, arguing that the problematisation of Islam serves to cloak anti-Arab racism in the more ostensibly 'respectable' language of religious critique. Recent Islamist terrorist attacks in the West have allowed Muslims to be further stigmatised en masse as potential terrorists: the treatment of them as guilty until proven innocent is exemplified in mayor of Bordeaux Alain Juppé's claim after the Paris terrorist attacks of November 2015 that French Muslims 'doivent dire clairement qu'ils n'ont rien à voir avec [...] l' État islamique' (@alainjuppe, 16 November 2015).

Abdellali Hajjat and Marwan Mohammed argue that various factors have motivated politicians and media outlets to stigmatise Muslims, or those perceived as Muslim, in this way. As differences between left and right wing economic programmes have lessened, social issues have become increasingly important political battlegrounds; the common acceptance that there is a 'problème musulman' has provided such a battleground, allowing left and right to differentiate themselves by offering differing solutions to it. The FN's rising popularity has also led mainstream parties to embrace anti-Muslim rhetoric in the hope of attracting far right voters. Equally, since the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and particularly since the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, sensationalist coverage of stories relating to a supposed Muslim threat has become increasingly profitable to media outlets. (Hajjat and Mohammed 2016, 108-109, 116-119, 121, 131-133, 285-287). Unlike Camus, Hajjat and Mohammed thus do not suggest that an 'elite' conspiracy is at work; multiple structural factors, they argue, have encouraged the stigmatisation of Islam and Muslims. Nonetheless, both schools of thought are united by the belief that discourses surrounding Islam in France are imposed from above by an 'elite' more concerned with maintaining their own privileged status than the

interests of the French people (Muslim or otherwise).

Michel Houellebecq's *Soumission* is the best-known recent literary expression of the pervasive dissatisfaction with this 'elite'. As Adam Gopnik notes, Houellebecq's novel attacks 'the spinelessness of the French intellectual class', which allows political Islam to be imposed on France in return for assurances that it will maintain its own privileged position thereafter (Gopnik 2015). While this article will not join the debate over whether *Soumission* should be considered Islamophobic, Houellebecq's portrayal of France's political class shares some common features with that of Camus. Although Houellebecq's political elite does not actively support the 'Islamisation' of France, its decision to form a coalition with Mohammed Ben Abbes's Fraternité musulmane, which subsequently wins the presidential election of 2022, is what allows it to happen (Houellebecq 2015, 75-77 83-84, 150).

Another recent text, however, has used similar subject matter to give the opposite representation of France's political class. Sabri Louatah's tetralogy *Les Sauvages* (2011-2016) also depicts the nation electing a President of North African descent. Where Ben Abbes leads an Islamist party, however, in Louatah's work Idder Chaouch wins the 2012 presidential election as leader of the Parti socialiste (PS); far from seeking to impose political Islam like Ben Abbes, he is not even a practising Muslim. Louatah's tetralogy draws upon the conventions of several genres to depict the election and its aftermath, notably incorporating elements of the *Balzacien* family saga and political thriller. Louatah describes *Les Sauvages* as a 'roman feuilleton en quatre volumes', also inspired by the American TV series which he considers the novels of the twenty-first century; the influence of these genres is particularly apparent in his use of short, fast-paced chapters ending in cliff-hangers to deliver a story in which the kind of government plot most closely associated with the political thriller is gradually uncovered (Cavigliogi 2013; Louatah 2015).

This article will explore how Louatah's depiction of the French 'elite' resonates with that of Hajjat and Mohammed. It will subsequently draw upon Leela Gandhi's theoretical

framework of the 'politics of friendship' to provide two different readings of how *Les Sauvages* may suggest to its readers France's racial and religious divides could be bridged.

First, however a definition of how the term 'elite' should be understood in this article will be necessary. Within political discourse it is typically poorly defined, signifying all which conspires to manipulate society in its own interests and against those of the people (another vague term which it will not be necessary to explore here). The 'elite' is typically connected with the political class, the so-called 'mainstream media', and the world of finance, and is held to be at the heart of an equally vaguely defined 'system'. These terms can be applied so broadly that in the 2017 French Presidential elections, candidates as different as Jean-Luc Mélenchon, Emmanuel Macron, Marine Le Pen, and even former Prime Minister François Fillon all presented themselves as 'antisystème' (Ory 2016; Bouchet-Petersen 2017). The centrality of the term to contemporary political debate in France and elsewhere speaks to a pervasive dissatisfaction with the current situation, which politicians of all stripes seek to harness by presenting themselves as outsiders challenging a self-serving establishment.

An in-depth analysis of the different uses to which the term 'elite' is put would fall outside the scope of this article; here, it will denote members of the political class and the journalists normally assumed to be complicit in their manoeuvres. This broad definition is shared by most of those who complain about 'elite' influence, with disagreement arising over which news outlets and sections of the political spectrum should be included. Politicians implicate their opponents; polemicists like Camus claim that both the mainstream right and left are complicit in allowing France to be 'Islamised'; Hajjat and Mohammed conversely argue that politicians and media outlets from across the political spectrum are complicit in stigmatising Muslims.

Les Sauvages's depiction of the elite is closest to the latter although, unlike Hajjat and Mohammed and in keeping with his adoption of the tropes of the political thriller, Louatah does depict an organised conspiracy. On election day Chaouch is shot by Abdelkrim or Krim

Nerrouche, a young man of Algerian descent from the town of Saint-Étienne. Krim has been manipulated into carrying out the attack by his elder cousin, Nazir, but the conspiracy goes far deeper. Nazir was in the pay of conspirators led by Pierre-Jean de Montesquiou, principal private secretary to incumbent Interior Minister Marie-France Vermorel, who had previously employed him to manipulate alienated young men of North African descent into planning jihadist attacks. Before they could act they would be arrested on terrorism charges, allowing Montesquiou and co-conspirators working in law enforcement to both reap the benefits of their apparent efficiency and scapegoat Muslims as a threat to public security. Unwilling to allow Chaouch to become President, Montesquiou turns to Nazir to find a young man willing to assassinate the Socialist candidate; Nazir chooses his cousin (Louatah 2011, 239; 2016, 300-305).

He cannot interest Krim in radical Islam, instead exploiting the alienation of this young man from Saint-Étienne's deprived outskirts led into petty crime after an early abandonment by his teachers left him unqualified and unable to find fulfilling employment. In particular he persuades Krim to attack the new President by encouraging him to blame the French state for the death of his father, a factory worker killed by the toxic fumes he inhaled while working. Although Nazir's own motivations are less clear, he too privately uses the language of class more than that of religion; when riots erupt in *banlieues* nationwide after the attack on Chaouch, he boasts that he has incited 'les classes maudites' to 'honorer leur rage'. When he does appeal to radical Islam, it is only as a means of manipulating others; his brother, Fouad, even claims that Nazir has never had 'une seule pensée religieuse de toute sa vie' (Louatah 2011, 16-18; 2013, 190-191, 462-463; 2016, 306-307).

Montesquiou and his cronies, however, ensure that early media coverage of the attack assumes that it was an act of Islamist terrorism. Co-conspirator Xavier Putéoli, editor of news website Avernus.fr, plays a central role in promoting this narrative. Soon after the attack, Montesquiou feeds him a video of innocent relatives of Krim and Nazir being arrested for

questioning; he quickly publishes it on his website, suggesting that the whole family may be a terrorist cell. The subsequent arrest of several acquaintances of Nazir is characterised as a 'coup de filet antiterroriste', by the media, which underlines that some of them are 'liés à l'islamisme radical'. Despite a lack of evidence implicating any of Krim or Nazir's relatives in the attack, one conspirator adds in a radio interview that those arrested may be linked to the 'réseau Nerrouche'. This accumulation of media coverage allows Vermorel to quickly move from claiming that 'aucune piste [n'est] exclue' in determining Nazir's motivations to stigmatising Islam as a 'ferment de décomposition nationale'. Populations of postcolonial immigrant descent, assumed to be Muslim, in general find themselves stigmatised by association: Putéoli claims that the putative unmasking of the Nerrouche family, whom neighbours thought were 'une famille sans histoires', as a terrorist cell demonstrates 'l'échec de l'"intégration"' (Louatah 2012, 372-373, 388-389; 2013, 265, 328-329, 332-333, 558).

Louatah's depiction of political and media 'elites' manipulating coverage of this attack, which is not religiously motivated, to promote the narrative that France has a 'problème musulman' resonates with Hajjat and Mohammed's thesis. Why, though, are the conspirators so determined to ensure that Chaouch cannot become President? Although Montesquiou's personal racism plays a role, it is less important than Chaouch's desire to bridge the racial and religious divides in French society. He gives hope to marginalised young people of postcolonial immigrant descent that they can succeed in France: as Fouad Nerrouche puts it, when 'les gamins de la banlieue' see Chaouch they will finally be able to say that '[u]n type qui me ressemble peut devenir président […] de tous les Français'. His uncle Toufik makes explicit that this is a desire for inclusion rather than mere personal success by saying that Chaouch will 'réuni[r] les Français au lieu de les diviser'. Tens of thousands of descendants of immigrants living in France's 'banlieues à problèmes' are inspired by this prospect, with many registering to vote for the first time in order to support Chaouch. The wish for unity, however, is not confined to these populations. Chaouch wins an

election recording 89.4% participation, with so many young people voting for him that they are dubbed 'génération Chaouch'. Working class communities also seem inspired by his message: commentators note that they have abandoned extremist candidates to vote for him (Louatah 2011, 89, 153-154; 2012, 310-311, 458-459; 2016, 159).

Chaouch also seeks to reduce the chasm between the French populace and its politicians, refusing to manipulate the electorate into supporting him through the kind of tactics used by Montesquiou and Putéoli. He disregards numerous warnings from his advisors that elections cannot be won 'en faisant confiance au bon sens des électeurs', instead placing his trust in voters' goodwill even when public opinion takes a sharp anti-Muslim turn after the failed assassination. Shortly after leaving intensive care he insists that Fouad Nerrouche, who is romantically involved with his daughter Jasmine, accompany his party to a G8 meeting in New York. He disregards an advisor's warning that showing such favour to the brother of public enemy number one Nazir will be electoral suicide ahead of the legislative elections which follow their presidential counterpart, replying that '[l]es Français sauront reconnaître le geste d'un père, le geste d'un *homme* envers un autre homme'. His wish to establish a relationship with the electorate based on mutual respect rather than deception is demonstrated by the fact that, in his previous role as mayor of the fictional town of Grogny, he knew the names of 'tous les gamins du quartier' (Louatah 2013, 52-53, 505-506, 557-558).

His attempt to reduce the distance separating the political class from those they represent is not only resisted by his right-wing opponents; rivals within the PS are also involved in Montesquiou's conspiracy. Their treachery is partly motivated by the fact that, to implement his project, Chaouch introduces a new generation of candidates for the legislative elections, leaving many 'vieux mâles blancs, des privilégiés de la politique, des barons locaux' divested of their previous influence. It is the entire political elite – from which ethnic minorities, women, and the young, are largely excluded – that Chaouch threatens (Louatah 2013, 445-446; 2016, 287-288). That both left and right-wing politicians are willing to

stigmatise a whole community to protect their own privileged status resonates strongly with Hajjat and Mohammed's argument.

More than their personal privileges, however, are threatened: Chaouch's desire to reduce social, racial, and religious divides undermines the very foundations of the modern state. As Giorgio Agamben argues, 'The state [...] is not founded on a social bond of which it would be the expression, but rather on the dissolution, the unbinding it prohibits'. The inclusion of those who meet the conditions of belonging that it imposes is thus less important than the exclusion of those who do not (Agamben 1993, 86). Chaouch seeks to unite the national community, ending exclusion; it is the state itself that is threatened by this project, and not just its political elites.

Leela Gandhi holds that what Jacques Derrida labels the 'politics of friendship' can help us to overcome the exclusion inherent in the modern state. Derrida notes that Western political systems are typically based upon

> quelque adhérence de l'État à la famille [...] une *schématique* de la filiation: la souche, le genre ou l'espèce, le sexe (*Geschlecht*), le sang, la naissance, la nature, la nation (Derrida 1994, 12-13).

The focus upon similarity, and thus exclusion of what is deemed different, in this characterisation of the modern state echoes Agamben's; the insight that it draws upon a schematic of filiation enables us to ask what other framework may enable more inclusive communities (Gandhi 2006, 9-10).

This is where friendship offers some hope, signifying all that rejects this injunction to similarity and allows radically different singularities to connect with each other on an affective level. One's family is necessarily similar to oneself; the same need not be true of one's friends. A community founded upon friendship rather than filiation could be open and hospitable, welcoming difference rather than fearing it. Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of *com-*

parution, Gandhi suggests, can help elucidate how we might establish such a community. *Com-parution* rejects all pre-imposed identities; it is only through our contact with the Other that the self can exist (Gandhi 2006, 19-20). As Nancy puts it:

> l'ordre de la com-parution est plus originaire que celui du lien. Elle ne s'instaure pas, elle ne s'établit pas, ou n'émerge pas entre des sujets (objets) déjà donnés. Elle consiste dans la parution de l'*entre* comme tel: toi *et* moi (l'entre-nous), formule dans laquelle le *et* n'a pas valeur de juxtaposition, mais d'exposition. Dans la com-parution se trouve exposé ceci, qu'il faut savoir lire selon toutes les combinaisons possibles: "toi (e(s)t) (tout autre que) moi". Ou encore, plus simplement: toi partage moi (Nancy 2004, 74).

There can be no self without Other because it is on the boundary between the two, in touching the Other, that the self is exposed. *Com-parution*, then, necessitates an ability to constantly expropriate the self into the space between self and other; there can be no self-contained subject, no pre-imposed identity, and no community of resemblance. This is anathema to the modern state: it must therefore be violently repressed whenever it threatens to appear, with shared spaces in which singularities might come into contact needing to be tightly controlled.

Chaouch's intentions are far from as radical as Gandhi's, but his wish to overcome racial and religious divisions remains intolerable to the modern state and for that reason it must respond. Elite manipulation of the media should be read in this context; the internet, a shared space which in principle provides new virtual spaces of anti-identitarian and democratic potential, is particularly important. As Sara Ahmed notes, online spaces like messageboards can facilitate the creation of communities (Ahmed 2004, 95-96). It is far from inevitable that these communities will, without outside intervention, come to resemble communities of friendship: countless real-life examples of trolling attest to this, while in *Les Sauvages* numerous anti-Semitic conspiracy theories emerge online regarding the attack on

Chaouch. Nazir also uses social media to incite young people to violence, echoing the successful online recruitment strategies of real-world terrorist organisations (Louatah 2012, 484-485; 2016, 81-82). Nonetheless, the possibility that communities escaping its control *might* emerge in this shared space necessitates intervention from the state.

The use of online news coverage to scapegoat the Nerrouche family is one example of such intervention. As Derrida notes, ''l'intrusion en permanence [...] de l'autre' into one's home through the television (and, presumably, computer) screen can be experienced as an invasion. Particularly when that Other is portrayed as a threat, this often leads to a reaction of violent rejection (Derrida & Dufourmantelle 1997, 83). This is why it is critically important that the scapegoating of the Nerrouche family begins with the nationwide diffusion, via Putéoli's website, of the video of their arrest. The family, against their will, invade their compatriots' homes in the form of a threatening, potentially terrorist Other, inciting a response of fear and rejection aimed at all who resemble them. Thus, when Vermorel and Putéoli go on to explicitly extrapolate the suspicion of terrorism to post-immigrant communities as a whole, public opinion seems to follow: there is little complaint when soldiers guarding the Parisian metro against potential terrorist attacks systematically search 'tous les passagers à peau bistre' (Louatah 2012, 521; 2013, 30-31).

The Nerrouche family's neighbours' description of them in televised interviews as 'une famille sans histoires' also helps enable this, and Ahmed's work can help us understand how. Analysing speeches made in 2000 by then British Conservative leader William Hague, in which he claimed that Britain risked being 'swamped' by 'bogus' asylum seekers, she notes that ostensibly Hague differentiated these 'bogus' new arrivals from those who were 'genuine'. By doing so he allowed his supporters to continue considering themselves hospitable towards the 'genuine' while opening the structural possibility that any *could* be bogus. Given the difficulty of differentiating between the two, in practice this validated the pre-emptive rejection of all asylum seekers as potentially bogus. The unveiling of the

Nerrouche family as a terrorist cell follows a similar logic, suggesting that any 'famille sans histoires' *could* potentially be terrorists. As Ahmed also notes, however, the fear of terrorism has since 2001 not been attached to all bodies equally, but to certain ones in particular: those which 'appear "Middle Eastern, Arab or Muslim"' (Ahmed 2004, 46-48, 75-77). Not all apparently unassuming families fall under suspicion; only those considered to *look Muslim*. In contemporary France this means postcolonial immigrants and their descendants, and particularly those of Maghrebi descent. Vermorel understands this and exploits it to call their very Frenchness into question when she characterises the riots which erupt in *banlieues* nationwide following the attack on Chaouch as 'intolérables pour nos concitoyens' (Louatah 2013, 133-134). As Ahmed notes, those who suggest how 'we' should respond to a given event generate what 'we' means; here, Vermorel constructs citizenship around finding the riots intolerable (Ahmed 2004, 98-99). Given that they broke out in *banlieues* associated in the popular imagination with racial alterity, among those angered by the attack on the so-called 'candidat arabe', this speech act is a challenge to the legitimacy of post-immigrant communities. Postcolonial immigrants and their descendants thus become both potential terrorists and at best problematically French: divides that Chaouch had sought to bridge have been re-imposed, using the shared space of televised and online news coverage.

The conspirators' use of the internet for this purpose also exploits a threat to the very notion of hospitality which is inherent in the medium. As Derrida notes, in order for hospitality to exist the boundary between the public and private spaces must be theoretically inviolable; when the frontiers of the home become permeable the host loses their sovereignty over whom they invite in, which is a necessary precondition of hospitality. The state's ability to censor online communications compromises the boundaries of the home in this way: when it intercepts messages sent between two homes and intended to be private, it introduces itself uninvited into both. This is problematic because '[p]artout où le "chez soi" est violé [...] on peut prévoir une réaction privatisante, voire familialiste, voire […] ethnocentrique et

nationaliste, et donc virtuellement xénophobe' (Derrida & Dufourmantelle 1997, 51). This is demonstrated in *Les Sauvages* when, with widespread state surveillance taken for granted by protagonists, the release of the video of the Nerrouche family being arrested by agents of the state *in their own home* dramatises the state's ability to undermine the boundaries of *any* home: that the video is released online underlines this by allowing uninvited spectators into the Nerrouche household, bringing the Nerrouche family uninvited into theirs, and reminding them that the physical intrusion of police officers is not the only means by which the state can enter their home. As Derrida predicts, the video thus helps provoke a xenophobic reaction not against the state but those often characterised in racist discourses as uninvited guests in the nation: once again, those who appear 'Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim'.

This chain of events begins with the attack on Chaouch, whose status as a presidential candidate allows it to be portrayed as an attack against France itself. The strength of the process of racial othering that it triggers is demonstrated when even his own Frenchness is soon able to be called into question. Upon reawakening from the coma into which the attack sends him, the multilingual President speaks in Chinese before French; upon discovering this, Putéoli publishes the story but emphasises his racial alterity by substituting Chinese for Arabic. The conspirators subsequently portray the far from devout Chaouch as part of the putative Muslim problem when, after having left hospital, he refuses a *jambon-beurre* sandwich during a public engagement. His unwillingness to eat this pork-based French speciality, they claim, demonstrates a Muslim refusal to 'intégrer'; Montesquiou subsequently denounces Chaouch's government as 'islamo-gauchiste', claiming immediately after that France is under attack from Islam*ism*. Chaouch, paradoxically, now represents both the wounded national body and its perceived Islamist attacker (Louatah 2012, 616; 2013, 209; 2016, 78-79, 193). This demonstrates what Ahmed terms the 'stickiness' of the stereotype of the Arab-as-terrorist; any body perceived as 'Arab', even one which is itself a victim of violence presented as terrorist, can fall under suspicion of terrorism (Ahmed 2004, 59-60, 76-

77, 98-99).[i]

Amid this climate of hysteria politicians from the right of the mainstream right, led by Vermorel and Montesquiou, form an alliance with the FN. The Alliance des Droites Nationales (ADN) seeks to invalidate the election of Chaouch, ostensibly because his physical and mental condition after the attack leaves him incapable of leading the nation. What they are really challenging, of course, is the legitimacy of this son of Algerian immigrants to be President of France: they hope to unite the nation around an opposition to the fictitious threat that they have generated, expressed in the rejection of Chaouch. The effectiveness of these tactics is demonstrated even before the ADN is formed, when the FN's new membership rates rise by 1000% following the attack; after it is created, polls show an immediate spike in support for the movement (Louatah 2013, 346-347, 479-489).

The ADN's popularity is not the only way in which the success of the conspirators in re-imposing racial and religious divides in French society makes itself clear. The *banlieue* riots demonstrate the anger of some descendants of immigrants; although most conspiracy theories which subsequently emerge implicate former President Nicolas Sarkozy in the attack, others are openly anti-Semitic. Their anger at the attack on Chaouch has led some descendants of Muslim immigrants to re-assert two of contemporary France's divides: one between themselves and a political class seen as intrinsically racist, and another with a Jewish community which a minority of them stigmatises en masse as complicit in a Zionist conspiracy to oppress Muslims. This xenophobic reaction is mirrored by Islamophobic incidents among the Franco-French community: Muslim quarters of graveyards nationwide are vandalised and, after the *jambon-beurre* incident, many people gleefully follow Putéoli's suggestion to leave ham sandwiches on the doorsteps of their Muslim neighbours in a 'Nuit des Jambon-beurres'. The rise in anti-Muslim discrimination culminates when neo-Nazis kill thirty-six people in an attack on a Saint- Étienne mosque; the victims include journalists suspected by the attackers of being Jewish, underlining that anti-Semitism in contemporary

France is not, as is often implied, exclusively a Muslim problem (Louatah 2016, 81, 127-128, 164-167, 188-189, 225-227, 266-267, 272-273; Marelli 2006, 138-140).

Louatah's political elites interfere not only in spaces shared by all of society but also those like letters, social media messages, and phonecalls through which singular subjects seek to connect with each other. Bernard Stiegler characterises any letter as 'un envoi au loin de soi qui rompt déjà le cercle de toute proximité' (Derrida & Stiegler 1996, 45). Derrida agrees, holding that 'je te touche en t'envoyant quoi que ce soit, même si ce n'est rien'; social media messages surely hold similar potential. Derrida adds that telephone calls also offer an opportunity to touch one's interlocutor, holding that 'en parlant [...] nous nous touchons encore en mêlant nos voix' (Derrida 1980, 63-64, 88). This idea of touching is central to Nancy's conception of community: it is precisely when we touch the Other that *com-parution* can emerge, and Stiegler's 'envoi au loin de soi' is the type of self-expropriation needed to make this possible.

Montesquiou and his co-conspirators repeatedly seek to prevent protagonists from appropriating these spaces to form intersubjective connections. Krim's only point of contact with white, bourgeois France is Aurélie Wagner, whom he met on holiday the year before the events depicted in *Les Sauvages* and with whom he is besotted. Although too shy to contact her for some time thereafter, before the attack he arranges via Facebook[TM] messages to meet her in Paris. He seems willing to renounce the assassination in order to be with Aurélie, and only after her affluent friends humiliate him does he carry it out. After his arrest Aurélie, hoping to make amends, writes a letter to him which she hopes to persuade her father, the judge heading the investigation of the attack, to pass on. However, the elite intervenes: Putéoli's son, who is her classmate, steals the letter and it soon reaches Montesquiou. Montesquiou subsequently offers sections of it to Krim in return for information about Nazir, who has escaped his control. The elite conspirators not only prevent Krim and Aurélie from connecting with one another across social and racial divides, using a letter as they had

previously used social media; they appropriate Aurélie's attempt to do so and use it to force Krim into a relationship of still greater dependency upon them. (Louatah 2011, 148, 166, 187, 225-228, 231; 2012, 512-513, 581-582, 629)

The plotters sabotage the relationship between Jasmine Chaouch and Fouad Nerrouche in similar fashion. They intercept Fouad's phonecalls and messages to Jasmine, leaving her wondering why he is not contacting her; she is dissuaded from contacting him by advisors who encourage her to consider him suspect by association with his brother and cousin. Fouad overcomes this block on relationality by writing her a letter, which manages to sidestep state surveillance; in their subsequent telephone conversation the narratorial voice collapses the distance between them, immediately following Fouad's 'Jasmine?' with 'Les larmes montèrent aux yeux de la jeune femme'. Their connection has been re-established and its effect is as physical as Derrida implies when he holds that his telephonic interlocutor 'me touche, me prend dans sa voix'. The power of the in-between space of the phone call is further underlined later, even as their relationship flounders; when Jasmine telephones Fouad her voice, although weak, holds 'comme un pont de cordes au-dessus d'un ravin brumeux'. Their relationship similarly functions as a bridge across both social and religious divides: while both are of Kabylian descent, Fouad originates from the *banlieues* of Saint- Étienne while Jasmine grew up in 'les beaux quartiers' of Paris, and her heritage is both culturally Muslim on her father's side and Jewish on her mother's. The hope of reconciliation that their relationship represents is demonstrated when Jasmine becomes pregnant; they agree that '[l]a vie, ça se dit Chaim en hébreu, et Hayat en arabe [...] Si c'est un garçon, on l'appelle Chaim. Si c'est une fille, on l'appelle Hayat.' The state's interference, however, eventually overcomes them: Fouad's resentment at the treatment of his family along with the doubts concerning his motivations that Jasmine's entourage have planted in her mind lead her to end their relationship, planning on terminating her pregnancy (Louatah 2012, 325, 402, 431-432, 447-448, 600-601; 2013, 102-103; 2016, 63-64, 190-191; Derrida 1980, 63-64).

The success of Montesquiou and his cronies in re-imposing divides which had seemed to be disappearing is shown through Krim's fifteen-year-old sister, Luna. Before the attack, Luna is the Nerrouche family member who seems to feel most unproblematically French: she is likely to soon be selected by the national junior gymnastics team, and takes pride in the prospect of representing France. Her Facebook™ account is filled with pictures of her with friends whose names are conspicuously Franco-French, and to whom she refers as 'soeurs'. Luna's realisation that she is at best conditionally accepted as French is, therefore, all the more painful. After the attack, neither her gymnastics coaches nor her friends will reply when she tries to contact them via social media; this previously inclusive shared space has become the site of her exclusion, and she angrily reacts by deleting 'tous ses amis Facebook dont les noms ne sonnaient pas musulman'. Then, having previously blamed Islam for Krim's wrongdoing, she substitutes the French identity of which she feels divested for a contestatory Islamic replacement. This is symbolised in her decision to wear a veil, the signifier par excellence of Muslim alterity within French political discourse, having previously dressed in a fashion that Krim considered too provocative.[ii] The stigmatisation of descendants of North African immigrants as un-French on the basis of their perceived Muslim identity thus becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Luna only ceases to feel French when it becomes clear to her that she is not accepted as such; she latches on to a contestatory Muslim identity not because of any inherent religious opposition to mainstream culture, but because it is as an assumed Muslim that she has been rejected. That she adopts this identity primarily due to her consciousness of exclusion is demonstrated when youths leave a ham sandwich on her family's doorstep during Putéoli's 'Nuit des jambons beurres'; Luna seizes the chance to fight back against discrimination that this provocation offers, jettisoning her veil as she runs to fight the youths (Louatah 2011, 44-45, 182-83, 223; 2016, 121-122, 126-127, 226-227).

Power thus works to prevent social divides from being bridged both on the national level and between individuals, and has considerable success in both domains. This portrayal

of the modern state as reliant upon exclusion fits Agamben's framework; its depiction of the French political and media 'elite' imposing racial and religious divisions upon the people also resonates with Hajjat and Mohammed's thesis, even if it depicts an organised conspiracy rather than their convergence of structural factors.

Les Sauvages ends, however, more positively: the French public rally around Chaouch's message of hope that the nation can be united, rejecting the ADN. Montesquiou and several co-conspirators are brought to justice, but Chaouch's party remains comfortably ahead of theirs in opinion polls even beforehand. Chaouch prevents them from re-imposing racial and religious divides as successfully as initially appeared to be the case, and does so precisely by refusing to replicate their tactics. He is unwilling to follow an advisor's suggestion that he respond to the *jambon-beurre* incident by publicly stating that he is not Muslim after Fouad argues that this would only validate the idea that it would be a problem if he was; Fouad believes that 'l'écrasante majorité' of young French people of all backgrounds share his belief that it would not. It is significant that this advice comes from the actor Fouad rather than Chaouch's professional advisors. They do not intend to stigmatise Muslims, but feel that Chaouch can succeed only by reassuring the public that he is not one of them: the discourse of the 'problème musulman' has become so pervasive that individuals used to working within politics can only think of communication strategies which accept that such a problem exists. It takes an outsider to realise that what Chaouch must do is repudiate this basic premise. *Les Sauvages* thus attacks the inability of contemporary French politicians, whether they are personally Islamophobes or not, to treat Islam as anything other than a problem; it suggests that the only way to combat the likes of Montesquiou is to step outside of the discourse of the 'problème musulman' altogether (Louatah 2016, 103-104, 112-113, 117, 288-290).

Further hope is provided by the fact that not everyone within the state apparatus or media is corrupt: Aurélie's father Judge Wagner, Commandant Mansourd of the Direction

centrale du renseignement intérieur, and the investigative journalist Marieke van Vanderdroom all work tirelessly to expose Montesquiou's plot. State hegemony is also not *complete*: this is symbolised when Aurélie, visiting her father's office while Krim is being interviewed in an adjoining room, darts past his guards and shouts that she loves him; even if only for a second, she has managed to bypass the state apparatus keeping them apart. How beneficial even such fleeting moments of connection can be is shown by the regenerating effect that hearing Aurélie has on Krim; he leaves the interview with a smile on his face, having previously sat in sullen silence (Louatah 2016, 212-213).

Fouad and Jasmine, meanwhile, remain separated at the end of the text, but are at least reconciled after a stormy separation. Jasmine decides not to have an abortion, and will allow Fouad contact with their child. The child, whose name will mean 'life', will thus remain a bridge across the social divides separating Fouad, Jasmine, and their respective families (Louatah 2016, 278-279, 308-309). An unborn child, named 'Life', is a powerful symbol of hope for the future. The parental love which Fouad and Jasmine will, one would expect, feel for their offspring may be the closest thing to *com-parution* in *Les Sauvages*. Their child will in some sense be a bridge between them: like *com-parution*, their love will thus be exposed on the boundary between self and other. Love seems eminently compatible with *com-parution*; Alain Badiou sees love as

> le laborieux devenir d'une vérité construite point par point [...] un travail [...] et non pas seulement un miracle. Il faut être sur la brèche, il faut prendre garde, il faut se réunir, avec soi-même et avec l'autre (Badiou & Truong 2009, 83-84).

This has much in common with *com-parution*'s constant exposition of the self through contact with the other, and while it may be easy for Fouad and Jasmine to love their own child the point is broader. The formation of a community of friendship necessitates love, not for the Other as such but for the contact we have with all that is different.

The tetralogy's most powerful moment of reconciliation comes after the attack on the Saint-Étienne mosque, when people of all ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds come together across the nation to commemorate the dead. The atmosphere of the marches is utopian: strangers offer support to the elderly Ferhat Nerrouche, while Fouad and Nazir's brother Slimane, who previously tried to hide his homosexuality, walks arm in arm with his boyfriend: a Syrian refugee. Louatah portrays the French political class negatively, but not the French people: although susceptible to elite manipulation, most wish for their divided society to be reunited. *Les Sauvages* suggests that this outcome is achievable if they reject the discourses of exclusion imposed upon them, against their will, from above (Louatah 2016, 213-214, 288-290, 318-320).

While the text thus seems to suggest that its readers should distrust the existing political class, this seems undermined by the fact that the nation needs Chaouch himself in order to be reconciled. Only through his influence can the agents of the state who seek to expose Montesquiou's conspiracy succeed, with Mansourd and Wagner both distanced from the investigation until he intervenes (Louatah 2016, 69-70). Equally, it is Chaouch's programme that people rally around and Chaouch who has the courage to reject the discourse of the 'problème musulman'. If *Les Sauvages* implies that the French people must reject their nation's exclusive community of belonging, equally it seems to suggest that such efforts need the help of some political *homme providentiel*.

This is problematic because, despite his wish to overcome the divides that his predecessors have imposed, Chaouch does not seek to alter the way in which the state itself functions. Soon after the election he evokes the need for pragmatism, describing the political system as 'tout un écosystème' which should not be too greatly disturbed. This may appear sensible, but is a long way from the rejection of the very mechanisms of the modern state implicit in a community of friendship; Agamben holds that '[t]he novelty of the coming politics is that it will no longer be a struggle for the conquest or control of the State, but a

struggle between the State and the non-State'. Chaouch represents the former rather than the latter (Louatah 2016, 232-233; Agamben 1993, 85-86).

That control of the mechanisms of the state as it is now cannot be enough to realise Chaouch's utopian vision is suggested by the fact that he only defeats Montesquiou by compromising on his wish to end the manipulation of the electorate through the media. Although he knows that Nazir probably organised the Saint-Étienne massacre Chaouch makes a deal with him, allowing him to remain free in return for evidence incriminating Montesquiou; he will never face trial for his crimes and the public will never know, seeing only Montesquiou being brought to justice. The progress that Chaouch represents can paradoxically only be made by manipulating public opinion using similar tactics to those of his opponents in order to bring them down; this demonstrates the difficulty of avoiding the use of such tactics in a modern democracy.

The most high-profile conspirator arrested, meanwhile, *is* Montesquiou, when the conspiracy went at least as high as Vermorel. The nation may be temporarily united, but the most influential of those who seek to divide it remain in their positions of influence; while the public is not inherently racist, it has demonstrated its susceptibility to their manipulations (Louatah 2016, 62-63, 69-70, 288-290 293-294, 296-297). That Chaouch's success is so partial and fragile, and can only be achieved by using the same tactics that he hoped to consign to history, seems to urge still more mistrust of the modern state: no *homme providentiel* working within it, *Les Sauvages* implies, can escape the need to use these strategies.

The uncertainty of the apparent national unity which emerges in *Les Sauvages* is visible in the experiences of the protagonists. When she takes part in a march commemorating those who died in Saint-Étienne Luna is still wearing her veil. This article does not intend to suggest that a young girl choosing to wear a veil should be considered problematic; Luna, however, adopted hers as a reaction to her exclusion. That she is still

wearing it even after the Nerrouche family name has been cleared implies that France's racial and religious divisions are too deeply rooted to be overcome in the short term. Krim and Aurélie's relationship may seem more promising, but transpires to have its roots in Nazir's schemes: before the two met he had offered Aurélie free drugs if she would pretend to find Krim attractive, hoping that the discovery of her betrayal would increase Krim's resentment for bourgeois France and thus make him more likely to carry out the attack on Chaouch. While the genuine feelings that they develop for one another despite Nazir suggest that racial and social divisions can be overcome, that outside manipulation is required in order for their relationship to be possible underlines how entrenched those divisions are (Louatah 2016, 209-211, 315-316, 320-321).

If *Les Sauvages* urges its readers to strive to bridge divides imposed from above by political 'elites', then, it is under no illusion that doing so will be easy. Any attempt to appropriate the structures of contemporary democracy to this end, the text suggests, must inevitably require a certain deception of the electorate. By retaining a division between the 'elite' and those whom they manipulate, it will therefore undermine any apparent progress that it makes towards national unity. Two readings of *Les Sauvages* seem possible in this context. One could argue that it implies that communities of friendship cannot be formed while working within modern democracies: that readers should reject traditional political engagement, instead seeking to bridge racial and religious divides in ways which repudiate state control. Alternatively, one could propose the less radical reading that political action like that of Chaouch will be necessary if a more united society is ever to be constructed but that it cannot be sufficient on its own: that Chaouch's democratic progressivism and the anti-state radicality of *com-parution* are both vital. Their differing interpretations of the legitimacy of traditional political engagement notwithstanding, both readings agree on two points. Firstly, as Hajjat and Mohammed argue, racial and religious divisions are being imposed upon French society from above by self-interested political and media elites. Secondly, if those

divisions are to be overturned then the structures of modern democracy cannot *on their own* enable this to happen. What Chaouch calls '[les] gens de bonne volonté' must strive to form a community of friendship that rejects the exclusion inherent in the modern state (Louatah 2016, 51-53). Its insistence on the role of elites in imposing divisions in modern societies, and suggestion that something more radical than mainstream politics alone is needed in order to overcome this, are among the key points which emerge from *Les Sauvages*.

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[i] The racist abuse to which grieving family members of victims of the 2016 Nice terrorist attack were subjected at public commemoration services is a particularly shocking real-life example of this (Charrihi & Brunet 2017, 27, 46-50).

[ii] I do not mean to suggest that all French Muslim women who wear veils do so for this reason, but it seems to be Luna's primary motivation. Caitlin Killian (2003, 579) pinpoints similar reactions from young women who have remained subject to racism after conforming to the expectations of the dominant group as one of the multitude of reasons why young French women choose to wear the veil.