

# BECOMING ÉDOUARD LOUIS AND THE TRANSMEDIAL SOCIAL NOVEL

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## Introduction

French writer Édouard Louis has been active in the French cultural landscape since 2014 and the publication of his critically acclaimed (and much debated) debut novel *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule*. Yet, trying to answer ‘Who is Édouard Louis?’ is not straightforward, considering his protean contribution to French literature along with his political engagements. To date, he has published seven novels (the latest one, *L’Effondrement*, came out in October 2024), a play (adapted from *Histoire de la violence* in collaboration with German director Thomas Ostermeier), two political essays (*Pierre Bourdieu: L’insoumission en héritage*, 2013 and *Dialogue sur l’art et la politique*, 2021 in collaboration with British filmmaker Ken Loach) and two translations of Anne Carson’s work (*Antigonick*, 2019 and *Norma Jeane Baker de Troie*, 2021). Louis often takes to social media, in particular Instagram, to share political messages, participates in street protests – he is close to the radical left party La France Insoumise – and shares his political views in major news outlets from *Le Monde* to *The Guardian*, where he often attacks far-right leader Marine Le Pen (and her party, the Rassemblement National) as well as other party leaders who fail to deliver ‘the good life’. More recently, he has been performing in plays adapted from his novels, such as *Qui a tué mon père* (also directed by Ostermeier) both in France and in Germany at Berlin’s famous Schaubühne playhouse. His work is likewise adapted for theatre and has been translated into English, German, Italian, Dutch and Spanish, among others. This seemingly comprehensive introduction to Édouard Louis however falls short of fully answering the initial question, given that his identity spreads further than his achievements as a writer or cultural actor.

Returning to *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule*, two names appear on the cover of the book: that of the writer, Édouard Louis, and that of the character, Eddy Bellegeule. The two names are in fact inextricably linked with one another, on a professional (author-character) but also personal (intimate memories, experiences and feelings) level. As such, this first autobiographical novel, as he describes it, not only tells us ‘who’ Louis is and where he comes from, but perhaps more importantly, how he became who he is. In their analysis of the novel and the influence of French writer Jean-Luc Lagarce on Louis’s œuvre, Cyril Barde and Maxime Triquenaux remark that Lagarce’s ‘*Juste la fin du monde* et *En finir avec*

*Eddy Bellegueule* annoncent tous deux la fin d'un monde, d'une époque, d'une forme de vie'.<sup>1</sup> They add that 'la volonté d'en finir est plus fortement affirmée chez Édouard Louis'. The space of the novel becomes as much a space of exploration of the various processes of domination that shaped his and his family's lives as it is a space of self-reinvention.

It is Louis's transformation practice that guides this article, and in particular how the author shapes his identity in writing and beyond. In this sense, we argue that Louis engages in processes of *branding*. We do not only refer to the commercialization of Édouard Louis's œuvre as a product or a brand – which it is to an extent –, but also to the constant process of self-fashioning that is at the heart of his literary production and public engagements. Since his striking entrance into the French literary world, Louis has been constructing an identity and a public image that pulls away from his origins, either by his conscious effort to be different from the social milieu in which he grew up or through the literary and political companions he chooses. Furthermore, the term 'branding' carries an inherent tension. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, branding refers to 'the action of marking with a hot iron' or, in business settings, the Cambridge Dictionary describes it as 'the act of making a product, organization, person, or place easy to recognize'. In Louis's work, these two definitions are inextricable insofar as the initial and painful branding he experienced as a child has led to his efforts to become someone else, someone who is now a recognizable figure in (French) cultural and political circles, someone with a stylistic signature and consistent social engagements.

This article considers Édouard Louis's comprehensive literary œuvre from his debut novel in 2014 to his latest text about his mother *Monique s'évade* (2024). In addition, it moves beyond the literary sphere to look at alternative methods of self-fashioning. Louis interacts through various media, from social media to talk shows, in order to build one coherent identity and reach a greater audience. His media engagements are as critically informative as his literary works, offering political, social and literary commentaries, as well as personal news. If engaging with non-traditional forms of writing exposes how an intellectual thinks within their times and reflects on the world that surrounds them, it also allows us to transcend standard genres privileged by academic discourses. In fact, this prefix *trans* is central to everything he does, from sexual transgression to class transgression and transmediality. While past scholarship has shed light on some of these key themes, we seek here to explore these processes of crossing, of moving across, of branding the self, of being an *écrivain engagé*, which allow Louis to deploy a socio-political critique through his work, through different platforms and, in turn, also allow him to control the narrative.

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1. Cyril Barde, Maxime Triquenaux, 'Textes transfuges. Textes refuges. Fonctions de l'intertextualité dans *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* d'Édouard Louis', *Inverses: littérature, arts, homosexualités*, 15 (2015), hal-01316015, p. 5.

**(Self)-Branding**

*En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* recounts Louis's troubled childhood as a gay boy living in Hallencourt, a poor village in the northern French region of Picardie. In addition to detailing the homophobic violence that he experienced whether at home with his family, at school or in the village, he sheds light on the disappearance of a past identity and the emergence (or construction) of another. This literary reflection on his changing identity is certainly a key feature of his entire œuvre. Upon the publication of *Changer: Méthode* in 2021, Keiran Goddard wrote in *The Guardian* that: 'Louis's writing up to this point has been monomaniacal in its focus on the psychological and physical violence inflicted on the working classes by the structures of neoliberalism. *Change* is no different'.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, the novel explores the metamorphosis of his identity, 'as he tries to escape his working-class origins and refashion himself as an actor, a student, a lover, a radical, a writer'. Or, as Louis puts it:

À un peu plus de vingt ans j'avais changé de nom devant un tribunal, changé de prénom, transformé mon visage, redessiné la structure de mon implantation capillaire, subi plusieurs opérations, réinventé ma manière de bouger, de marcher, de parler, fait disparaître l'accent du Nord de mon enfance.<sup>3</sup>

This process of transformation finds its origin in instances of trauma and the attendant unhappiness he experienced in his childhood: 'De mon enfance je n'ai aucun souvenir heureux [...] Le grand aux cheveux roux a craché *Prends ça dans ta gueule*. Le crachat s'est écoulé lentement sur mon visage'.<sup>4</sup> Displaying feminine qualities in contradiction with normative gender expectations in a heteropatriarchal system, Louis suffers the repeated bullying of two young boys in the school hallways. The spit on Louis's face marks the disrespect and disgust the schoolboys feel towards Louis's unmanly behaviour and appearance. The gesture embodies a degrading and dehumanizing act that expresses extreme disdain and contempt for his lack of virility; it also serves as a physical marking and a form of public shaming, like a scarlet letter. Facing the two boys, the young narrator freezes, refusing to wipe the spit away in fear that it might further offend them.<sup>5</sup> In this opening scene, Louis experiences branding through the spit, as if the boys' saliva had marked him permanently. In fact, re-reading the above quotation from *Changer*, it is as though the spit had seeped through his skin and inside his body so deeply that only surgical interventions ('plusieurs opérations') could allow him to move

2. <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/feb/08/change-by-edouard-louis-review-the-revenge-of-eddy>> [accessed 30 April 2024].

3. Édouard Louis, *Changer : Méthode* (Paris: Seuil, 2021), p. 16.

4. Édouard Louis, *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* (Paris: 2014), p. 9.

5. Louis, *En finir*, p. 9.

forward. If the spit eventually disappears (from sight), the humiliation remains. Indeed, this opening scene is ‘la scène-clé du roman’ as Kraenker and Annala note, adding that ‘cela se manifestera [...] par la référence à cette scène qui se répètera et qui se traduira [...] par des symptômes comme l’insomnie ou la peur d’aller à l’école. [...] L’enfant est harcelé’.<sup>6</sup> In the next few pages, Louis details the indignity he faces as children at his school kept asking him, ‘C’est toi le pédé?’<sup>7</sup> The term ‘pédé’, a pejorative term in the French language, officially punishable by law, has been used to designate homosexual men. Interestingly, too, as much as it is a question, it seeks no answer. On the contrary, it serves to interpellate young Louis and posits his identity in definitive terms. He recounts that: ‘En la prononçant ils l’avaient inscrite en moi pour toujours tel un stigmate, ces marques que les Grecs gravaient au fer rouge ou au couteau sur le corps des individus déviants, dangereux pour la communauté.’<sup>8</sup>

Be it the insult or the spit, both exteriorize a form of punishment for deviating individuals who operate outside of social norms. In addition to the punishment, the branding also serves as a dissuasive warning not only for the individual, enjoining him to change (and thus conform), but also for the rest of society. Didier Eribon, one of Louis’s bestfriends, a gay man and class defector himself, remarks about insults in *Réflexions sur la question gay*, that they are similar to sentences: ‘ce verdict, c’est une sentence quasi définitive [...] avec laquelle il va falloir vivre’.<sup>9</sup> Desperate to no longer stand out from the group, Louis initially tries to conform to gender expectations. Like a mantra, he would repeat the phrase, ‘[a]ujourd’hui je serai un dur’, in a performative manner, hoping to manifest a different identity, body type and reality.<sup>10</sup> While Louis experiences different forms of oppression, it is the daily homophobia that pushes him out of the village. Rightfully so: ‘on sent que l’auteur aurait pu s’accommoder de la pauvreté matérielle et sociale s’il avait été accepté en tant qu’homosexuel par sa famille, par ses camarades d’école, par son milieu social.’<sup>11</sup>

The second part of *En finir...*, titled ‘L’Échec et la fuite’, thus points to an inevitable outcome as Louis is unable to become ‘one of the guys’. Bourdeau remarks that ‘le narrateur aspire à être comme les autres et s’efforce pendant plus de cent quatre-vingt-dix pages (sur deux cent vingt au total) d’y parvenir,

6. Sabine Kraenker and Satu Annala, ‘La Question de la violence, de la haine et de la honte dans les textes autobiographiques d’Annie Ernaux et d’Édouard Louis à la lumière de la théorie de la non-reproduction de Chantal Jaquet’, *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 74:1 (2023), 208–225 (p. 218).

7. Louis, *En finir*, p. 11.

8. Louis, *En finir*, p. 11.

9. Didier Eribon, *Réflexions sur la question gay* (Paris: Fayard, 1999), p. 30.

10. Louis, *En finir*, p. 166.

11. Kraenker et Annala, ‘La question de la violence’, p. 218.

sans brandir le milieu bourgeois comme destination ultime à atteindre'.<sup>12</sup> The novel ends at the dawn of Louis's new journey – 'la fuite était la dernière solution envisageable'.<sup>13</sup> He now aims to cultivate a talent that will help him leave his village in order to pursue his life somewhere else. The escape comes through theatre. In middle school, Louis becomes a passionate amateur actor and practices it on a weekly basis. Due to his notable artistic skills, he later applies and is admitted to the Madeleine-Michelis high school in Amiens, where he will follow the drama programme. Far from the safe space he had certainly hoped for, the new school proves challenging, not so much because of his sexual orientation (though it is to an extent), but more because of his class. Aware of this new stigma and devoid of the cultural baggage that his peers have inherited from their middle-class or bourgeois parents, Louis is once more forced to play a part. He recalls an instance when he had heard classmates talk about classical music, which he knew nothing about: 'Le soir, en rentrant chez moi, je me précipite sur Internet, je tape "Wagner" sur Google, et le lendemain [...] je dis: "Oui, d'ailleurs Wagner..." [...] Je savais très bien que je jouais un rôle, une pitrerie sociale'.<sup>14</sup>

In *Changer...*, Louis returns to this move during his late teenage years and notes about theatre:

La vérité c'est que le théâtre a été étonnamment facile pour moi. Je crois que c'est parce que je savais jouer un rôle. [...] Depuis ma naissance j'avais essayé de prétendre être quelqu'un que je n'étais pas, et à cause de tout ça, grâce à tout ça, le théâtre a été une évidence, justement pas une vocation artistique mais tout simplement la continuité de ma vie.<sup>15</sup>

School represents a space that was oppressive but also liberating for Louis. He had to conceal in plain sight; and it is his performance as an actor that will open doors and allow him to elevate socially and reconstruct his identity. More broadly, Louis's work embraces a performative approach to identity-making. In *Monique s'évade*, Louis's latest novel, which tells the story of his mother's escape from a violent man, Louis comments on her behaviour during a scene in a German theatre. He notes that: 'Elle surveillait sa manière de parler, elle essayait de contrôler son accent du Nord' and remarks that he cannot fault her for it, because: 'Moi aussi je modifiais mon attitude devant les inconnus, devant le public [...] Qui ne change pas a

12. Loïc Bourdeau, 'De "Pas comme les autres" à "tous dominés" dans *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* d'Édouard Louis', *Nouvelles Etudes Francophones*, 35:1 (2020), 71–85 (p. 79).

13. Louis, *En finir*, p. 197.

14. <[https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2016/12/11/edouard-louis-trump-et-le-fn-sont-le-produit-de-l-exclusion\\_5047058\\_3260.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2016/12/11/edouard-louis-trump-et-le-fn-sont-le-produit-de-l-exclusion_5047058_3260.html)> [accessed 12 May 2024].

15. Louis, *Changer*, p. 43.

manière d'être devant les autres?'<sup>16</sup> Having become someone else and having access to a new social milieu, Louis is able to 'diffuser et de rendre visibles et audibles son discours et ses combats'.<sup>17</sup>

### The transmedial search for truth

Even if writing is central to Louis's practice, he continues to have a close relationship with the theatre world. As we noted in our Introduction, he often collaborates with Thomas Ostermeier and performs on stage. As this special issue concerns itself with the social novel, which for some time in the nineteenth century 'se réclamait de la figure du médecin auscultant le corps social, dévoilant les plaies pour essayer de les soigner', it appears that Louis's work aligns in many ways with this view.<sup>18</sup> Despite the violence he experienced, he seeks to give space and to 'donner la parole à ceux qui ne l'ont pas (ou si peu) dans la littérature'.<sup>19</sup> As such, theatre acting marks the natural continuation of his work, insofar as it is also about testing 'les possibles du monde – autrement dit, de proposer une représentation expérimentale [...] du monde tel qu'il n'est pas censé être ou devenir'.<sup>20</sup> Towards the end of *Monique*..., Louis takes his mother to Berlin to see Faulk Richter's adaptation of *Combats et métamorphoses d'une femme*. The 2021 publication tells about the mother's first escape from her abusive husband, Louis's father. At the end of the performance, 'les applaudissements étaient si forts, je le jure, ils étaient si forts [...] qu'ils faisaient vibrer le sol sous nos pieds'; Louis adds: 'Je pensais : *Une revanche de plus pour elle*'.<sup>21</sup> Through this process of mise en abyme Louis not only avenges his mother, but he also reflects on the way the world works and should work. During the performance, Louis tells his mother 'que c'est du théâtre, c'est exagéré évidemment...'; yet, she replies, '[c]'est pas exagéré du tout, c'était exactement comme ça !'<sup>22</sup> This exchange poses a key question about authenticity, truth, and performance. While performing is central to Louis's work, it is not incompatible (rather the reverse) with his commitment to telling the truth, to writing literature 'qui ne permette pas de détourner le regard de ce qu'elle a à dire'.<sup>23</sup>

16. Édouard Louis, *Monique s'évade* (Paris: Seuil, 2024), pp. 148–9.

17. Édouard Louis and Ken Loach, *Dialogue sur l'art et la politique* (Paris: PUF, 2021), p. 58.

18. Christophe Charle, 'Le Romancier social comme quasi-sociologue entre enquête et littérature : le cas de Zola et de *L'Argent*', in *L'Écrivain, le savant et le philosophe*, ed. by Evelyne Pinto (Paris: Sorbonne, 2003), pp. 31–44 (p. 31).

19. Delphine Edy, 'L'Expérience du réel au cœur du triangle littérature, théâtre et performance. Édouard Louis en scène', *Symbolon*, 22:1 (2012), 99–109 (p.102).

20. Edy, 'L'Expérience du réel', p. 99.

21. Louis, *Monique*, p. 153.

22. Louis, *Monique*, p. 152.

23. Edy, 'L'Expérience du réel', p. 102.

In addition to theatre, the inclusion of photographs likewise plays a key part in this search for truth. Towards the beginning of *Changer*..., he includes photos of his childhood home.<sup>24</sup> With the caption 'La Maison de l'enfance' at the bottom, two photos cover the page: the first shows an attached house with damaged walls, cracked or worn out paint revealing cinder blocks, and a broken window on the second floor; the second shows Louis as a young child petting his dogs with his toys scattered around the backyard. The recourse to visual representations in his book represents an attempt to establish the veracity of his story and the actual poverty in which he grew up. For readers already acquainted with Louis, these pictures may not come as a surprise. In fact, shortly after the publication of *En finir*..., several media outlets questioned his version of events. In response, Louis published in August 2015 a blog piece titled 'La vérité en littérature' on his own website and later publicized it on his social media.<sup>25</sup> The piece is composed of four childhood photos and a text. Louis explains that he wanted to publish these in the original novel but his editor convinced him to do otherwise. Noting that he was driven by 'une sorte de volonté de vérité', he seeks to support his literary claims with photographic evidence. For a while, Louis was in fact subjected to a media trial being accused of exaggerating, of humiliating his family and working-class people, of betraying them. Some critics vilified Louis for his stereotypical representation of the poor village in which he grew up. Journalists went as far as to visit Hallencourt to interview villagers, with some voicing their anger at Louis's representation of their lives.<sup>26</sup> Louis reflects on this comment with Ken Loach, as mentioned in the next section, showing that this anger and the rejection of his depiction are consitutive of the process of domination and oppression. As his œuvre unfolds, he is certainly aware of the pain he has caused. In *Monique*..., reflecting on the material help he provided his mother to escape, Louis wonders whether '[il] ressentai[t] ce besoin de l'aider parce qu'[il] l'avai[t] blessée quelques années plus tôt et qu'[il] tentai[t] maintenant de réparer cette blessure'.<sup>27</sup> Yet, he shows that violence was reciprocal, and, adds: 'c'est parce que j'avais souffert dans mon enfance que j'avais écrit des livres qui avaient engendré des conflits avec ma famille mais qui paradoxalement me permettaient d'aider ma mère dans sa fuite et sa réinvention'.<sup>28</sup> The novel ends on a photograph of his mother looking out of an airplane window on

24. Louis, *Changer*, p. 39. See other photographs on pp. 31, 89, 93, 94, 147, 275, 289, 292, 294.

25. <<https://edouardlouis.wordpress.com/2015/08/07/la-verite-en-litterature/>> [accessed 12 May 2024].

26. <<https://www.leparisien.fr/culture-loisirs/le-village-d-eddy-bellegueule-a-la-gueule-de-bois-13-04-2014-3763971.php>> [accessed 12 May 2024].

27. Louis, *Monique*, p. 107–8.

28. Louis, *Monique*, p. 80–1.



her way to Germany, the visual proof of her successful escape and new beginning. The relationship between text and image thus offers a reflection on literature itself. In his 2015 blog post, Louis remarks: ‘j’avais donc pensé à inclure plusieurs photos dans le livre, qui, je crois, auraient pu avoir dans le texte une valeur littéraire, modifier le texte lui même [sic] parce qu’elles auraient pu projeter sur lui’. The use of photos – and Louis’s overall transmedial approach to his work – serves, on one hand, to ‘pousser encore plus loin cette démarche [de vérité], la radicaliser’ and, on the other, to give new meaning to his words.<sup>29</sup>

Thomas Corbani explains that ‘Louis’s claims to truth and failure to write autofiction opens him up to personal attack’.<sup>30</sup> With each publication comes its flow of criticisms and doubts. After the publication of his second novel, *Histoire de la violence* (2016), new media wars emerged. The autobiographical narrative describes the encounter between Réda and Louis on Christmas Eve 2012. After inviting him into his apartment and spending the night together, Réda pulls a gun, rapes and robs Louis.<sup>31</sup> The next day, Louis files a police report and begins the healing of the traumatic experience which later materializes through writing. Five years later, the police arrest the assaulter for drug dealing. Based on DNA evidence, he is put on trial after the accusations of Louis. The tension between ‘vérité littéraire’ and ‘vérité judiciaire’ arises at court where the publication of the book takes a central role. Indeed, Louis refuses to confront his assaulter, who continues to deny the allegations. His version of events had already been published. Louis denies the fictional trait of his narrative, explaining that ‘mon obsession, c’était d’écrire la vérité. Dans ce livre, comme dans le suivant, il n’y a pas une ligne de fiction’.<sup>32</sup> On the opposite end, the defence lawyer argued that ‘aucune agression sexuelle n’avait eu lieu mais, Louis, ayant exposé le contenu d’*Histoire de la violence* comme étant réel [...] ne pouvait plus faire marche arrière et se trouvait

29. <<https://edouardlouis.wordpress.com/2015/08/07/la-verite-en-litterature/>>.

30. Thomas Corbani, ‘D’un roman plus que le nom: Édouard Louis’s *Histoire de la violence*, a reflexive, gay novel’, *Modern & Contemporary France*, 30:1 (2021), 49–68 (p. 53).

31. See Étienne Achille and Oana Panaïté, *Fictions of Race in Contemporary French Literature: French Writers, White Writing* (Oxford: OUP, 2024). In their chapter on Louis and *Histoire de la violence*, ‘Postcolonial Otobiography: *Histoire de la violence* by Édouard Louis’, the two authors expose a paradox in Louis’s novel insofar as it acts as a political critique and, yet reinforces dominant narratives of whiteness. Achille and Panaïté explain that if the book challenges ‘the universalist expectations of a predominantly White French readership’, the text fails to deconstruct whiteness and ‘thus becomes symptomatic of White-authored autobiographical or autofictional explorations which are ultimately reluctant to delve into their intimate experience and genuinely engage with the unacknowledged ethno-racial hierarchy at the core of French society’ (23).

32. <[https://www.liberation.fr/france/2019/01/29/edouard-louis-du-recit-litteraire-au-feuilleton-judiciaire\\_1706238/](https://www.liberation.fr/france/2019/01/29/edouard-louis-du-recit-litteraire-au-feuilleton-judiciaire_1706238/)> [accessed 30 April 2024].



pris à son propre piège'.<sup>33</sup> The abuser was eventually released from custody after a judge ruled that Louis's statements were inconsistent, reviving once again the debate on the authenticity of Louis's words. Here, as Edy notes about the whole affair, we witnessed:

un brouillage des genres par la critique entre le terrain artistique, le terrain médiatique et le terrain judiciaire, comme si l'auteur, l'œuvre et sa représentation théâtrale étaient sur le même plan, comme si on gommait d'un seul geste toute la recherche scientifique entreprise depuis Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida et Michel Foucault pour ne citer qu'eux.<sup>34</sup>

As he often does, Louis turned to social media (Facebook, Twitter) to address the outcome of the trial. In 2022, his appeal was rejected. In particular, the justice system, and later the press, have pointed Louis's absence, a constant during the trial. The author thus felt compelled to offer some explanation. This was taken from Facebook, but is no longer available: 'La justice me reproche notamment [...] d'avoir refusé la confrontation avec l'accusé. Mais comment imaginer se confronter avec une personne qui a tenté de vous détruire à ce point?' Louis's statement indicates that the trauma has not completely healed. In an interview with *LivreHebdo*, Louis notes: 'Je suis sonné, abattu même, qu'une ou un juge ait pu remettre en question mon récit';<sup>35</sup> for his lawyer 'cet arrêt souligne la difficulté pour les victimes de violences sexuelles de faire valoir leurs droits'.<sup>36</sup> With each publication, the media storm reproduces the systemic violence Louis endured as a child, doubting his words, his narrative and his identity. The digital platforms he uses such as his personal website or social media serve as a response to these criticisms but also provide a counter-narrative to the system.

On the eve of the publication of *Changer...*, he posted on Facebook a picture of his entire œuvre with the annotation 'My own private little army' (in English in the original; the post is no longer available). The comment brings forth his understanding or conceiving of literature and social media as fighting tools. By posting on these platforms, Louis is able to control what he says, how he says it and to whom. Jill Walker Rettberg, in her study of the place of technologies in our lives, explains that selfies (as do social media more broadly) 'allow the subject full control over the photographic process'; it allows the subject to curate a specific image and

33. <<https://www.vanityfair.fr/actualites/article/l-homme-qu-edouard-louis-accusait-d-agression-sexuelle-relaxe-en-appel>> [accessed 30 April 2024].

34. Edy, 'L'Expérience du réel', p.101.

35. <<https://www.livreshebdo.fr/article/la-justice-relaxe-rihad-b-edouard-louis-reagit>> [accessed 30 April 2024].

36. <<https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/affaire-edouard-louis-rihad-b-definitivement-relaxe-du-chef-dagression-sexuelle-07-02-2022-JHYPVCGL4RBFRA44MIG6HMCC4Y.php>> [accessed 30 April 2024].

to engage with who they appreciate.<sup>37</sup> Louis's close friendship with Didier Éribon and philosopher Geoffroy de Lagasnerie – widely and frequently displayed on social media and even explored by Lagasnerie in his essay 3. *Une aspiration au dehors* – likewise points to the importance and power of communities and kinship. Online, Louis works to establish a digital form of 'amitié comme mode de vie,' develops alliances and 'des lignes de forces', with his readers, social media followers or talk attendees.<sup>38</sup> Louis's transmedial approach thus allows him to curtail the limiting effects of traditional media outlets. More importantly, this approach seems to be one of the necessary tools to get as close to truth and reality as possible: 'Est-ce que la littérature peut tout dire? Si oui, alors j'ai échoué. Si non, alors la littérature ne suffit pas.'<sup>39</sup>

### The socio-political novel

In a 2019 interview for *The Guardian*, Louis was asked about his reading practice as a child. In response, he explains: 'Like my father and those around him, I believed reading was boring and useless and there was even a mistrust for literature. It wasn't that we'd rejected literature, but that it had rejected us'.<sup>40</sup> When he finally had access to books, he felt distant from the writers he was reading: 'Je me sens tellement éloigné des écrivains qui racontent leur découverte de la littérature à travers l'amour des mots et de la fascination pour la vision poétique du monde. Je ne leur ressemble pas. J'écrivais pour exister.'<sup>41</sup> Louis makes a contrast between writing as passion and writing out of necessity, arguing that he writes from necessity. Writing was both a way to assert an identity that was denied to him and a form of counter attack against the social oppression he experienced. 'J'écrivais pour exister' can also refer to the lack of diversity in literature – and more broadly in the media – where his life and the lives of people like him remained absent. Ken Loach tells Louis: 'je crois que c'est dans les livres et dans les récits, comme dans tes livres, qu'on peut retrouver sa voix. Cette voix devrait être dans nos médias de masse, elle devrait être audible à la télévision'.<sup>42</sup> In *Combats...*, Louis reflects on the political act of inclusion literature carries (as he writes primarily about his mother): 'Parce que je sais désormais qu'écrire sur elle, et écrire sur sa vie, c'est

37. Jill Walker Rettberg, *Seeing Ourselves Through Technology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 80.

38. Michel Foucault, 'De l'amitié comme mode de vie', *Le Gai Pied* 25 (1981), pp. 38–9.

39. Louis, *Monique*, p. 112.

40. <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jun/08/edouard-louis-who-killed-my-father-interview>> [accessed 15 May 2024].

41. Louis, *Changer*, p. 317.

42. Louis and Loach, *Dialogue*, p. 15.

écrire contre la littérature'.<sup>43</sup> Louis criticizes the literary world arrayed against individuals from working-class groups whose narratives tend to be marginalized. He constantly seeks to subvert the space of literature by giving space to and making audible different voices. In *En finir...*, he uses italics to integrate words other than his (family, friends, professors) without any breaks in the text; he not only incorporates the familiar and orality of the working-class language into a poetic prose, but he also champions of form of horizontality (against the verticality of governmental power and cultural circles). In *Histoire de la violence*, the story of his rape is told through different viewpoints, including his own and that of his sister, Clara. Decentering the gaze and writing polyphonic stories is yet another attempt at getting as close to the truth as possible. However, his commitment to telling those stories goes beyond the pages of his books. Louis's socio-political novel is a novel that bleeds into daily life and works to change the world as much as daily life and political issues bleed into his novels.

As noted previously, Louis, as a millennial writer, is well aware of the power of social media. Not only does it allow him to promote upcoming publications, talks, or visits throughout the world, it also provides space to shed light on specific causes. Louis demonstrates a clear understanding of cultural capital and social power dynamics. Social media, he notes, act as 'des contre-pouvoirs par rapport à l'espace médiatique'.<sup>44</sup> He also understands that his novels will probably not be read by those he describes; but, he might reach them through other media. Far from generalization or stigmatization, the *Observatoire des Inégalités*, an independent organization which assesses and analyzes all forms of inequality and discrimination in France, confirmed that '47% des ouvriers et employés ne lisent jamais de livre, contre 15% des cadres supérieurs'.<sup>45</sup> Louis's social media interventions serve as a way to democratize access to literature, attempting to reach out to individuals for whom reading is not a common practice or not something they believe is for them, as much as it is about making visible 'des images [et des réalités qui] n'auraient peut-être pas été prises en compte sinon'.<sup>46</sup>

Louis thus carries with him and tries to make up for the symbolic violence that also hinders his working-class milieu, or what Éribon calls 'la voix absente'. In *Pierre Bourdieu: L'insoumission en héritage*, a collection of essays directed by Louis in 2013, Éribon contributes a piece on education and explains: 'il n'est pas certain que les absents auraient l'idée, ou l'envie, de contester leur absence [...] L'exclusion du système [...] peut-être vécue et perçue [...] comme un inéluctable

43. Édouard Louis, *Combats et métamorphoses d'une femme* (Paris: Seuil, 2021), p. 8.

44. Louis and Loach, *Dialogue*, p. 36.

45. <<https://inegalites.fr/Un-acces-au-livre-profondement-inegal-selon-les-milieus-sociaux#:~:text=47%20%25%20des%20ouvriers%20et%20employés,entre%20catégories%20sociales%20demeurent%20importants>> [accessed 15 May 2024].

46. Louis and Loach, *Dialogue*, p. 36.

destin sur lequel il n'y a pas à s'interroger'.<sup>47</sup> Louis often uses the example of his mother to illustrate this violence:

Pourquoi est-ce que tu dis dans ton livre qu'on était pauvre? Elle ne voulait pas que je le dise parce qu'elle avait honte de la pauvreté. Parce que les gouvernements, les dominants font sans cesse croire aux pauvres qu'ils sont responsables de leur pauvreté [...] Ce qui fait que des gens qui ont souffert ne veulent plus dire: 'J'ai souffert'.<sup>48</sup>

The mother feels a sense of shame after her son reveals publicly their living conditions. For fear of being considered a failure socially, she prefers to deny her own experience of hardship. Louis, by contrast, does not blame his mother for her difficulties but rather calls on the responsibility of the dominant class in wealth distribution. In his third novel *Qui a tué mon père* (2018), Louis shifts the blame in a very explicit manner onto the ruling class, on each and every political figure that has contributed to his father's ill health. In this short ninety-page text, the author details his father's work accident and the subsequent health and social issues. After years apart, they finally see each other. Louis discovers a fifty-year-old man, poor and disabled, barely able to walk and breathe. The author recounts how his father broke his back at a factory, was put on disability benefits, and later, due to a change in the law, had to either find a job or lose his benefits: 'soit vous mourrez de faim, soit vous mourrez au travail [...]: mourir ou mourir'.<sup>49</sup> The story, whose title includes no punctuation and which is written like a letter to his father with the use of 'tu', functions like a contemporary 'J'accuse', Émile Zola's famous letter during the Dreyfus Affair. Here, Louis casts the blame and responsibility on those who have governed France. He overtly names them: Sarkozy, Macron, Hollande, Chirac, Valls, El Khomri, and so on. Each one played a key part in the degradation of people's health due to the economic, social, and political impact of laws implemented during their terms.<sup>50</sup> His father's broken body becomes a metonymic vessel for France's poor and sick constituents, for those who experience in their daily lives and in their flesh the concrete effects of these decisions. In his 2013 political essay, he asked: 'Comment la politique – et en l'occurrence une politique de gauche – peut-elle produire la vie bonne si ceux qui font la politique sont si peu concernés par les effets de la politique? Si elle ne les frappe pas comme elle frappait les personnes de mon enfance?'.<sup>51</sup>

47. Didier Eribon, 'La voix absente. Philosophie des états généraux', in *Pierre Bourdieu. L'insoumission en héritage*, ed. by Édouard Louis (Paris: PUF, 2013), p. 119.

48. Louis and Loach, *Dialogue*, p. 31.

49. Édouard Louis, *Qui a tué mon père* (Paris: Seuil, 2018), p. 10.

50. Loïc Bourdeau, 'Forgotten Class: French Literature, Medicine and Poverty', in *Literature and Medicine*, ed. by Anna M. Elsner and Monika Pietrzak-Franger (Cambridge: CUP, 2024), pp. 281–96.

51. Édouard Louis, *Pierre Bourdieu. L'insoumission en héritage* (ed.) (Paris: PUF, 2013), p. 12.

When *Qui a tué mon père* was published in 2018, newspapers reported that Macron and his advisers read Louis's novel. Adviser Bruno Roger-Petit declared that Macron shared Louis's perspective on the lack of social emancipation for working-class people in France.<sup>52</sup> Yet, Macron's office focused on the father's failure to improve his social status rather than on his poverty, working conditions and related disability. On social media, Louis quickly reacted and called out the President:

Emmanuel Macron, mon livre s'insurge contre ce que vous êtes et ce que vous faites. Abstenez-vous d'essayer de m'utiliser pour masquer la violence que vous incarnez et exercez. J'écris pour vous faire honte. J'écris pour donner des armes à celles et à ceux qui vous combattent.<sup>53</sup>

Louis stands against the political instrumentalization of his narrative by the French president and his advisers. He openly accuses Macron and his policies of working against people like his father, who suffer from social oppression and domination. The debate on the value of literature is also quite telling through Louis's response. More than informing on the tragic state of French working-class citizens, it also advocates for the role of literature in denouncing and confronting the responsibility of the government. More broadly, Louis posits literature as inextricably political and radical, which Lagasnerie argues in *Penser dans un monde mauvais*: 'sitôt que l'on écrit, sitôt que l'on prend la décision de publier [...] [n]ous sommes engagés dans quelque chose. Et là, nous ne pouvons plus reculer et nier la dimension politique de notre action'.<sup>54</sup> Bourdeau remarks that 'le travail de Louis est imprégné d'un tel impératif, posant la littérature comme un des lieux de productions qui façonnent le monde et doit le rendre meilleur'.<sup>55</sup> Louis, through literature and his transmedial work, thus transforms the abstraction of politics into the concreteness of how it impacts the lives of vulnerable individuals.

It is perhaps important to keep in mind the political context in which Louis has been evolving. When he emerged, Socialist François Hollande had been elected two years prior with the promise of change and a social programme that was quickly abandoned. The appointment of Manuel Valls as Prime Minister further divided the left. Debate about 'la déchéance de nationalité', the targeting of so-called 'Islamogauchistes', and the liberal economic agenda fashioned and implemented by then Minister of Finance Emmanuel Macron, led to the collapse of the Parti

52. <<https://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/le-scan/2018/06/06/25001-20180606ARTFIG00285-qui-a-tue-mon-pere-edouard-louis-s-agace-du-succes-de-son-livre-a-l-elysee.php>> [accessed 15 May 2024].

53. <<https://www.ouest-france.fr/culture/livres/l-ecrivain-edouard-louis-s-en-prend-emmanuel-macron-sur-twitter-5809402>> [accessed 15 May 2024].

54. Geoffroy de Lagasnerie, *Penser dans un monde mauvais* (Paris: Fayard, 2017), p. 12.

55. Bourdeau, 'De "Pas comme les autres"', p. 83.

Socialiste. On the right side of the political spectrum, far-right rhetoric of ‘déclinisme’ and ‘le grand remplacement’ gained new ground. In June 2024, Marine Le Pen’s party scored over 30% in the European elections (while Macron’s scored less than 15%) and the subsequent dissolution of Parliament led to the election of over 150 far-right MPs. Louis uses his artistic practice both to counter far-right ideas and to show the processes that lead working-class individuals to support such candidates. While much criticism targeted Louis and his alleged betrayal of his class, it all seems rather ill-founded considering his constant support of vulnerable individuals. Politically, he has endorsed Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the radical-left party, La France Insoumise; he often reiterates his support to Adama Traoré’s family; and he was a strong supporter of the Gilets Jaunes movement. In all of his novels, Louis asserts a form of political protest: ‘On m’a dit que la littérature ne devait jamais ressembler à un manifeste politique et déjà j’aiguise chacune de mes phrases comme on aiguiserait la lame d’un couteau’.<sup>56</sup> *Qui a tué mon père* is perhaps the most explicit example of this engagement. When it was adapted for the stage, Louis called out the names of all the aforementioned politicians, which gave another dimension to his work. The staging also included portraits of these political figures hanging on a string. If Louis began his literary career as a branded marginalized individual, he has refashioned himself as a writer and citizen *engagé* working to avenge his class. The metaphorical hanging on stage marks ‘une revanche de plus’.<sup>57</sup>

## Conclusion

In 2017, Vincent Kaufmann published *Dernières nouvelles du spectacle*, a study of contemporary literature, the author’s place in the media and its failing authority due to social media. He argues that “le monde tel qu’il est et tel qu’il change exige de l’auteur qu’il devienne un spécialiste de la mise en scène de soi [...] La spectacularisation de l’auteur commence lorsque celui-ci doit abandonner, peu à peu, son autorité “professionnelle””.<sup>58</sup> For him, the increased visibility of authors both on regular television programmes and on social media platforms leads to the loss of authority; he thus wonders whether we will remember today’s authors like we remember Sartre or Kerouac.<sup>59</sup> While his analysis is a reminder that we, literary scholars should be careful not to be influenced by what the living author has to say about their work, we cannot help but think that Kaufmann simply reproduces conservative power dynamics and proposes a narrow understanding of literature. For many queer writers, from Édouard Louis to Kevin Lambert in Québec, making an intervention in the present matters more than leaving a mark for centuries. For

56. Louis, *Combats*, p. 7.

57. Louis, *Monique*, p. 153.

58. Vincent Kaufmann, *Dernières nouvelles du spectacle* (Paris: Seuil 2017), p. 69.

59. Kaufmann, *Dernières nouvelles*, p. 9.

Louis, his spectacularization is also part of a project to share his message across different platforms, to different people. If Kaufmann writes that 'il n'est donc plus certain qu'on puisse être auteur comme on l'était autrefois', Louis would argue that it is probably for the best.<sup>60</sup> As he tells Ken Loach: 'il est important que les artistes aillent dans la rue, manifestent, prennent position politiquement, s'engagent'.<sup>61</sup> Louis's transmedial social novel has not only allowed him to exist and become who he wanted to be, but it has become a tool to deploy his 'éthique de l'art', that is to raise awareness about vulnerable lives and to make art exist where it is usually absent.<sup>62</sup>

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60. Kaufmann, *Dernières nouvelles*, p. 10.

61. Louis and Loach, *Dialogue*, p. 58.

62. Louis and Loach, *Dialogue*, p. 58.