Reading Houellebecq And His Fictions

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Reading Houellebecq And His Fictions

Abstract
This dissertation explores the role of the author in literary criticism through the polarizing protagonist of contemporary French literature, Michel Houellebecq, whose novels have been both consecrated by France's most prestigious literary prizes and mired in controversies.

The polemics defining Houellebecq's literary career fundamentally concern the blurring of lines between the author's provocative public persona and his work. Amateur and professional readers alike often assimilate the public author, the implied author and his characters, disregarding the inherent heteroglossia of the novel and reducing Houellebecq's works to thesis novels necessarily expressing the private opinions and prejudices of the author.

This thesis explores an alternative approach to Houellebecq and his novels. Rather than employing the author's public figure to read his novels, I proceed in precisely the opposite direction, employing the implied author derived from his novels to read his public author figure.

My first chapter, Reading Houellebecq and his fictions, explores the evolutions in the author's public presentation that render personalist readings of his work particularly problematic. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 Houellebecq's Islamophobic, Misogynistic and Racist Character(s) reveal attenuating factors in the scenes of enunciation and the characterization of the speakers that systematically undermine the Islamophobic, misogynistic and racist discourse in these novels, preserving the author's possible difference of opinion. Despite myriad doubts sewn throughout these narratives, however, the portrayal of minority characters in Michel Houellebecq's novels not only fails to provide a compelling counterargument, it overwhelmingly coincides with the ideas of his Islamophobic, misogynistic and racist speakers.

Our narratological analysis of Michel Houellebecq's novels, therefore, shows that the implied author broadly corresponds to the public author's unsavory reputation as an Islamophobe, "réactionnaire, cynique, raciste et misogyne honteux" (Houellebecq Ennemis 7). From this perspective, the author may strategically package himself as a provocateur and satirist as a means of expressing his Islamophobia, misogyny and racism with impunity.

The results of this dissertation, however, by no means justify a personalist approach to literary criticism. Houellebecq's case suggests that the presence of a provocative public author merits an even more intense focus on his writing.

Degree Type
Dissertation

Degree Name
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

Graduate Group
Romance Languages

First Advisor
Gerald J. Prince
Keywords
Authorship, Islamophobia, Media persona, Misogyny, Narratology, Racism
READING HOUELLEBECQ AND HIS FICTIONS
Sterling Kouri
A DISSERTATION
in
French
For the Graduate Group in Romance Languages
Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania
in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
2018

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ABSTRACT

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Gerald Prince

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CHAPTER 1: READING HOUELLEBECQ AND HIS FICTIONS

“‘Elle a pas mal changé’ dit Jed. ‘Enfin, sur le plan personnel. Professionnellement, par contre, pas du tout. C’est impressionnant quand même à quel point les gens coupent leur vie en deux parties qui n’ont aucune communication, qui n’interagissent absolument pas l’une sur l’autre. Je trouve stupéfiant qu’ils y réussissent aussi bien.’”

(Houellebecq La Carte et le territoire 157-158)

Provocation and Response, Houellebecq’s public figure and his reception:

Over the last three decades, Michel Houellebecq and his novels have garnered considerable attention in the mainstream media—more so, perhaps, than any of his contemporaries in French literature. Yet despite receiving some of the most prestigious literary prizes, Houellebecq has polarized the reading public. In 1998, he was conferred the last Prix Novembre (since re-baptized the Prix Décembre) because the founder promptly withdrew his financial support to protest the selection of Les Particules élementaires. In 2005, despite being the odds-on favorite for the Prix Goncourt, La Possibilité d’une île was snubbed by a jury who reportedly did not so much choose “Weyergans's novel, but simply, [...voted] against Houellebecq” (Cloonan 45-46). When Houellebecq finally brought home the Prix Goncourt in 2010 with his artist’s novel, La Carte et le territoire, his success was tainted by accusations of plagiarizing Wikipedia (Aissaiou).

A quick survey of the subjects broached in Michel Houellebecq’s novels helps to explain the controversy of his critical and commercial success. The depressed and dejected hero of Extension du domaine de la lutte [1994] contemplates committing a
double homicide out of sexual jealousy. The middle-aged and sex obsessed Bruno—half of the fraternal duo featured in *Les Particules élémentaires* [1998]—fails to seduce one of his teenage students before penning a racist tract targeting her boyfriend’s ethnicity. Bruno later encounters the love of his life, Christiane, a sexually liberated swinger who offers an unexpectedly scathing criticism of the feminist movement. *Plateforme* [2001] not only explores the sexual tourism industry in Thailand, but also presents several islamophobic characters whose critiques are punctuated by a brutal scene of Islamist terrorism. *La Possibilité d’une île* [2005] details the dubious development and legacy of a religious cult through the life and reincarnations of Daniel1—a comedian who gains notoriety from a scandalous sketch on Palestinian gang-bangs. Houellebecq’s least controversial novel to date, *La Carte et le territoire* [2010], nevertheless considers the commercialization of euthanasia in Switzerland and contains scenes of brutal violence. Finally, his latest novel *Soumission* [2015] imagines the victory of Mohammed Ben Abbes (la Fraternité musulmane) over Marine Le Pen (le Front national) in the 2022 presidential election and the ensuing establishment of a non-secular, patriarchal regime in France. The coincidental publication of this last work on January 7th, 2015—the day of the Charlie Hebdo massacre—only amplified the controversy surrounding the novel’s already polemical premise, prompting the Prime Minister’s declaration that “La France, ça n’est pas Michel Houellebecq, ça n’est pas l’intolérance, la haine et la peur” (Leyris).  

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1 It must be noted that despite his position as Prime Minister, Manuel Valls is a dubious cultural authority. During the 2016 burkini controversy, Valls conflated France’s Marianne with the personification of liberty in Delacroix’s *La Liberté guidant le peuple* [1830], reasoning “Elle a le sein nu parce qu’elle nourrit le peuple, elle n’est pas voilée parce qu’elle est libre” (Albertini).
Although we can certainly imagine an author capable of navigating these dangerous waters without stirring controversy, Michel Houellebecq is not such an author. Rather than distancing himself from the controversial content of his works, he purposely and problematically espouses the controversial ideas of his protagonists in public. As Jérôme Meizoz observes, “la posture ‘Houellebecq’ consiste à rejouer machinalement dans l’espace public, le personnage d’antihéros aux propos ‘socialement [in]acceptables’ auquel il a délégué la narration” (Meizoz “Le roman” 15). This posture—be it a genuine reflection of the author’s personal sentiments or a hollow publicity strategy—brought him a highly publicized court case. His public persona also knotted ties with extreme political associations—France’s “nouveaux réactionnaires” and the so-called politically engaged intellectual “dissidents de l'islam politique” (Devecchio).

Michel Houellebecq’s polemical authorial figure has deservedly drawn scholarly attention. Jérôme Meizoz places Houellebecq in a class of contemporary authors who “incluent désormais à l’espace de l’oeuvre, conformément aux propositions de l’art contemporain, la performance publique d’écrivain,” claiming that “le geste de Houellebecq, qui reprend à son compte (d’écrivain) sur un plateau de télévision les propos islamophobes de son narrateur, constitue un choc dont il faut pourtant rendre compte” (Meizoz Postures littéraires II 91). Meizoz’ notion of a posture littéraire forges potentially problematic links between the author’s public figure and his texts:

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2 France’s Human Rights league, the World Islamic League, the Lyon and Paris Mosques and the National Federation of Muslims jointly filed formal charges of inciting racial hatred against the author, who was later acquitted by the tribunal correctionnel de Paris (Hendon 198; “Poursuivi pour injure” ¶ 2).

3 In Ennemis publics, Houellebecq suggests that the author of “Le Rappel à l'ordre : Enquête sur les nouveaux réactionnaires,” Daniel Lindenberg, “témoignait d’une telle incompréhension de mes livres que l’idée m’est venue que j’étais peut-être un mauvais auteur” (119).
la notion de ‘posture’ m’a semblé précieuse pour dépasser la vieille division des tâches entre spécialistes de l’interne et de l’externe textuel : ainsi une posture d’auteur implique relationnellement des faits discursifs et des conduites de vie dans le champ littéraire […] Ainsi, une posture n’est pas seulement une construction auctoriale, ni une pure émanation du texte, ni une simple inférence d’un lecteur. Elle relève d’un processus interactif : elle est co-construite, à la fois dans le texte et hors de lui, par l’écrivain, les divers médiateurs qui la donnent à lire (journalistes, critiques, biographes, etc.) et les publics. (Postures littéraires II 82-83)

Although Meizoz rightly suggests that Houellebecq’s polemical persona proves difficult to simply sweep under the carpet, how should literary critics account for the public author in their readings? 4

So far, critics who have done away with “le dogme heuristique de distinguer l’auteur et le narrateur” have yielded dubious results (Meizoz Postures littéraires II 91). Criticism of Michel Houellebecq’s novels appears exceptionally preoccupied with his public persona. His polemical posture in the media earned him a reputation as a misogynist, racist and Islamophobe that has visibly influenced readings of his work. Even after his acquittal from charges of inciting racial hatred, Houellebecq’s infamous description of Islam as “la religion la plus con” continues to be cited as an encapsulation of his “thoughts on Islam,” not only an expression of his “personal distaste for” this faith, but a manifestation of his demonstrable Islamophobia (Hendon, 198; Cloonan, 44; 4)

Henceforth, I will employ Meizoz’ posture and performance as synonyms for the public author, to be rigorously distinguished from both the private author (the biographical author or flesh-and-blood author) and the implied author (the image of the author inferred from the novel).
After evoking this interview-heard-round-the-world with Didier Sénécal, Richard Golsan asserts that *Plateforme* is “anti-immigrant, anti-Arab, and anti-Islamist in tone and action” (131). Golsan’s conclusion refuses to acknowledge the possibility that Islamophobic discourse in this novel could contribute to a larger criticism of the philistine protagonist (an employee of the French Ministry of Culture whose interest in other countries is ironically circumscribed to sexual tourism) or reflect the global resurgence of Islamophobia that we plainly observe today. Nancy Huston relates the alleged misogyny of Houellebecq’s novels to “the disaster of his childhood” (31). Other critics readily amalgamate the author and his controversial characters. Refusing “ce petit jeu de cache-cache consistant à dire qu’un auteur n’assume pas tout ce que disent ses personnages,” Bruno Viard envisions the composite “personnage/ auteur houellebecquien” (Viard, 76). Pierre Jourde, in his slightly more nuanced analysis, still views Houellebecq’s characters as a manifestation of the author’s personal character: “En faisant le portrait de Bruno [dans *Les Particules élémentaires*], ou de Michel dans *Plateforme* [...] Houellebecq met en jeu le raciste en lui [...] il laisse s’exprimer, prendre un corps une part malsaine de lui-même” (Jourde, 274). Even Emmanuel Dion, after actively defending Houellebecq against literal and biographical readings in his preface, erroneously identifies the unnamed hero of Houellebecq’s first novel as the “Michel dépressif d’*Extension*” before concluding that “la position du témoin [...] celle de l’écrivain et celle du narrateur [...] se confondent de toute manière assez largement” (Dion, 77, 94). These examples suggest that Houellebecq’s continual play on the

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5 In an interview, Houellebecq’s unauthorized biographer Denis Demonpion claimed without hesitation that he could prove the author’s Islamophobia—ses déclarations l’attestent” (Houellebecq, *Ennemis*, 236).
“séparation entre domaine public et vie privée—entre l’homme et l’oeuvre” have struck a nerve in his readership—both critics and the general public visibly struggle to dissociate his provocative authorial figure from his fictional works (Houellebecq, Ennemis, 201).

Michel Houellebecq is partially responsible for this problem. The tendency to relate l’homme et l’oeuvre derives not only from what Meizoz refers to as Houellebecq’s characteristic posture—the public performance of his polemical characters—but also from his fictions themselves. Two prominent features of Houellebecq’s written and filmic oeuvre invite the assimilation of the biographical author and his art. First, the author’s conviction that theory constitutes “un matériau romanesque aussi bon qu’un autre” together with his admitted “tendance à la généralisation” have resulted in a general tendency to read his novels as “une sorte de long essai démonstratif au premier degré” and easily decodable romans à thèse that reflect “les tares personnelles de l’auteur” (Interventions, 7; Clément, Houellebecq se confie; Dion, 9). Second, the inscription of the author in the fictional space of his works renders the dissociation of the artist and his art particularly challenging. Houellebecq actively developed the ambiguous relationship between the author, narrator and characters through a series of vaguely autobiographical and outright autofictional works. He suggestively named his protagonists Michel in both Les Particules élémentaires [1998] and Plateforme [2001], assumed his notorious reputation in Ennemis publics [2008], wrote himself into La Carte et le territoire [2010]

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6 Although our languages are similar, I differ fundamentally from Meizoz. When he refers to the inscription of the author in “l’espace de l’oeuvre,” he argues for a broader space of the author’s oeuvre that transcends the limits of his published works and encompasses his public performances as well (Postures littéraires II 91). I will be advocating for precisely the opposite approach that makes a sharp distinction between an author’s public performances and published works.
and even portrayed himself in Guillaume Nicloux’s comic film *L’enlèvement de Michel Houellebecq* [2014].

The provocation, hyperbole, humor, irony, self-contradiction and equivocation characterizing these self-representations cast doubt over Michel Houellebecq’s public persona, which may not provide a faithful portrait of the biographical author or a reliable lens for evaluating his novels.  

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**Ennemis publics—Houellebecq’s confessions of provocation and publicity strategies:**

*Ennemis publics* [2008] provides a particularly compelling starting point for an inquiry into Michel Houellebecq’s public image. In this published correspondence with Bernard-Henri Lévy—his ostensible political enemy and fellow public enemy—Michel directly addresses questions surrounding his controversial public figure. Houellebecq’s letters reveal his commercial strategy, his proclivity for provocation, his refusal of biographical criticism and his rejection of the politically engaged author and public intellectual.

The palpable playfulness and humor of this correspondence creates two possible readings. On one hand, Houellebecq’s claims regarding his public figure could be sincere—the sort of confessions and truths that often form the foundation of a comedian’s humor. On the other hand, Houellebecq’s reflections of his public figure could be insincere—conceivably, he might package himself as a provocative humorist to speak

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7 My claim about the relationship between Houellebecq’s public figure and novels echoes Gérard Genette’s conclusion regarding Proust, “I do not mean to suggest that the narrative content of the *Recherche* has no connection with the life of its author, but simply that this connection is not such that the latter can be used for a rigorous analysis of the former (any more than the reverse)” (Genette 28).
with impunity. Each of these distinct readings of *Ennemis publics* gains traction as we consider the author’s media presence, self-criticism, and self-representation in his fictions. Fortunately, however, these opposing readings lead us to the very same conclusion—Michel Houellebecq’s public figure cannot be trusted.

In the opening lines of his correspondence with BHL, Michel Houellebecq demonstrates that he is fully aware of his bad reputation. After taking a few friendly jabs at his pen-pal, whom he characterizes as a “philosophe sans pensée” and the embodiment of the “gauche-caviar,” Houellebecq paints an equally unflattering portrait of himself with generous swathes of hyperbole and self-deprecating humor:

> Nihiliste, réactionnaire, cynique, raciste et misogyne honteux: ce serait encore me faire trop d’honneur que de me ranger dans la peu ragoûtante famille des anarchistes de droite; fondamentalement, je ne suis qu’un beauf. Auteur plat, sans style, je n’ai accédé à la notoriété littéraire que par suite d’une invraisemblable faute de goût commise, il y a quelques années, par des critiques déboussolés. Mes provocations poussives ont depuis, heureusement, fini par lasser. À nous deux, nous symbolisons parfaitement l’effroyable avachissement de la culture et de l’intelligence françaises, récemment pointé, avec sévérité mais justesse, par le magazine *Time* (*Ennemis* 7-8).

The opening lines of the correspondence are written with levity. In an ironic concession to *Time’s harsh, but fair* criticism of the duo’s place in the cultural and intellectual sphere in France, Houellebecq observes that “nous n’avons en rien contribué au renouveau de la scène électronique française. Nous ne sommes même pas crédités au générique de *Ratatouille*” (*Ennemis* 8). This comic self-portrait nevertheless offers an accurate roundup of the
criticism lobbed at the author and his literary productions since the cult success of his debut novel, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*. For example, critics have remarkably postulated at least eight distinct theoretical models to explain his alleged “absence du style” (Estiers 103).

In subsequent letters, Houellebecq contests certain elements of this reputation. He distances himself from right-wing anarchists by comparing them to terrorist organizations (Houellebecq *Ennemis* 113). He also rejects the label of reactionary on a semantic basis; Houellebecq argues that a reactionary actively fights to reestablish a former, superior social order: “Or s’il y a une idée, une seule, qui traverse tous mes romans [...] c’est bien celle de l’irréversibilité absolue de tout processus de dégradation, une fois entamé” (*Ennemis* 118-119). While the author rejects some of the charges brought against him, he noticeably does not contest his reputation for provocation.

The author’s admitted provocation could contribute to an explanation of his polemical public figure. In his second letter to BHL, Houellebecq defines his vision of provocation as it is practiced by many contemporary humorists: “J’appelle provocateur celui qui, indépendamment de ce qu’il peut penser ou être [...] calcule la phrase ou l’attitude qui provoquera chez son interlocuteur le maximum de déplaisir ou de gêne” (*Ennemis* 14). He also elaborates the psychological and pragmatic motives for his provocations. Exhibiting a sort of “sincérité perverse,” Houellebecq aspires to be loved “en raison de ce que j’ai de pire” (Houellebecq *Ennemis* 14). While it may seem like self-

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8 Eric Naulleau’s has long insisted that Houellebecq is simply a bad writer “au sens littéraire du terme.” His unauthorized biographer Denis Demonpion claimed that Houellebecq “ne serait pas un écrivain au sens habituel du terme” because his authorial persona was exclusively contrived for commercial success. Jean-François Patricola likewise dismisses Houellebecq’s style and content as a “bric-à-brac de clichés et de pensées rétrogrades ou à la mode” engineered to create buzz and bolster sales (Estier, 6, 17, 19).
sabotage, the author’s perverse self-presentation could reflect a well-known commercial strategy—the idea that there is no such thing as bad publicity (toute publicité est bonne à prendre). Houellebecq is not indifferent to his publicity. When promoting his second novel, the author participated in “tous les médias, absolument tous” in a bid to escape the traditional workplace, believing that “la vente des livres avait un rapport avec leur médiatisation” (Houellebecq Ennemis 243). His provocative public figure could certainly have played into this commercial strategy.

A possible explanation for the public author’s polemics emerges from Houellebecq’s confessions in Ennemis publics. Perhaps his provocations stem from his psychology (a perverse desire for infamy) and his pragmatism (a desire for commercial success at all costs). His resulting reputation for prejudice may therefore not be founded in deep-rooted, personal convictions, but rather in provocations made “indépendamment de ce qu’il peut penser ou être” (Houellebecq Ennemis 14).

While this explanation seems reasonable, the reader should nonetheless approach Houellebecq’s candor with caution. The overall sincerity of the work remains questionable. Houellebecq feels compelled to ask, “on en est à dire plus ou moins la vérité, n’est-ce pas?” (Houellebecq, Ennemis, 91: emphasis added). Moreover, Michel confesses to the calculated fashioning of his public image. For example, he hesitates to admit his affection for the French language—“je trouve que ça fait posture d’écrivain”—and describes situations that compelled him to “surjouer mon rôle de Français [...et] surjouer mon rôle de mâle” (Houellebecq Ennemis 123, 182). The author’s ambiguous

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9 Even if the author does not necessarily believe in the fundamental inferiority of a given minority group, his willingness to risk reinforcing negative stereotypes can, of course, be considered a form of racism.
self-presentation in *Ennemis publics* rivals Rousseau’s *Confessions* and *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*—references that are explicitly evoked in the correspondence (Houellebecq *Ennemis* 47, 260). Does Houellebecq honorably and sincerely confess his misdeeds to counter the proliferation “d’injures et de crachats […]par ses] ennemis traditionnels” (Houellebecq *Ennemis* 29)? Or alternatively, does his alleged sincerity constitute a further manipulation of his public image?

When scrutinized, Houellebecq’s confessions about his past provocations prove problematic. His admission itself is vague and non-committal: “*Il a pu m’arriver de me livrer à la provocation […]mais] telle n’est pas ma nature profonde*” (Houellebecq *Ennemis* 14: emphasis added). His psychological and commercial motives are also compromised by self-contradictions. His pursuit of “les jouissances de l’abjection, de l’humiliation, du ridicule” is incompatible with his dream “d’être aimé […] simplement, de tous, comme peuvent l’être un sportif ou un chanteur […] sans accusations, ni coups tordus, ni polémiques” (Houellebecq *Ennemis* 12-13). Furthermore, if his “talon d’Achille […] a été l’argent,” he could not be satisfied with “une petite rente” (Houellebecq *Ennemis* 235).

Given these ambiguities and contradictions, it will be necessary to measure the author’s claims about his public image in *Ennemis publics* against his public interventions as an author and critic in *H.P. Lovecraft. Contre le monde, contre la vie* [1991], *Interventions* [1998] and *Interventions 2 : traces* [2009].

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10 The author’s poetry is admittedly absent from my analysis. Although Michel Houellebecq has published several collections of poetry (*La Poursuite du bonheur* [1992], *Le Sens du combat* [1996], *Renaissance* [1999] *Configuration du dernier rivage* [2013]), their reception proved far more modest than his prose fiction. Save for the *Prix de Flore* he received in 1996 for *Le Sens du combat*, Houellebecq’s poetry has
The Two Houellebecqs--Michel's revisions to *Interventions* and his public image:

In *Ennemis publics*, Michel Houellebecq suggests that 1998 was a pivotal year in his career:

mon talon d’Achille, ça a été l’argent. Pour moi tout s’est joué en l’espace de quelques jours, au moment de la sortie des *Particules élémentaires*. En quelques jours j’ai compris que j’avais une chance, une petite chance d’échapper au monde du travail. C’était merveilleux, inespéré. Alors, oui, j’ai fait des pieds et des mains pour agrandir la brèche par laquelle je venais d’apercevoir une lumière. J’ai fait tous les médias, absolument tous […] la vie de bureau était pour moi une absolue perte de temps. (234)

Initially he privileged his work above all else, believing that “tout le reste (journaux, magazines…) n’existe pas, ne peut avoir aucune espèce d’importance” (Houellebecq, *Ennemis*, 234). Over time his idealism faded. When the possibility of becoming a career author suddenly presented itself, his media relations went from a non-priority to his top priority. But did this abrupt change in Houellebecq’s publicity strategy also alter the nature of his public persona?

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The Pre-Particules élémentaires Houellebecq:

Conveniently, the first edit [1998] compiles a selection of Houellebecq’s articles published between 1992 and 1997, providing a picture of the generally failed to inspire critical acclaim or scandals commensurate with his novels. Arguably, therefore, his poetry played a relatively insignificant role in the construction of his provocative public figure and may be considered beyond the scope of my inquiry. However, I invite specialists to read Houellebecq’s poetry in light of my findings and propose a means of articulating the poetic je with the public author and the implied author of his novels outlined in this dissertation.
author’s self-presentation before his pivotal second novel. *Interventions* presents a moderate Michel Houellebecq who hardly resembles the controversial figure that would later declare Islam “the stupidest religion” and put an end to the *Prix Novembre* (Hendon, 198).

In *Interventions*, Michel Houellebecq preoccupies himself primarily with literary criticism and theory. He intervenes as a critic, declaring that “balzacien” is not pejorative, Céline is an “auteur surfait” and “Jacques Prévert est un con” (Houellebecq *Interventions* 138, 8). He reflects on generic boundaries—postulating that the novel “devrait normalement pouvoir tout [...] contenir” and that theory, history and criticism constitute “un matériau romanesque aussi bon qu’un autre, et meilleur que beaucoup d’autres” (Houellebecq *Interventions* 7, 116). The theoretical bent of *Interventions* is reinforced by scientific theory. Houellebecq places Niels Bohr’s Copenhagen interpretation and concept of complementarity in dialogue with Jean Cohen’s ideas about poetry in *Le haut langage* [1979] (Houellebecq *Interventions* 31). He invokes scientific methods in his personal conception of the novel: “la nécessité […] de la clinique. […] de la dissection, [de] l’analyse à froid” (*Interventions* 45). The author even speculates about the impact of scientific discoveries on the novel, asking if character psychology “longtemps considérée comme l’une des spécialités du romancier” has become meaningless in “l’âge du triomphe dans l’esprit du grand public d’une explication scientifique du monde […] associée à une ontologie matérialiste et au principe de déterminisme” (Houellebecq *Interventions* 52).

But Houellebecq does not limit himself to the relatively safe territory of literary criticism in *Interventions*, he also weighs in on the potentially controversial topics of sex,
feminism and politics. He suggests that the women’s liberation movement primarily benefited men “qui y voyaient l’occasion d’une multiplication des rencontres sexuelles” (Houellebecq *Interventions* 116-117). This position, however, must be contextualized in the author’s broader vision of social degradation—“une dissolution du couple et de la famille […] les dernières communautés qui séparaient l’individu du marché” (*Interventions* 117). According to Houellebecq, classically conceived feminine values “empreintes d’altruisme, d’amour, de compassion, de fidélité et de douceur” are being replaced by the values of the male sphere—“un monde plus dur, plus compétitif, plus égoïste et plus violent” (*Interventions* 117). It is therefore not women, but men who are to blame for the liberalization of the erotic economy and the redefinition of the social hierarchy based on the two “également méprisables” criteria of “l'attractivité érotique et l’argent” (Houellebecq *Interventions* 40-41). Houellebecq’s primary target, therefore, is ostensibly toxic masculinity, which he hopes will become “une parenthèse malheureuse” in human history (*Interventions* 117).

Michel Houellebecq’s rejection of the generally accepted narrative of May 1968 in *Interventions* may also strike the reader as reactionary:

*Certains témoins plus directs des ‘événements de 68’ m’ont raconté par la suite qu’il s’agissait d’une période merveilleuse, où les gens se parlaient dans la rue, où tout paraissait possible ; je veux bien le croire. D’autres font simplement observer que les trains ne roulaient plus, qu’on ne trouvait plus d’essence ; je l’admets sans difficulté. (78)*

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11 The author’s support for traditional feminine values may be construed as reactionary. While forcing women to conform to ostensibly gender-specific values would, of course, be sexist, it is important to note that the author hopes that these feminine-coded values will dominate society.
Having witnessed first hand the deserted Lycée du Raincy, Houellebecq does not dispute the fact that “magiquement, pendant quelques jours, une machine gigantesque et oppressante s’est arrêtée de tourner” (Interventions 78). The author does not question the movement’s values, but rather the long-term effects; Houellebecq observes that the socio-economic machine stuttered briefly before beginning to turn again “de manière encore plus rapide, encore plus impitoyable” (Interventions 78).

Michel Houellebecq’s contrarian political positions arguably contest the mythologization of these social revolutions, rather than their core values. The author avoids controversies by defending women, criticizing unjust hierarchies, decrying economic exploitation and affirming that “la seule supériorité que je reconnaisse, c’est la bonté” (Houellebecq Interventions 41).

Admittedly, his social commentary is not entirely devoid of provocations. Championing traditional feminine values may attest to a reactionary, anti-feminist position. Habitually placing “[les] événements de ‘68” in quotation marks effectively casts suspicion over the generally accepted historical narrative of this period (Houellebecq Interventions 78). However, the implied author of Interventions [1998] remains far from the provocative “Nihiliste, réactionnaire, cynique, raciste et misogyne honteux” depicted in Ennemis publics (Houellebecq Ennemis 7-8). Only two statements in Interventions come close to his future reputation as an extreme provocator: first, his affirmation of the “lâche hantise du ‘politically correct,’” and, second, his claim that violent pornography inspired “pour la première fois de [sa] vie, [...] une vague sympathie

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12 Although his personal version of May ‘68 may appear dismissive, it is important to note that Houellebecq was merely 10 years old at the time. Aside from “un seul souvenir” at his cousin’s high school, he had to rely on “témoins plus directs des ‘événements de 68”’ (Houellebecq Interventions 78).
pour les féministes américaines” (Houellebecq 75, 125). But both of these provocative statements were notably made in articles dating from 1997—the year before the publication of Les Particules élémentaires [1998]. The original edition of Interventions, therefore, supports the trajectory traced by the author in Ennemis publics. Before Les Particules élémentaires, Houellebecq remained predominantly preoccupied with literary questions; placing “le livre très haut, extrêmement haut,” he had yet to fully explore the commercial potential of a more provocative media presence (Houellebecq Ennemis 234).

The Provocative Post-Particules élémentaires Houellebecq:

The first edition of Interventions [1998] provides a baseline for Houellebecq’s public figure before Les Particules élémentaires that can be compared with the image of the author in the significantly revised and expanded second edition, Interventions 2: traces [2009] (See Table A).

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<th>Table A: Interventions and Interventions 2: Traces Contents</th>
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<tr>
<td>Avant-propos</td>
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<td>Lettre à Lakis Proguidis</td>
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<td>L’art comme épluchage</td>
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<td>Entretien avec Sabine Audrerie</td>
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<td>Entretien avec Valère Staraelski</td>
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16
As Table A illustrates, the interviews with Valère Staraselski [1996] and Sabine Audrerie [1997] are the only two articles not to be carried over from the first edition. In their place, we find two more recent interviews—a 2002 interview with Christian Authier and a 2006 interview with Gilles Martin-Chauffier and Jérôme Bégé. The scales are further tipped in the favor of a post-Particules élémentaires Houellebecq by the addition of numerous relatively recent articles, only two of which predate 1998. When closely examined, the changes in Interventions 2 reveal the author’s similarly revised and expanded public presence “au moment de la sortie des Particules élémentaires” that Houellebecq alludes to in Ennemis publics (234).13

The replacement of earlier interviews speaks most directly to the refashioning of Michel Houellebecq’s public presence in Interventions 2. In keeping with the first edition as a whole, the interviews in Interventions present a more moderate Houellebecq. Their elimination from the second edition, therefore, could serve to cultivate a provocative authorial figure.

13 The lead up to this publication of Les Particules élémentaires in August 1998 can reasonably include 1997, when we observe the first indications of the polemical author to come.
In his interview with Sabine Audrerie, Houellebecq focuses on his literary production, describing his “deux directions contradictoires” in poetry and prose and his singularity (“je m’intéresse moins au langage qu’au monde”) (*Interventions* 109, 110-111). At first, it is not clear why this interview with Sabine Audrerie would be excised from *Interventions*, but a number of his claims noticeably conflict with his later statements. His impression in 1997 that he was becoming “de plus en plus impitoyable et sordide en prose” conflicts with his subsequent endorsement of Schopenhauer's ethics of compassion and refusal of the “trash” aesthetics of modern art (Houellebecq, *Interventions*, 109; *Ennemis* 179; *Interventions* 2, 197). Likewise, Houellebecq’s suggestion to Sabine Audrerie that literature could “dépasser le cynisme” contradicts his more recent description of his novels as “l’expression négative pure” and a testament to “l’irréversibilité absolue de tout processus de dégradation” (*Interventions* 111; *Interventions* 2, 203; *Ennemis* 119). Finally, the idea that literature could “[modifier] l’histoire du monde” clashes with his later assertion that “la littérature ne sert à rien” ; citing the example of *The Possessed* [1872], Houellebecq asks “en quoi les intuitions de Dostoïevski ont-elles influencé le mouvement historique ? Absolument en rien” (*Interventions* 111; *Interventions* 2, 221). The 1996 Valère Staraselski interview also contains remarks that would be difficult to reconcile with Houellebecq’s later work; notably, his suggestions that traditional feminine values constitute “des valeurs de civilisation supérieures” or that civilization “[ne] puisse subsister longtemps sans religion quelconque” complicate the dystopian societies envisioned in *Les Particules élémentaires* (the fruition of a transhumanist project with the slogan “DEMAIN SERA FÉMININ”) and *La Possibilité d’une île* (a world dominated by the Elohimite Church “n’imposant
aucune contrainte morale, réduisant l'existence humaine aux catégories de l'intérêt et du plaisir”) (*Interventions* 117, 119; *Particules* 153; *Possibilité* 360).

The suppression of these interviews with Sabine Audrerie and Valère Staraselski supports the hypothesis that Houellebecq not only sought to increase his visibility, but also began to actively cultivate a new, more provocative author figure around the release of *Les Particules élémentaires*. To further investigate this possibility, it is necessary to examine the interviews that took their place. Do the new interviews with Christian Authier, Gilles Martin-Chauffier and Jérôme Bégé present another, more provocative side of Michel Houellebecq? The short answer is yes.

The new interviews in *Interventions 2* follow the author’s most scandalous public statement to date. While doing press for his third novel, *Plateforme* [2001], Houellebecq controversially described Islam as “la religion la plus con” in an interview with Didier Sénécal published in *Lire* (Sénécal). When Christian Authier questioned Houellebecq about: “ces polémiques autour de vos déclarations sur l’islam,” multiple Muslim organizations had already filed their first complaints against Houellebecq for inciting racial hatred (Licht; Houellebecq *Interventions 2*, 193). When Gilles Martin-Chauffier and Jérôme Bégé interviewed Michel in 2006, four years had passed since Houellebecq’s acquittal of these charges. Both in 2002, when a legal battle loomed, and in 2006, after the controversy had largely subsided, we would expect the accused author to diffuse the scandal, but Michel merely regrets his statement because it made him “[le] héros d’un combat qui ne m’intéresse pas” (Houellebecq *Interventions 2* 264).

Houellebecq’s problematic statements about Islam in the new *Interventions 2* interviews only stoke the *Lire* controversy, lending credence to his reputation as an
Islamophobe and provocateur. In his 2002 interview with Christian Authier, Houellebecq defiantly stands by his statement: “quand je disais : ‘l’islam, c’est quand même la religion la plus con,’ c’était sur le ton de l’évidence. Je ne pensais pas que ce serait critiqué, ni même contesté. La plupart de bons auteurs du passé, de Spinoza à Lévi-Strauss, sont parvenus à la même conclusion” (Houellebecq Interventions 2 193). 14

Adding fuel to the fire, Houellebecq associates fundamentalism and terrorism, suggesting that violence and intolerance are intrinsic to Islam:

On a commencé à dire dans certains journaux ce que je pensais depuis longtemps, c’est-à-dire que l’intégrisme islamique n’est pas spécialement une dérive par rapport à l’islam du Coran. C’est juste une interprétation du Coran, qui se tient tout à fait. Ce qui me fascine, c’est de voir qu’une grande majorité de gens dans les médias continue à répéter que le message de fond de l’islam est un message de tolérance qui interdit le meurtre, plein de respect pour les autres croyants. (Interventions 2 195-196).

His “synthèse rapide” of Islam exemplifies the problematic stereotyping of Muslims in contemporary France—“une série d’amalgames et d’ambivalences autour des catégories symboliques de l’immigré et de l’étranger du musulman et de l’islamiste du jeune de banlieue ou du terroriste [et de l’arabe]” (Houellebecq Interventions 2 193; Deltombe 191).

In his interview with Christian Authier, Michel Houellebecq further develops his provocative public figure by contesting political correctness. He claims that “on ne peut

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14This appeal to authority is not particularly persuasive given that the most recent example—the criticism of Islam in Tristes Tropiques—dates from 1955 when Morocco and Algeria remained a French protectorate and colony.
plus rien dire” and that “le politiquement correct, tel qu’il est devenu, rend inacceptable la quasi-totalité de la philosophie occidentale” (Houellebecq Interventions 2 204). Michel provocatively flaunts “l’autocensure,” affirming that Islam is “virulente” and one of “les cultures les plus immorales et les plus sottes” (Houellebecq Interventions 2 205 193). A particularly gratuitous allusion to the afterlife allegedly reserved for Muslim martyrs takes his provocative posture to new heights: “Si je suis politiquement correct, qu’est-ce que j’y gagnerai ? On ne me promet même pas soixante-douze vierges” (Houellebecq Interventions 2 205). In one fell swoop, Houellebecq manages to attack political correctness, ridicule Muslim beliefs and tie Islam to terrorism.

Michel’s ambiguous positioning in these interviews contributes to his provocative public figure. Blurring the frontier between himself and his novels, the author adopts the positions of his more controversial characters. Houellebecq concurs with the a minor character in Plateforme who predicts that “l’islam est condamné sur le long terme, qu’il va être absorbé par la mondialisation libérale […]et le modèle occidental” (Interventions 2 196). When probed about the state of sexuality in Europe, the author cites the protagonist of Plateforme: “À un moment, Michel dit que le dépérissement de la sexualité en Occident comporte peut-être des causes psychologiques, mais qu’il s’agit avant tout d’un phénomène sociologique. J’aime bien cette idée” (Houellebecq Interventions 2 197).

Houellebecq further cultivates his polemical public figure by associating himself with controversial contemporary authors. The author claims that Alain Finkielkraut was one of the few individuals who defended him “avec ardeur” in the fallout from his Lire interview when Plateforme failed to make the second round of the 2001 Goncourt selection (Houellebecq Interventions 2 204; Garcia). He also comes to the defense of
Nicolas Jones-Gorlin, Éric Bénier-Bürckel and Renaud Camus—writers who found themselves “au cœur d’un scandale, de procès […dont] aucun d’entre eux ne s’en remettra” (Houellebecq *Interventions* 264). Although it is unclear whether he is defending their ideas or simply their freedom of speech, Houellebecq’s dangerous liaisons with authors accused of right-wing extremism, pedophilia and antisemitism further reinforce his newly polemical author figure.

This ambiguous positioning is arguably the trademark of the post-*Particules élémentaires* Houellebecq. When tackling thorny subjects before *Particules élémentaires*, Michel’s careful positioning enabled him to emerge relatively unscathed.

In his first published work, *H.P. Lovecraft: Contre le monde, contre la vie* [1991], Michel Houellebecq does not come off as a racist or reactionary, because he clearly positions himself in opposition to his “raciste […et] réactionnaire” subject (*H.P.* 110).

Houellebecq explicitly subscribes to a reigning system of values that *entirely oppose* Lovecraft’s worldview:

le personnage de Lovecraft fascine en partie parce que son système de valeurs est entièrement opposé au nôtre. Foncièrement raciste, ouvertement réactionnaire, il glorifie les inhibitions puritaines et juge très évidemment repoussantes les ‘manifestations érotiques directes.’ Résolument anti-commercial, il méprise l’argent, considère la démocratie comme une sottise et le progrès comme une illusion [… ] attitude typiquement aristocratique de mépris de l’humanité en général, joint à une extrême gentillesse pour les individus en particulier. (*HP* 22-23)
This critical portrait of Lovecraft’s values may seem surprising, given Houellebecq’s present reputation as a misanthrope, “nihiliste, réactionnaire, cynique, raciste et misogyne honteux” (Ennemis 7-8). But the author explicitly distances himself from Lovecraft’s “système de valeurs [...] entièrement opposé au nôtre” (Houellebecq HP 22: emphasis added).

Michel Houellebecq further distances himself from his controversial subject through a lucid analysis of the mechanisms of racism in Lovecraft’s life and life’s work. While unhappily unemployed in New York City, “ses opinions racistes se transformeront en une authentique névrose raciale […] Il ne s’agit plus alors du racisme bien élevé des W.A.S.P.; c’est la haine brutale de l’animal pris au piège, contraint de partager sa cage avec des animaux d’une espèce différente, et redoutable” (Houellebecq HP 111). Placed in fierce competition with “des immigrants de toute provenance,” Lovecraft experiences an increasingly unbearable bitterness and jealousy, unable to cope with the “horreur que son maintien aristocratique et son éducation raffinée […] ne lui apportent aucun avantage” (Houellebecq HP 109, 111). Beyond identifying the roots of Lovecraft’s racism, Houellebecq explains how the author rendered this racism “littérairement très productif” (HP 111). Because “pour lui, comme pour tous les racistes, l’horreur absolue, plus encore que les autres races, c’est le métissage,” Lovecraft’s stories regularly feature an “anglo-saxon, cultivé, réservé et bien éduqué” who is victimized by monstrous aberrations—“des métis, des mulâtres, des sang-mêlés” (Houellebecq HP 121, 117). So, despite his evident admiration for Lovecraft’s work, Michel successfully positions himself on the safe side of his controversial subject, aligning himself with the enlightened, anti-racist and progressive values of his contemporary audience.
In stark contrast with his clear positioning in *H.P. Lovecraft: Contre le monde, contre la vie* and *Interventions*, Houellebecq can be remarkably difficult to pin down in *Interventions 2*. The first significant essays added to the second edition of *Interventions*, “La question pédophile” [1997] and “L’Humanité, second stade” [1998] present the reader with a more elusive and provocative author figure.¹⁵

Throughout “La question pédophile,” Michel Houellebecq’s position vacillates between a morally sound condemnation of pedophilia and a morally ambiguous a rationalization of pedophilia. Initially, he takes the moral high ground. In response to the provocative questionnaire on child sexuality proposed by *L’Infini* in the wake of the Dutroux affair, Houellebecq declines “une subtile invite à la tenue de propos politiquement incorrects,” categorically rejecting the notion of a “sexualité infantile” as “une invention pure et simple” (*Interventions 2* 159).¹⁶ Accordingly, he concludes that “l’enfant est absolument, totalement une victime” in cases of pedophilia (Houellebecq, *Interventions 2* 159). The convicted pedophile, on the other hand, is rightfully considered “bien misérable et bien lâche” and “le dernier des hommes” by fellow inmates (Houellebecq, *Interventions 2* 161). On the basis of these remarks alone, Houellebecq’s position on pedophilia appears perfectly clear. Yet, these statements condemning pedophilia are interspersed throughout a much more troubling response to “La question pédophile.”

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¹⁵ I say “first significant essays,” because the first addition to *Interventions 2*, “La fête,” is an obviously tongue-in-cheek piece on social gatherings in which Houellebecq prescribes flirtation and copious amounts of alcohol as the only means of surviving any party “sans larmes” (88).

¹⁶ Marc Dutroux was a serial child rapist and murderer in Belgium. *L’affaire Dutroux* following his arrest in 1996 brought significant media attention to the justice system and the question of pedophilia (Guerivière “les Vertiges”; *Interventions 2* 158).
In the course of his essay, the author’s condemnation of pedophilia becomes increasingly ambiguous as he rationalizes the pedophile’s sexual deviance and portrays the perpetrator as another victim. Houellebecq qualifies the pedophile as “le bouc émissaire idéal d’une société qui organise l’exacerbation du désir sans apporter les moyens de le satisfaire” and the logical consequence of “les conditions actuelles de l’économie sexuelle” that disfavor middle-aged men (Interventions 2 159). Houellebecq shifts the burden of responsibility from the pedophile to society at large and arguably normalizes pedophilia: “C’est en un sens normal (la publicité, l’économie en général reposent sur le désir et non sur sa satisfaction) [...] Il ne faut donc pas trop s’étonner qu’il s’en prenne au seul être incapable de lui opposer une résistance : l’enfant” (Houellebecq, Interventions 2: 159-160, emphasis added). Moreover, the author appears to sympathize with the pedophile’s suffering. To supplement a marital sex life that is “loin d’être un feu d’artifice,” the pedophile turns to prostitution and pornography, which only exacerbate “ses supplices” (Houellebecq Interventions 2 159, 160). After his arrest, the pedophile’s supplices continue at the hands of his co-detainees: “Pendant plusieurs années il sera enculé, battu et humilié” (Houellebecq Interventions 2 161). This final stage of Houellebecq’s narrative provocatively completes the pedophile’s transformation from a perpetrator of sexual violence into another victim of sexual violence.

The essay’s chute only renders Houellebecq’s commentary on pedophilia more problematic. First, he underlines “[l’étape] capitale, qui est l’adolescence” to distinguish between minors and children, reproaching journalists who invoke of pedophilia “lorsqu’on a affaire à des filles de 16 ou 17 ans” (Houellebecq Interventions 2 162). However, just as Houellebecq appears to clearly and safely articulate a definition of
pedophilia based on France’s age of consent, he proceeds to provocatively extend the period of adolescence to embrace and implicitly excuse his ideal middle-aged pedophile: “L’adolescence n’est pas dans nos sociétés contemporaines un état secondaire et passager ; c’est au contraire l’état dans lequel, vieillissant peu à peu dans notre être physique, nous sommes aujourd’hui, et pratiquement jusqu’à notre mort, condamnés à vivre” (Interventions 2 162). The conclusion, therefore, only accentuates the ambiguity of the author’s position.

The second significant addition to Interventions 2, “L’Humanité, second stade,” reveals “La question pédophile” as a harbinger of Houellebecq’s more provocative posture. “L’Humanité, second stade” explores Valerie Solanas’ radical feminist work, SCUM Manifesto, which controversially advocates for the extermination of all men. As in “La question pédophile,” Houellebecq’s authorial position is ambiguous, vacillating between condemnation and sympathy for his subject, between misogyny and radical feminism.

Houellebecq begins by taking a clear stand against both “[le] féminisme ‘grand public’” and the dangerous derivative incarnated by Valerie Solanas: “Pour ma part j’ai toujours considéré les féministes comme d’aimables connes, inoffensives dans leur principe, malheureusement rendues dangereuses par leur désarmante absence de lucidité” (Interventions 2 166, 165). In the first half of “L’Humanité, second stade,” he adheres to this opening statement, dismissing both mainstream and radical feminism (Houellebecq Interventions 2, 168). He ridicules what he perceives to be the flawed logic, futility and even danger of mainstream feminism. Houellebecq rejects the idea that “le ‘système patriarcal’ était une invention des méchants mâles” (Interventions 2 165). He claims that
the sexual liberation did not represent “une dangereuse remise en cause du pouvoir masculin,” but served the interests of men, whose “objectif historique [...] était à l’évidence de baiser le maximum de nanas” and who appreciated “l’amour lesbien [...comme un] condiment érotique” (Houellebecq *Interventions* 2 165). He frames the feminist push to enter the workplace as another misguided project: “les hommes, qui savaient depuis longtemps à quoi s’en tenir sur la ‘liberté’ et l’‘épanouissement’ offerts par le travail, ricanaient doucement” (Houellebecq, *Interventions* 2 165). Of course, Houellebecq’s provocative take on the “naïveté” of the feminists and their “triste [...et] incompréhensible appétit à l’égard du monde professionnel et de la vie de l’entreprise” regularly misses the point (*Interventions* 2 165). The sexual liberation aimed to free women from a double standard, lesbianism has nothing to do with the sexual fantasies of “la quasi-totalité des hétérosexuels en activité,” and “la ‘liberté’ et l’‘épanouissement’” of the working woman derived from her newfound financial independence (Houellebecq, *Interventions* 2 165). For Houellebecq, however, the feminist movement only succeeded in reversing “l’immense travail de domestication accompli par les femmes au cours des millénaires précédents afin de réprimer les penchants primitifs de l’homme” (*Interventions* 2, 166).17

In keeping with his opening statement, Houellebecq also criticizes the dangerous derivative of mainstream feminism incarnated by the Valerie Solanas. Unsurprisingly, he condemns her genocidal project to liquidate “cette portion déshéritée de l’humanité [l’homme]” and “fantasmes ouvertement nazis” (Houellebecq, *Interventions* 2, 169). He

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17 The contrast between his praise of *traditional feminine values* in *Interventions* and the vehement anti-feminism in this essay from *Interventions* 2 is striking.
appears to question the reasoning that brought her to this radical conclusion. Houellebecq juxtaposes Valerie’s assertion that “la femme n’est pas seulement différente, elle est supérieure” with evidence of their alleged inferiority and inadequacy:

malgré trente ans de propagande féministe ininterrompue, une femme ne paraît toujours pas tout à fait à sa place au milieu d’une réunion d’affaires ou d’un Conseil des ministres. Cette inadéquation [sic], dirait Valérie Solanas, est la preuve de sa supériorité foncière. La femme n’a inventé ni le pouvoir ni la compétition, ni la guerre. (Interventions 2 167-168)

When Houellebecq refers to the opening pages of the SCUM Manifesto as “éblouissant” and suggests that “Valérie Solanas [comprend] aussi bien la psychologie masculine,” his sarcasm feels palpable (Interventions 2 169).

But Houellebecq’s anti-feminist position in “L’Humanité, second stade” is not as straightforward as it may seem. The author often agrees with the radical feminist Solanas. He finds that her gendered narrative of human history “tient largement la route” and describes her concept of genetically grounded gender difference as “réaliste, teintée de bon sens” (Houellebecq Interventions 2 168, 167). Critically, Houellebecq concurs with her scathing portrait of men. He describes men as “bêtes, paresseux, querelleurs, indisciplinés,” arguing that their “penchants primitifs [...] (violence, baise, ivrognerie, jeu)” were only mitigated by the civilizing influence of women (Houellebecq Interventions 2 166). Houellebecq even makes his agreement with Valérie explicit:

“ceux qui consacrent actuellement leur énergie à des combats stupides [...] leur seul point commun attestable est, justement, celui mis en avant par Valérie Solanas : ce sont des hommes” (Interventions 2, 168). The author’s other works, moreover, provide
further evidence of his sincere admiration of Solanas’ ideas. His description of the SCUM Manifesto bears a striking resemblance to his previous interview with Valère Staraleski in Interventions (Table B).

### Table B: Michel Houellebecq and Valerie Solanas on Gender Differences

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<td>-égoïste</td>
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<td></td>
<td>-incapable de compassion ou d’amour</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women:</td>
<td>Women:</td>
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<tr>
<td>-empreintes d’altruisme, d’amour, de compassion</td>
<td>-supérieure</td>
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<td>-supérieures</td>
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Moreover, Solanas’ proposal to use genetic engineering to transcend “certaines limitations actuellement considérées comme inséparables de la condition humaine” is explored in Les Particules élémentaires and La Possibilité d’une île (Houellebecq Interventions 2 170).\(^\text{19}\)

\(^{18}\) Humanity is described by the new race of humans in Les Particules élémentaires as “cette espèce douloureuse et vile, à peine différente du singe” (Interventions 2 393).

\(^{19}\) The genetic research of the protagonist of Les Particules élémentaires, Michel Djerzinski, lays the foundation for a new, genetically engineered race “[qui a] su dépasser les puissances, insurmontables pour
As Houellebecq increasingly identifies with Solanas, his position begins to display the same ambiguity of the author of *SCUM Manifesto.*

After the first dazzling pages of Valerie’s manifesto, “on observe avec tristesse, chez l’audacieuse pamphlétaire, la multiplication de traits typiquement masculins [...] la mégalomanie, la vanité insensée [...] l’attraction malsaine pour la violence, l'assassinat, la conspiration, l’action ‘révolutionnaire’” (Houellebecq, *Interventions* 2, 169). After the first anti-feminist pages of “L’Humanité, second stade,” we observe the typical traits of radical feminist ideology in Houellebecq—the conviction that men incarnate megalomania, violence, and revolution. So, in their essays, Valérie and Michel begin to resemble the respective objects of their criticism—men and radical feminists. Therefore, a case can be made for reading both “L’Humanité, second stade” and *SCUM Manifesto* as satire.

As in “La question pédophile,” Houellebecq’s conclusion to “L’Humanité, second stade” fails to resolve his ambiguous authorial position:

En plein milieu des années 1970, au milieu d’un bordel idéologique sans précédent, et malgré quelques dérapages nazis, Valérie Solanas a donc eu, pratiquement seule de sa génération, le courage de maintenir une attitude progressiste et raisonnée, conforme aux plus nobles aspirations du projet eux [les hommes], de l’égocisme, de la cruauté et de la colère” (Houellebecq 393). Incidentally, the campaign for this new species employed the “slogan quasi publicitaire: ‘DEMAIN SERA FÉMININ’” (Houellebecq *Particules* 388). Similarly, *La Possibilité d’une île* echoes Valérie’s “anticipation du clônage” by imagining a new race of neo-humans who achieve quasi-immortality through a combination of cloning and the transmission of auto-biographies (*Interventions* 2 170).

While I agree with Raphaël Baroni that Michel Houellebecq adopts “la vision du monde de Valérie, [...] également son style pamphlétaire” I do not agree that this identification serves simply to “déconstruire les valeurs féministes” or, for that matter, that Houellebecq’s alleged anti-feminism can be confirmed “en définitive” by a complete reading of his œuvre (91).

Sharon L. Jansen likens Valérie’s text to Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* (156). Ginette Castro considers the *SCUM Manifesto* to be a parody of the Freudian theory of femininity in which the terms are simply inverted, noting that “All the clichés of Freudian psychoanalytical theory are here: the biological accident, the incomplete sex, ‘penis envy’ which has become ‘pussy envy,’ and so forth” (72).
occidental : établir un contrôle technologique absolu de l’homme sur la nature, y compris sur sa nature biologique, et son évolution. Cela dans le but à long terme de reconstruire une nouvelle nature sur des bases conformes à la loi morale, c’est-à-dire d’établir le règne universel de l’amour, point final. (Interventions 2 171-172)

By defending the nobility of Solanas’ genocidal project, Houellebecq embodies the ambiguous position of his subject—“être incomplet, torturé, contradictoire, fascinant et exaspérant comme le sont toujours les prophètes” (Interventions 2 171).

The Two Houellebecqs on Biographical Criticism:

As we have observed in HP Lovecraft: contre le monde, contre la vie, the first and second editions of Interventions, and Ennemis publics, Michel Houellebecq’s authorial posture evolved significantly around 1998. The sudden emergence of a decidedly more provocative, contradictory and exasperating post-Particules élémentaires Houellebecq should give the reader pause—the author could be employing a new publicity strategy, revealing his true character or simply going off the rails. This fundamental ambiguity compromises readings of Houellebecq’s novels informed by his provocative persona.

Houellebecq’s new position on biographical criticism further complicates his more provocative posture. Before the pivotal publication of Les Particules élémentaires, Michel Houellebecq notably employs biographical criticism in his first major intervention

22 This conclusion reflects the same sort of paradox of radical feminism that Laura Winkiel attributes to SCUM Manifesto: “Solanas imagines that women openly declare war on other particular subjects—men—in the name of the universal […]parodying] masculine politics in order to challenge its authority” (69).
as a critic, *H.P. Lovecraft: Contre le monde, contre la vie*. In theory, Houellebecq 
eschews biographical criticism for a hermeneutic approach grounded in the text: “Pour 
essayer d’en savoir plus [sic], il n’y a qu’un moyen, d’ailleurs le plus logique : se plonger 
dans les textes de fiction écrits par HPL” (*HP* 37). But in practice, he adopts an 
undiably biographical approach to Lovecraft. Houellebecq explains how Lovecraft’s 
WASP upbringing and traumatic period of unemployment in New York City nourished a 
racism and xenophobia that he rendered “littérairement très productif” (*HP* 111).

After the pivotal publication of *Les Particules élémentaires*, however, Michel 
Houellebecq becomes an outspoken critic of biographical criticism. Throughout *Ennemis 
publics*, he presents himself and his oeuvre as the victims of “*reductio biographica*” 
performed widely by critics and “leurs complices” in the mass media (*Houellebecq* 
295). Houellebecq suggests that this problematic trend reflects the present state of 
affairs in literary criticism and in France. Unable to accept his portrait of society, critics 
resort to biographical criticism: “Je tends un miroir au monde, où il ne se trouve pas 
beau. Il retourne le miroir et affirme : ‘ce n’est pas le monde que vous décrivez, c’est 
yous-même’” (*Houellebecq Ennemis* 295). This refusal to accept an author’s criticism 
reflects the degradation of France since the *Trente Glorieuses*:

> Lorsqu’un pays est fort, et sûr de lui-même, il accepte sans broncher de la part de 
> ses écrivains n’importe quelle dose de pessimisme. La France des années 1950 
> supportait sans broncher des gens comme Camus, Ionesco ou Beckett. La France 

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23 Although Houellebecq complains about *reductio biographica*, this is only rarely the case in the criticism of his work. It is more legitimate to speak of a *personalist approach*: Liesbeth Korthals-Altes observes that “the tendency in the reception of Houellebecq towards a personalist rather than work-centred approach is striking [...] not only in the journalistic reviews and media reception of his works, but also in the monographs that have been published so far” (*Slippery Author Figures* 111).
Consequently, “on n’a eu de cesse d’établir que mes livres n’étaient nullement l’expression d’une vérité humaine générale, mais celle d’un traumatisme individuel” (Houellebecq *Ennemis* 241). Houellebecq, however, argues that this approach is particularly inapplicable to his writing. He abandoned his only autobiographical experiment “assez vite,” quickly concluding that “ma pente naturelle ne m’entraîne pas dans cette voie” and that “la grande entreprise autobiographique, celle d’un Rousseau ou d’un Tolstoï, n’est, je le crains, *pas tout à fait mon genre*” (Houellebecq *Ennemis* 301, 47). Nonetheless, the distinctions between the public and private domains, between the man and the work, “Tout ça est devenu trop compliqué, on ne s'embarrasse plus de ces scrupules aujourd’hui” (Houellebecq *Ennemis* 201). Hence, when Michel Houellebecq addresses the following plea to the popular media, “Qu’on parle de ce qu’on voudra, de mes à-valoir, de ma feuille d’impôts, de mes opinions politiques, de mon goût pour l’alcool, de mon histoire familiale; mais surtout pas, en aucun cas, de mes livres,” he clearly reasserts the boundaries between the author and his books, between his celebrity and the criticism of his works (*Ennemis* 203).

Houellebecq’s rejection of biographical criticism also reflects his lack of esteem for the biographical genre. He finds biographies necessarily reductive and speculative. Biographers imposing their own sense of causality and meaning upon their subject’s life. For this reason, biographies strike Houellebecq as vulgar—comparable to “ces mauvais romans d’espionnage (ou romans policiers à énigme) […] dans lesquels seuls les mobiles et les combinaisons évidentes sont explorés” (*Ennemis* 44-45). As Houellebecq
underlines, biographers, of course, run the real risk of getting it wrong. Even Nietzsche’s seemingly reasonable explanation of Schopenhauer’s misogyny through “ses mauvais rapports avec sa mère” remains “intellectuellement, une bien mauvaise action” (Houellebecq Ennemis 298). When Nietzsche’s reasoning is applied to his own case, Houellebecq concludes that the absence of his mother should have transformed him into an “obsédé sexuel (Ennemis 298). This conclusion, however, proves unreliable : “À examiner ma vie, j’avoue que j’ai des doutes. Je l’ai sans doute été, par moments ; mais à d’autres je me trouve, au contraire, d’une inexcusable nonchalance” (Houellebecq Ennemis 298). Houellebecq concludes that the reductive nature of biography fails to account for “l’indéfinie richesse de [sa] personnalité” (Ennemis 48).

In Houellebecq’s opinion, autobiographies prove equally unreliable. Michel takes his parents’ relationship as an example. Despite the straightforward structure of their story and the fact that they are “[les] deux protagonistes, [... et des] témoins plus ou moins directs,” his parents nonetheless produced markedly different accounts over the years:

Mon père [...] aime le plus souvent à jouer le bon petit gars, le prolétaire courageux et honnête séduit par une dangereuse déséquilibrée. Ma mère, par contre, trouve parfois piquant de donner à sa propre histoire un côté assez rock and roll—exagérant par exemple sa propre consommation de drogue […] À chaque fois mon père et ma mère amélioraient un peu leur version,

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24 As “le récit de leur rencontre, de leur vie commune, [et] de leur séparation,” their relationship conveniently fits a basic model of a narrative plot with a beginning, middle and end (Houellebecq, Ennemis, 46).
As Houellebecq’s description reveals, his parents progressively fictionalized their autobiographical narratives. They repackaged themselves as recognizable character types (le bon petit gars, le prolétaire courageux et honnête, la dangereuse déséquilibrée), reframed their relationship in terms of a cliché plot of seduction and corruption, exaggerated qualities and even invented details as they saw fit. As Houellebecq illustrates, autobiography may easily slip into fictional narration.

Michel Houellebecq admits that autobiography does find its way into his fictions, but not in a form that would render biographical criticism useful. The dispersal of “quelques souvenirs épars […] au milieu d’un manuscrit dont l’objet est différent” is a far cry from “la grande entreprise autobiographique” of Montaigne, Rousseau, Chateaubriand, Tolstoï and Gide:

Pour certains auteurs le moi, le moi quotidien, minable, est un moyen privilégié d’accès à l’universel. Je dois maintenant me rendre à l’évidence : Je n’en fais pas partie. […] Plus que de creuser en moi-même à la recherche d’une hypothétique vérité, j’aime sentir naître en moi, se développer des personnages ; j’aime sentir entre eux, et de moi à eux, naître admiration, haine, jalousie, fascination, désir (Houellebecq Ennemis 47, 300-301).

Rather than drawing him closer to his fellow man, his writing moves him farther away, establishing “par rapport à l’humanité une certaine distance critique” (Houellebecq Ennemis 182). Rather than introspection, his writing reflects the externalization of
fictional characters and the widening of the emotional and intellectual gulf “de moi à eux” (Houellebecq *Ennemis* 301).

Subscribing to “cette voie moyenne […] des romanciers classiques […] qui utilisent leur propre vie, ou la vie d’autrui peu importe, ou qui inventent pour construire leurs personnages,” Houellebecq asserts that regardless of the source “ça revient au même”—“La quantité de vérité, éventuellement de vérité autobiographique, qu’on met dans un personnage n’a, en littérature, pas la moindre importance” (*Ennemis* 33, 46-47). For Houellebecq, the distinctions between life and literature, true and fictional discourse, the author’s person and his works, invalidate both biographical criticism and a personalist approach.

Michel Houellebecq in Fiction and the Fiction of Michel Houellebecq:

*La Carte et le territoire* and the Death of the Author:

Michel Houellebecq’s forays into autofiction and dramatic self-representation in his Goncourt winning novel *La Carte et le territoire* [2010] and Guillaume Nicloux’s film *L’enlèvement de Michel Houellebecq* [2014] explore both the fictional potential and potential fiction of the author’s public figure. These parodic works underscore the unreliability, contradictions and fictionality of the Houellebecq’s notorious public image. Despite inscribing the author in the fictional space, these self-parodies counterintuitively

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25 The potential fiction of his authorial posture can already be felt in *Ennemis publics*. Houellebecq appears to model himself after another self-proclaimed public enemy of the French literary tradition—Rousseau. Houellebecq’s claim that “la relation entre moi et la quasi-totalité des médias de ce pays en est bel et bien arrivée à la haine totale,” “[une] guerre d’extermination totale dirigée contre moi,” rivals Rousseau’s paranoia when he spoke of “la ligue […] universelle [contre lui], sans exception, sans retour” in *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (Houellebecq *Ennemis* 242; Rousseau 145).
insist upon the divisions between his public figure, private life, and fiction, providing a further argument against biographical readings of Houellebecq’s novels.

As a variant of the künstlerroman, *La Carte et le territoire* is thoroughly steeped in metaliterary reflections. Jed Martin is in many ways Michel Houellebecq’s analogue in the art world. The fictional critics presenting “le travail de Jed Martin comme étant issu d’une réflexion froide, détachée, sur l’état du monde, on en a fait une sorte d’héritier des grands artistes […] du siècle précédent” could just as well be referring to the works of Michel Houellebecq (*Houellebecq Carte* 62). However, when the artist-protagonist of *La Carte et le territoire* hires a fictional version of the author to pen the pamphlet of his career-defining exhibition, *La Carte et le territoire* becomes a pointed interrogation of Michel Houellebecq’s public persona.

As Jed becomes professionally and personally acquainted with Houellebecq, he puts the author’s reputation to the test. When Jed first meets Michel, he is struck by the discrepancy between his preconceived image of the author and the “real” author he encounters: “Je suis un peu surpris…” avoua Jed. ‘Je m’attendais en vous rencontrant à quelque chose… enfin, disons, de plus difficile. Vous avez la réputation d’être très dépressif. Je croyais par exemple que vous buviez beaucoup plus’” (*Houellebecq Carte* 146). In the course of the exchanges between the artist and the author, the salient features of Michel Houellebecq’s public image are systematically explored—his reputed

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26 Critics have often associated Michel Houellebecq with *great conceptual artists from the previous century* (in this case, the 19th century). See, for example, Aurélien Bellanger’s *Houellebecq, écrivain romantique.*

27 Echoing this description of Jed Martin, Houellebecq has described his approach to the novel in terms of “[une] analyse à froid” and “une certaine distance critique” (*Interventions*, 45; *Ennemis*, 182). Moreover, Michel clearly identifies himself as a descendent of the 19th century tradition, qualifying Balzac as “le père de tout romancier” and claiming that “nul, s’il n’avouait à Balzac allégeance et amour, ne pouvait prétendre avoir compris le premier mot de l’art du roman” (*Interventions 2*, 278-279).
alcoholism, his pathological depression, his misanthropy, and, finally, his status as a serious author. On each count, the portrait of the author in La Carte et le territoire proves consistently ambiguous.

Despite Houellebecq’s claim that “ce sont les journalistes qui m’ont fait la réputation d’un ivrogne,” he initially appears to be an alcoholic (Carte 147). When Jed Martin calls the author, he notices Michel’s “voix terriblement empâtée par l’alcool” (Houellebecq Carte 154). Rather than thanking Jed for his generous gift of a 400E bottle of Château Ausone, the author rudely protests “une seule bouteille?” before downing a glass “d’un trait, sans humer le bouquet du vin, sans même se livrer à un simulacre de dégustation” (Houellebecq Carte 165, 166). Several glasses later, a “probablement, ivre” Houellebecq “s’est resservi un verre de vin” (Carte 170, 171). As the fictional Houellebecq’s inebriation becomes undeniable, so does the author’s self-parody. After shattering a bottle with an overzealous gesticulation, the fictional Houellebecq leaps up to open another bottle, “zigzaguant entre les bouts de verre” and taking no heed of Jed’s cautionary remark “On a déjà beaucoup bu” (Carte: 172, 173). Here the author’s self-portrait becomes Rabelaisian—the fictional Houellebecq enthusiastically chants “Aimer, rire et chanter!” between glasses of Chilean wine and begins to employ “des mots bizarres, parfois désuets ou franchement impropres, quand ce n’étaient pas des néologismes’” (Houellebecq, Carte 173).

Later in the novel, however, Jed encounters an almost unrecognizable Houellebecq at the author’s retirement home in the Loiret. Michel’s physical transformation is readily apparent : “Il avait changé, réalisa aussitôt Jed […] Plus robuste, plus musclé probablement, il marchait avec énergie” (Houellebecq Carte 256). This
visibly healthier Houellebecq also appears to have gotten a handle on his drinking habit. Rather than downing glass after glass “d’un trait,” Houellebecq “buvait son verre à petites gorgées” (Carte: 166, 173, 256). During their afternoon and evening together, the author exercises remarkable restraint, only uncorking “une nouvelle [(deuxième)] bouteille de chablis” when the two arrive at the cheese course (Houellebecq Carte 259).

A similar change characterizes the portrait of Houellebecq’s depression in the novel. Aware of the author’s “réputation d’être très dépressif,” Jed first remarks “[la] méditation morose qui paraissait lui être habituelle” (Houellebecq Carte 146, 138). The author’s life in Shannon reflects a textbook case of clinical depression. He lives in squalor. After three years, the author never managed to unpack his belongings or furnish his new home. Jed is surprised to find “des pièces dallées, vides de meubles, avec çà et là quelques cartons de déménagement” (Houellebecq Carte 138). Outside, his house is distinguished by “l’état répugnant de la pelouse” (Houellebecq Carte 138). Inside, “une légère pellicule de poussière recouvrait le sol” and his bedding is strewn with “Des bouts de biscotte et des lambeaux de mortadella [...] tachés de vin et brûlés par places” (Houellebecq Carte 138, 166). He struggles each day to cope with a severe depression that periodically brought him “chaque soir [...] au bord du suicide” (Houellebecq Carte 145). He prefers the winter season, when the early nightfall allows him to “prendre mes somnifères et aller au lit avec une bouteille de vin et un livre [...] sans trop de dégâts” (Houellebecq Carte 145). But, like the depiction of Houellebecq’s alcoholism, this portrait of his depression also becomes palpably parodic. When Michel claims to travel each year to the equatorial Thailand to manage his seasonal affective disorder and enjoy sexual tourism, Jed notices the parallels with the plot of Plateforme [2001] and questions
the author’s candor: “ Là, j’ai l’impression que vous jouez un peu votre propre rôle” (Houellebecq Carte 145-146: emphasis added). Surprisingly, the author does not deny this charge: “— Oui, c’est vrai’ convint Houellebecq avec une spontanéité surprenante, ‘ce sont des choses qui ne m’intéressent plus beaucoup. Je vais arrêter bientôt de toute façon, je vais retourner dans le Loiret” (Houellebecq Carte 146).

When Jed encounters Michel again in the Loiret, the author indeed appears to have abandoned his public role as an “être très dépressif” (Houellebecq, Carte 146). There are no lingering traces of his reputed clinical depression: “Il y avait dans la voix de l’auteur des Particules élémentaires quelque chose que Jed ne lui avait jamais connu, qu’il ne s’attendait pas du tout à y trouver [...] parce qu’au fond il ne l’avait plus rencontré chez personne, depuis pas mal d’années : il avait l’air heureux” (Houellebecq Carte 237). Whether Houellebecq finally overcame “certains problèmes personnels” or simply stopped playing his own role in front of Jed, his reputation for depression appears unreliable (Houellebecq Carte 159).

La Carte et le territoire paints a similarly evolving portrait of Michel Houellebecq’s misanthropy—another hallmark of his reputation. By all accounts, Houellebecq leads a solitary existence. Upon his second visit to Shannon, Jed discovers the author’s first and last attempt at home-improvement—Houellebecq had moved his bed and television into the living room, explaining that “Après votre visite je me suis rendu compte que vous étiez le premier visiteur à rentrer dans cette maison, et que vous seriez probablement le dernier. Alors je me suis dit, à quoi bon maintenir la fiction d’une
pièce de réception ?” (Houellebecq Carte 165).28 The narrator later corroborates the fictional Houellebecq’s assertion by citing “ses rares amis restants” (Houellebecq Carte 173).

However, as in the previous portraits of alcoholism and depression, comedy subverts the representation of the author’s misanthropy. As Jed contemplates Michel’s manifest indifference “à tout ce qui pouvait s’apparenter à une relation amoureuse, et vraisemblablement aussi à toute relation humaine,’ Houellebecq interjects “comme s’il avait deviné ses pensées”—“C’est vrai, je n’éprouve qu’un faible sentiment de solidarité à l’égard de l’espèce humaine” (Houellebecq Carte 175). This jarring, improbable moment of mind-reading parodies the readiness with which the author provocatively plays “[son] propre rôle” (Houellebecq Carte 146).29 Moreover, the fictional author’s behavior betrays his reputation as a misanthrope. Each time that Jed and Michel conclude their business, it is the author who prolongs the artist’s visits, rather than retiring to his solitude. Houellebecq insists that they dine out together on Jed’s first visit and protests the photographer’s departure on his second visit—“Allez, vous allez pas partir maintenant!” (Carte 173). In the Loiret, Michel visibly enjoys the role of host, preparing a home-made pot-au-feu a day ahead of time to ensure that “il va être meilleur” for his guest (Houellebecq Carte 257).

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28 Houellebecq’s remark about maintaining a fiction resonates in this self-portrait exploring the fiction of his public persona. Intriguingly, the prospect of maintaining the fiction of a living room reinforces the author’s reputation for reclusion and misanthropy, which is subsequently called into question as a potential fiction.

29 The fictional Houellebecq sounds as if he is paraphrasing his misanthropic assertion in Ennemis publics: “l’idée que tous les hommes étaient frères, en tant que fils de Dieu, et se comportaient en conséquence. Pour moi cela n’avait (et n’a toujours) rien d’évident” (Houellebecq, Ennemis, 153).
Michel Houellebecq’s self-parody in *La Carte et le territoire* extends beyond his person to his profession, weighing in on the debate over his status as a serious author. The novel first explores Houellebecq’s alleged commercial motives. Frédéric Beigbeder informs Jed Martin that a healthy financial incentive would persuade Houellebecq to accept his proposal to write the pamphlet of his exhibition: “Je vais peut-être vous surprendre, parce qu’il n’a pas du tout cette réputation: l’argent. En principe il s’en fout de l’argent, il vit avec que dalle ; mais son divorce l’a complètement séché. [...] si vous lui proposez pas mal d’argent, je pense que vous avez vos chances” (*Carte* 131). But Houellebecq’s reputation for commercialism does not play out in the novel. It is not the financial incentive, but rather the tradition of the artist’s novel that convinces Houellebecq to accept Jed’s offer: “je n’ai jamais fait ça ; mais je savais que ça arriverait, à un moment ou à un autre de ma vie. Beaucoup d’écrivains, si vous y regardez de près, ont écrit sur des peintres ; et cela depuis des siècles” (*Carte* 140-141). Money appears to be a non-factor. When Jed offers to paint the author’s portrait in lieu of cash payment, Houellebecq only hesitates because he thought it would entail posing “pendant des heures” (*Carte* 154).

With Michel Houellebecq’s alleged commercialism seemingly debunked, the sincerity of his social criticism and theoretical reflections can be explored. Houellebecq is

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30 Jean-François Patricola notably dismissed the ideological content of Houellebecq’s work as “un bric-à-brac de clichés et de pensées rétrogrades ou à la mode […] moyen de faire parler de lui, moyen de vendre des livres” (Estier, 19). Similar skepticism towards Michel inspired the fall 2005 edition of *Le Journal de la Culture*: “Houellebecq génial imposteur ?” (Estier, 19). Yet, Emmanuel Dion contests the assertions made by “Beaucoup de commentateurs […] qui ont pu tenter de faire croire que le battage médiatique [de Houellebecq…a été] orchestré par lui et son éditeur à des fins commerciales,” highlighting that “Les gros tirages réels des ‘années Houellebecq’ (par exemple ceux de Dan Brown ou de Marc Lévy) sont cinq à dix fois supérieurs en nombre et représentent des intérêts économiques bien plus considérables, mais ne provoquent qu’un débat d’idées beaucoup plus faible” (13-14).
presented as a well-versed and passionate social critic. His personal library reveals “un nombre étonnant d’ouvrages dus aux réformateurs sociaux du XIXe siècle : les plus connus, comme Marx, Proudhon et Comte; mais aussi Fourier, Cabet, Saint-Simon, Pierre Leroux, Owen, Carlyle” (Houellebecq *Carte* 259). Moreover, the author’s praise of Jean-Louis Curtis further testifies to his predilection for social criticism. Clearly identifying with Curtis, Houellebecq defends him as “un bon auteur, dans un genre un peu conservateur, un peu classique,” who has been erroneously labeled “comme réactionnaire” (*Carte* 169). While acknowledging Curtis’ remarkable talent as a pasticheur, Houellebecq admires him most for his reflections on “le passage de la France traditionnelle au monde moderne” and the concomitant rise of consumerism (Houellebecq, *Carte* 168). In *La Carte et le territoire*, Houellebecq is shown not only to be an avid reader of social critics, but also as a legitimate author of social criticism and theory. Jed’s retired father finds Houellebecq to be “un bon auteur […avec] une vision assez juste de la société” and his shrewd gallerist Franz attributes their multi-million-dollar success to Houellebecq’s insightful analysis of “le côté systématique, théorique de [la] démarche [de Martin]” (*Carte* : 23, 207).

Following the pattern that we have observed for Houellebecq’s reputation as a depressed alcoholic and misanthrope, the author’s status as a serious author is also called into question in *La Carte et le territoire*. Apart from his well-received criticism of Jed Martin that revealed “l’unité du travail de l’artiste, et […] une profonde logique,”

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31 This description clearly echoes Michel’s rejection of the title of reactionary in *Ennemis publics*: “À quelqu’un qui est à ce point persuadé du caractère inéluctable de tout déclin, de toute perte, l’idée de réaction ne peut même pas venir. Si un tel individu ne sera jamais réactionnaire, il sera par contre, et tout naturellement, conservateur” (119).
Houellebecq’s fictional writing described in *La Carte et le territoire* proves ridiculous (*Carte* 188). After retiring to the Loiret, Houellebecq describes his latest poem to Jed, undermining his reputation as a serious author: “Finalement, j’ai écrit sur mon chien. C’était l’année des P, j’ai appelé mon chien Platon j’ai réussi mon poème; c’est un des meilleurs poèmes jamais écrits sur la philosophie de Platon—et probablement aussi sur les chiens”32 (*Carte* 258).

As we have seen, Houellebecq’s self-portrayal in *La Carte et le territoire* consistently confronts and complicates his persona. This fictional Houellebecq illustrates the author’s defiant claim in *Ennemis publics* “[qu’on] ne pourra épuiser l’indéfinie richesse de ma personnalité, qu’on pourrait puiser sans fin dans l’océan de mes possibles—et que si quelqu’un croit me connaître, c’est simplement qu’il manque d’informations” (48). The novel’s unstable portrait of Houellebecq casts doubt over the reliability and sincerity of his public figure, leaving both Jed Martin and the reader with “l’impression [que Houellebecq jouait] un peu [son] propre rôle” (*Carte* 146: emphasis added). This inconsistent performance renders Houellebecq frustratingly opaque. Unable to decipher the author’s “expression difficile à interpréter (satisfaction? résignation? amertume?),” Jed Martin finds the man to be as unreadable as his “presque illisible” manuscripts (Houellebecq *Carte* 257, 167). Houellebecq’s unpredictable character appears to be the only reliable component of his reputation. As the fictional Frédéric Beigbeder’s suggests, “on ne sait jamais trop comment il va réagir” (Houellebecq *Carte* 131).

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32 Diogenes--a vocal critic of Plato--is in fact the philosopher most strongly associated with dogs.
The illegibility and incoherence of Michel Houellebecq’s self-portrait in *La Carte et le territoire* could once again point to the fiction of his persona. One can make the case that Jed Martin does not encounter a representation of the flesh-and-blood Michel Houellebecq, but rather a pure manifestation of Michel Houellebecq’s authorial figure. Throughout the novel, the author’s character is consistently referred to either by his *nom de plume*, Houellebecq, or as *the author of X*. Most often he is referred to as “L’auteur des *Particules élémentaires,*” but a number of his other works are referenced (Houellebecq *Carte*: 138, 146, 237, 256). *La Carte et le territoire* presents Houellebecq as “l’auteur de *Plateforme*” (pp. 143, 176), “l’auteur du *Sens du combat*” (p.165), “L’auteur de *La Poursuite du bonheur*” (p. 165) and “L’auteur de *Renaissance*” (p. 166). This conspicuous paraphrasing suggests that it is the *author* (Houellebecq), rather than the man (Michel Thomas), who is being portrayed.33 Intriguingly, in the scenes in which the author’s character appears alive, he is never referred to as Michel Houellebecq, or even as Michel for that matter—his full pen name is only invoked in his absence. The criminal investigators arriving at the scene of the author’s murder identify him as “Michel Houellebecq […] un écrivain […] très connu” (*Carte* 276). When the story of his death hits the press, *Le Parisien* announces that “L’écrivain Michel Houellebecq sauvagement assassiné” (*Carte* 313). Apart from these two examples, the author’s full name is only mentioned in the context of artistic representations of the author—Jed Martin’s painting “Michel Houellebecq, écrivain” (pp. 184, 254, 390, 395, 408) and his

33 The paraphrasing of the author may also be read as a play on Foucault’s notion of the classificatory function of the author’s name in “Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?”: “le nom d’auteur fonctionne pour caractériser un certain mode d’être du discours : le fait, pour un discours, d’avoir un nom d’auteur, le fait que l’on puisse dire ‘ceci a été écrit par un tel,’ ou ‘un tel en est l’auteur’” (798).
The investigation of biographical criticism in La Carte et le territoire:

From this perspective, the fictional Houellebecq’s murder in La Carte et le territoire becomes particularly significant—the author’s death may be interpreted as a literalization of Roland Barthes’ “La Mort de l’auteur.” Like Barthes’ essay, Houellebecq’s novel can be read as a rejection of biographical criticism. A compelling analogy can be established between the murder investigation and biographical criticism. Criminal investigators must analyze and interpret the crime scene. The police refer to the mysterious arrangement of Houellebecq’s mutilated body parts as a “puzzle” featuring “motifs difficiles à décrypter” (Carte 288). When called in as a witness, Jed Martin further reinforces this analogy by comparing this “puzzle informe” to a work of art—“une assez médiocre imitation de Pollock” (Houellebecq Carte 350, 353). While detectives traditionally “[raisonnent] à partir du corps,” to the police chief’s great chagrin, “à proprement parler, il n’y en avait pas. […] La tête de la victime était intacte […] Le reste était un massacre, un carnage insensé, des lambeaux, des lanières de chair éparpillés à même le sol” (Houellebecq Carte 277-278). In the absence of the victim’s body, the homicide investigators are left only with perplexing traces of the author’s presence. In other words, they face the same challenge imposed upon the reader, who must construct an image of the implied author from textual evidence in the scenes of a novel. But

34 Wayne Booth describes the (re)construction of the implied author in The Rhetoric of Fiction: “Whether we call this implied author an ‘official scribe,’ or adopt the term recently revived by Kathleen Tillotson—
rather than focusing on the evidence in the crime scene, the homicide detectives turn to the author’s private life in search of answers in an impulse that is not unlike practitioners of biographical or personalist criticism.

This investigation into Houellebecq’s private life utterly fails to elucidate his murder, implicitly undermining a biographical approach to the author and his works. The rare discoveries made about Houellebecq’s personal life, however, speak further to the unreliability of his public posture. Detectives find that the author’s claims about his writing cannot be trusted: “malgré ce qu’il avait répété dans de nombreuses interviews, [Houellebecq] écrivait encore ; il écrivait même beaucoup” (Houellebecq Carte 332). The investigators also find reason to question Houellebecq’s self-proclaimed status as a public enemy: his friends Teresa Cremisi and Frédéric Beigbeder clarify “qu’il s’agissait d’ennemis littéraires, qui exprimaient leur haine sur des sites Internet, dans des articles de journaux ou de magazines, et dans le pire des cas dans des livres, mais qu’aucun d’entre eux n’aurait été capable de se livrer à un assassinat physique” (Carte 314). Houellebecq’s reputed personal qualities are also called into question during the investigation. As it turns out, “l’auteur des Particules élémentaires, qui avait sa vie durant affiché un athéisme intransigeant, s’était fait très discrètement baptiser” (Houellebecq Carte 318).

The author’s email records belie his reputation for racism and misogyny, revealing sweet, sentimental correspondences with his ethnically and geographically diverse mistresses: ‘il y avait une Espagnole, une Russe, une Chinoise, une Tchèque, deux Allemandes – et,

the author’s ‘second self’—it is clear that the picture the reader gets of this presence is one of the author’s most important effects. However impersonal he may try to be, his reader will inevitably construct a picture of the official scribe who writes in this manner—and of course, that official scribe will never be neutral towards all values. Our reactions to his various commitments, secret or overt, will help to determine our response to the work” (Booth, 71).
quand même, trois Françaises. […] avec toutes il échangeait encore des mails, anodins et doux, évoquant les petites ou les grandes misères de leurs vies, leurs joies aussi parfois” (Carte 335). Systematically, the results of Houellebecq’s murder investigation reveal discrepancies between the author’s public declarations, professional activity and personal life.

The author’s relative lack of a private life constitutes the most significant discovery of the criminal investigation conducted in La Carte et le territoire. Houellebecq’s cell phone records reveal “Des conversations avec son éditrice, avec le type qui devait lui livrer du fuel, un autre qui devait poser un double vitrage… que des conversations pratiques ou professionnelles” (Carte 307). His landline record shows only “quatre-vingt-treize communications en tout ; et aucune n’avait le moindre caractère personnel” (Houellebecq Carte 316). His email server contains so few emails that, “au rythme de ses échanges actuels, il lui aurait fallu sept mille ans pour l’épuiser” (Houellebecq Carte 334). His virtual address book includes twenty-three individuals “dont douze d’artisans, de médecins et autres prestataires de services” (Houellebecq Carte 333). His agenda includes sparse, perfectly banal reminders “en général du genre ‘sacs poubelle’ ou ‘livraison fuel’” and his web-history “ne révèla rien de bien passionnant. Il ne se connectait à aucun site pédophile, ni même pornographique” (Houellebecq Carte 333). On the basis of this evidence, or rather the lack thereof, the seasoned detective Jasselin confirms his initial impression that “Ce type semblait n’avoir aucune vie privée,” remarking that he had rarely observed “quelqu’un ayant une vie aussi chiante” (Houellebecq, Carte 307, 333).
Given its overtly metafictional dimension, the failure of this investigation into the author’s private life can be read as a send-up of biographical and personalist criticism. Houellebecq’s murder “ne fut résolue que trois ans plus tard [...] par hasard” (*Carte* 385). The probe into the author’s private life made absolutely zero contribution to the discovery of the truth. If biographical criticism posits a continuity between the author’s private life and his work, *La Carte et le territoire* attacks the dubious foundation of this heuristic approach, first by questioning the author’s reputation and finally by affirming the radical separation between the author’s public and private lives.

*L’enlèvement de Michel Houellebecq* and the Role of the Author:

Guillaume Nicloux’s made-for-tv movie *L’enlèvement de Michel Houellebecq* performs another revealing interrogation of the author’s public figure. Nicloux’s exploration of the author’s public image and the possibility of biographical criticism should be of little surprise, given the film’s origin in a false rumor about the author. When Houellebecq failed to show up to a book signing in the Netherlands, wild rumors that the author had been kidnapped by Al-Qaeda circulated before contact was successfully reestablished with the author, who was safe and sound in Spain (Gindensperger). Like *La Carte et le territoire*, Nicloux’s film casts doubt over the sincerity of Houellebecq’s public posture and media presence, undermining the foundation of personalist criticism. *L’enlèvement de Michel Houellebecq*, however,

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35 Comically, because the film’s fictional kidnappers do not even know who is behind the kidnapping, because they are working through an intermediary. Maxime and Luc join the debate, speculating that it could be the Jews or the Arabs, having read “dans la presse qu’il était avec une Musulmane,” or, alternatively, Houellebecq himself—“peut-être qu’il voulait faire parler de lui. Peut-être qu’il se trouve que c’est lui qui avait commandé son propre truc.”
employs a significantly different approach from the novel. Rather than systematically demonstrating the incoherence of the author’s reputation, Nicloux’s comedy subverts the author’s public image through parody.

Much of the film’s humor relies on the viewer’s preconceptions about the author. When the author stumbles upon an écu in a park, the uninformed viewer would surely miss the playful suggestion that the allegedly reactionary and traditional novelist is living and writing in the past. In another opening vignette, the author hails a cab before whimsically declining his would-be taxi-driver’s services: “Non, finalement je vais prendre le métro. Excusez-moi, je, non, non, j’ai un truc à acheter.” Without knowing Houellebecq’s self-proclaimed reputation as a “raciste […] honteux,” the viewer cannot fully appreciate the author’s abrupt change of heart as the non-white taxi-driver exits from the vehicle to assist him with his luggage or his exoticizing romances with a black woman and a local prostitute Fatima (*Ennemis 7*). Finally, without knowledge of the author’s alleged alcoholism, the viewer might not fully grasp the parodic dimension of Michel’s continual negotiations over alcohol, as his kidnappers struggle to stop him from “[se cartonnant] la gueule.”

The viewer’s understanding of Nicloux’s parody also depends on his knowledge of Michel Houellebecq’s works. The director borrows details from the author’s parodic self-representation in his autofictional novel, *La Carte et le territoire*. Houellebecq’s special request for Spanish wine in the film plays on the description of his cellar stocked

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36 The écu is a long-outdated form of French currency.

37 Although it is also employed by non-muslims, the name Fatima is not indifferent to Houellebecq’s reputation for Islamophobia. Beyond the fact that the name originated in the Arabic language, it is notably the name of the Prophet Muhammad’s daughter.
with Argentinian and Chilean vintages in the novel (Carte 168). The kidnappers’
discovery of Tocqueville’s De la démocratie en Amérique on the author’s nightstand
coincides with the fictional Houellebecq’s praise for this work as “un chef-d’oeuvre, un
livre d’une puissance visionnaire inouie” in the novel (Houellebecq Carte 260).

These allusions are symptomatic of a larger trend in L’enlèvement de Michel
Houellebecq – throughout the film, the frontier between the author and his works is
regularly blurred. At times, Houellebecq paraphrases his fictional characters. While
chatting with a friend about his apartment renovations, the filmic Michel Houellebecq
qualifies Le Corbusier as “un esprit totalitaire à la base,” whose “ideal, au fond” was that
of a “camp de concentration”—a clear echo of Jed Martin’s father in La Carte et le
territoire, who describes the famous architect as “un esprit totalitaire et brutal” that
yielded “des espaces concentrationnaires” (Houellebecq 220, 222). Later in the film, the
author explains his suicidal thoughts to his kidnappers by referencing “les derniers mots
derEmmanuel Kant […] ‘c’est suffisant’”—an allusion that is also made by the protagonist
of La Possibilité d’une île, Daniel 1: “j’appris que les dernières paroles d’Emmanuel Kant,
sur son lit de mort, avaient été: ‘C’est suffisant’” (Houellebecq 313). The film also
dramatizes Houellebecq’s previous interventions as critic and author in Interventions 2
and Ennemis publics. In Ennemis publics, the author explains why he was destined to
become a novelist: “depuis vingt ou trente ans peut-être que les gens viennent me voir et
me racontent sans même que je les interroge des choses que peut-être ils n’avaient
racontées à personne” (Houellebecq 83). Sure enough, the mother of Mathieu— one of the
film’s kidnappers—confides in him: “ça concernait son passé, Dédé, c’était les
 choses…voilà elle me l’a dit à moi, je ne sais pas pourquoi […] j’ai pas demandé non
plus.” Likewise, Michel holds a conversation about politics with one of his captors that recycles his previous remarks on the state of democracy in Europe and political correctness. In Nicloux’s film, Houellebecq’s suggestion that “la vraie vocation de l’Europe, c’est de rendre impossible la démocratie et d’installer définitivement le gouvernement des experts” harkens back to *Ennemis public*, where he expressed the sentiment that he does not live in a democracy, but rather “dans une espèce de technocratie” (89). Furthermore, the filmic Houellebecq’s assertion that “C’est impossible de penser ce qu’on veut” in parts of Europe evokes his comment on political correctness in *Interventions 2*— “De plus en plus de choses deviennent impossible à penser” (204).

The aforementioned examples illustrate the sophistication of Nicloux’s parody in *L’enlèvement de Michel Houellebecq*; the director not only addresses the author’s reputation as a reactionary, racist and alcoholic, but also Houellebecq’s tendency to blur the line between himself and his works. As Jed Martin astutely observes in *La Carte et le territoire*, the author’s public performance encompasses both his fictional characters and “[son] propre rôle” (Houellebecq 146). This evident parody of Houellebecq’s public posture invites obvious questions with less obvious answers. *Where does this parody get us? What does it tell us about Houellebecq’s posture and reputation? What does it tell us about his novels?*

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38 Christy Wampole offered her take in a presentation at the University of Pennsylvania entitled “Michel Houellebecq as Filmic Object,” suggesting that the author’s embodiment of dark comedy in *L’Enlèvement de Michel Houellebecq* effectively ends the debate on Houellebecq’s novels, exposing his *romans à thèse* as satire.
Michel Houellebecq’s dramatic self-portrayal can be interpreted as a laying bare of the artifice of his persona— an acknowledgement of the fictional role the author plays in public. Nicloux’s film certainly demonstrates that Michel Houellebecq is willing to play his own role. Nicloux’s film also shows that the author’s public role may entail fiction, parody and frequent transgressions of the author-œuvre frontier. The symbolically charged masquerade dinner in the film lends further credence to this conclusion. Michel Houellebecq’s mask clearly symbolizes his authorial persona. While wearing this mask, the inebriated Houellebecq attains the height of his belligerence and provocation in the film, fully assuming his polemical public figure. The masked Houellebecq aggressively asserts his literary authority and flaunts his intolerance (“Je n’ai jamais dit que j’étais tolérant! Prononce pas ce mot devant moi!”), fearlessly engaging in a screaming match with his kidnapper Maxime, undeterred by his opponent’s bodybuilder physique. This microcosm of the author’s public relations naturally culminates in familiar accusations against the author: “Espèce de gros con! Facho! Réac!”

39 According to the Oxford English dictionary, the classical latin persona meant “mask, character, role.” This, of course, was an association between the mask worn by the actor in classical theater and the fictional role he embodied.

40 This masquerade scene in L’enlèvement de Michel Houellebecq resonates strongly Bakhtin’s description of the novelist’s role and prerogatives as a comedian: “The primary level, the level where the author makes his transformation, utilizes the images of the clown and the fool (that is, a naïveté expressed as the inability to understand stupid conventions). In the struggle against conventions, and against the inadequacy of all available life-slots to fit an authentic human being, these masks take on an extraordinary significance. They grant the right not to understand, the right to confuse, to tease, to hyperbolize life; the right to parody others while talking, the right to not be taken literally, not ‘to be oneself”; the right to live a life in the chronotope of the entr’acte, the chronotope of theatrical space, the right to act life as a comedy and to treat others as actors, the right to rip off masks, the right to rage at others with a primeval (almost cultic) rage—and finally, the right to betray to the public a personal life, down to its most private and prurient little secrets” (Bakhtin, 162-163).
The fiction of Houellebecq’s authorial figure, however, remains inconclusive. *L’enlèvement de Michel Houellebecq* provides evidence suggesting that the author’s public persona is fictionalized but fails to prove it beyond a reasonable doubt. This is not to say that the film gets us nowhere. Houellebecq’s self-parody highlights the fundamental ambiguity of his public figure, making a compelling argument against personalist criticism.

**Personalist Criticism—The Kidnapping and Interrogation of Michel Houellebecq:**

When Nicloux’s trio of clumsy kidnappers discuss literature, they reveal themselves to be equally incompetent critics. Houellebecq’s captors are emblematic of a reading public who accords an excessive importance to the author’s persona.

One of the film’s opening scenes draws our attention to this tendency in the general public. A fan stops Houellebecq in the street to sign a copy of *Plateforme*, before alluding to a decontextualized and sensational verse of Michel’s poetry that he had seen in the press: “Moi j’ai pas lu récemment les poèmes, mais malgré tout, j’ai vu l’extrait que les hommes passent la grande partie de la journée à se faire sucer” (emphasis added). This fan typifies the uninformed reading public, whose ideas about an author’s works are predicated on the popular media—on what they see in the press, rather than what they read. Sure enough, Houellebecq’s fan paraphrases one of the few citations that made it into Eric Loret’s real review of *Configuration du dernier ravage* published in *Libération* (Loret). Naturally, Michel refuses this sensationalist reduction of his poetry in the press: “Non, non, c’est pas exactement ça.”
In their relatively longer and more substantial literary discussions, Nicloux’s Pieds Nickelés-like kidnappers do not fare much better than this uninformed fan. Personalist criticism rears its ugly head throughout their attempts to understand the author’s work.

While waiting for the handcuffed Houellebecq to finish his lunch, Maxime probes the captive author’s creative process. When Houellebecq explains that his writing has little to do with introspection or personal experience, Maxime insists “il faut quand-même que tu aies vécu certaines émotions et certains...” The kidnapper is astonished to discover that “c’est pas une écriture autobiographique” and that an author could possibly “parler d’un sujet qu’[il] ne [connaît] pas.”

Maxime’s fellow kidnapper Luc displays a vague awareness of the distinction between the author and his subject. Speaking with a friend about Houellebecq’s first published book in which “Il se fait un délire sur un autre auteur qui s’appelle Lordcraft,” he defends Michel against bad criticism. As Luc’s friend flips through H.P. Lovecraft: Contre le monde, contre la vie, she reads sentence fragments at random that confirm her preconceptions about the author: “Tu vois c’est ça ‘macabre, fantastique, sombre.’ Il y a que ça […] voilà il est cru. ‘ai-je pissé ?’…regarde les mots !” Despite his struggle to remember the other author’s name, Luc at least makes the critical distinction between the author and his subject, explaining that Houellebecq naturally evokes the “macabre, fantastique, [et] sombre,” because “Là il te parle de de de de Lord … de Lovecraft quoi, parce que c’est, c’est, il est dans l’horreur.” Responding to the question of Houellebecq’s vulgarity, Luc further explores the distinction between the author’s writing and personality—“La vraie question qu’il se pose quand il dit ça, c’est est-ce que je suis allé
plus loin que ma propre, que ma propre personnalité me le permet ? Est-ce qu’il est capable de choquer lui-même et se faire pisser dessus ? ” (emphasis added). So despite his stammering speech, Luc theoretically understands that the author’s writing and person must be distinguished.

In practice, however, Luc reverts to a personalist, even borderline biographical approach. At the dinner table with Michel Houellebecq, he takes the opportunity to ask the author about “un truc qui m’étonne” in *H.P Lovecraft: contre le monde, contre la vie*. The detail in question concerns an anecdote about Houellebecq’s life, rather than the content of his book. Luc asks Michel, “c’est vrai que vous avez chiné pendant un truc d’écrivains le coussin de “Warcraft” avec sa bave, son sang?” Michel denies this anecdote and further claims that “C’est pas du tout mon livre […] il le confond avec un autre truc.” But Luc insists “j’ai lu le bouquin mon cousin,” and audaciously claims that he knows better than the “mec censé [l’avoir] écrit.” While this assertion evokes Barthes’ proclamation of the death of the author and the birth of the reader, Luc, problematically, did not read Houellebecq’s book attentively, if at all. Only coming away from his reading with an unfounded fantasy about the author’s life, Luc clearly prefers the fiction of the author’s life to the author’s fictions.

Maxime and Luc therefore parody misguided, personalist readings of literature. Maxime assumes that the writer must be speaking about his own lived experience, while Luc fabricates a personal anecdote about the author during his incomplete and inattentive reading. Houellebecq’s observation that “tout est faux […] tout est faux dans la

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41 Luc confuses Houellebecq’s subject (Lovecraft) with a popular computer game (Warcraft).
CONCLUSION--Reading Houellebecq and his Fictions, Separately:

To conclude, it is necessary to look back on our findings thus far and look ahead to the chapters that will follow. Michel Houellebecq is without a doubt one of the most visible and visibly provocative authors living today. The potential provocation of Houellebecq’s controversial characters is multiplied manyfold by the troubling relationship that the author maintains with them. By professing the ideas espoused by his characters, Houellebecq encourages critics to assimilate the author and his oeuvre, legitimizing readings of his novels as “une sorte de long essai démonstratif au premier degré” (Dion 9). At this point, it would be tempting to close the case on Michel Houellebecq and his oeuvre, had the author not voiced his strident opposition to “reductio biographica” and claimed that his writing has “rien à voir [avec une écriture autobiographique]” (Ennemis 295; Nicloux). At first glance, Houellebecq seems to make irreconcilable demands upon his reading public, rejecting the very biographical criticism that his polemical public persona invites.

Upon further examination, however, Houellebecq’s polemical public posture and refusal of biographical criticism can be reconciled. Time and time again, Michel Houellebecq gestures towards the artifice of his public posture. In Ennemis publics, the

42 Houellebecq’s remark is in response not to a reading of his books, but a rumor about his private life. The kidnappers’ blind faith in the media leads them to believe that Houellebecq has a brother and not a sister, while the truth is precisely the opposite—Houellebecq has a sister and not a brother. Yet, even when Michel disabuses them, they cling to their false ideas about the author’s life and consequently fail to grasp the situation: “mais pourquoi tu vas appeler ta sœur précisément et pas ton frère qui est diplomate ? je comprends pas.”
author admits to his proclivity for provocation and to the significant change in his publicity strategy around the publication of *Les Particules élémentaires* (Houellebecq *Ennemis* 14, 234). While the confessions of this comic correspondence must be taken with a grain of salt, these claims appear to be borne out in Houellebecq’s oeuvre. The revised and expanded second edition of the author’s essay and interview compilation, *Interventions 2*, shows the emergence of a decidedly new and more provocative version of Houellebecq around 1998. Furthermore, Houellebecq’s self-parody in both his novel *La Carte et le territoire* and Guillaume Nicloux’s film *L’enlèvement de Michel* underscores the incoherence and unreliability of his public image. These works also make implied arguments against biographical criticism. In *La Carte et le territoire*, Michel Houellebecq literalizes the Barthesian *Death of the Author* by portraying his own death. The subsequent criminal investigation reveals that the writer has “aucune vie privée”—an affirmation of the radical separation between the author’s private and professional lives (Houellebecq *Carte* 307). In *L’enlèvement de Michel* Houellebecq, the kidnappers attempt to understand Houellebecq’s writing not by reading his work, but rather by interrogating their hostage (a situation that can be seen as a metaphor for personalist criticism). Helpless literary critics, the kidnappers butcher the most basic details of Houellebecq’s books, insisting on scenes they evidently dreamed up and confusing names that are even provided in the book’s title. Assuming that writing is necessarily autobiographical, they fixate on imagined anecdotes about the author’s private life, rather than his words.

These findings effectively enable us to reconcile Michel Houellebecq’s polemical public posture and refusal of biographical criticism. His criticism, correspondence and
fictions point to the ambiguity of his persona and provocations—including, notably, his public flirtation with his controversial characters. Houellebecq’s public posture could just as well be a fiction or an authentic reflection of the flesh-and-blood author’s personal values. Either way, the author’s ambiguous public image fails to provide a clear and reliable lens for reading his novels. Furthermore, advancing more or less explicit arguments against personalist criticism in his works, Houellebecq makes the following appeal to his reader: “Couvrir d’un voile compatissant ou narquois les errances idéologiques ; faire un effort pour vous concentrer uniquement sur la qualité littéraire des textes. Vous pouvez le faire ; vous l’avez déjà fait, votre passé glorieux en témoigne” (Interventions 2 236).

A reader might pursue such a purely literary reading by focusing on what Michel Houellebecq identifies as the critical features of his novels—his ideas and his characters. In an interview with Frédéric Martel, Michel Houellebecq ascribes to Schopenhauer’s notion that “la première—et pratiquement la seule—condition d’un bon style, c’est d’avoir quelque chose à dire” (Estier 50). In his correspondence with BHL, Houellebecq suggests that “[si] j’étais doué pour une chose, et pour une seule en relation au roman, c’était la création de personnages” (Ennemis 266). Yet, as he notes in his essay on Alain Robbe-Grillet, “Coupes de sol,” “en ouvrant ma littérature aux conceptions théoriques qu’on peut élabérer sur le monde, je m’expose constamment au risque du cliché” (Houellebecq Interventions 2 282). Given his vision of the art of the novel, what exactly is Houellebecq saying through his characters? What clichés and what ideas do they express? Fully aware of his reputation as a reactionary, racist, Islamophobe and
misanthropic, we think we know what Michel Houellebecq has to say about questions of race, religion and gender, but what do his novels really say about these subjects?  

Answering these questions will require a rigorous, narratological examination of the Muslim, female, and minority characters in Houellebecq’s novels. How are these diverse minority figures represented by the narrator and by other characters? How do these remarks reciprocally characterize their speakers? What vision of the implied author do these characters generate? Finally, what can this implied author tell us about Michel Houellebecq’s reputation and perplexing public persona?

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43 This approach is explored by Gerald Prince in “Les Particules élémentaires: autoportrait” -- an insightful essay that was a major source of inspiration for this dissertation.
CHAPTER 2: HOUELLEBECQ’S ISLAMOPHOBIC CHARACTER(S)

Didier Sénécal’s infamous interview with Michel Houellebecq appeared on September 1st, 2001 in Lire, which had previously named Les Particules élémentaires their book of the year. In his brief introduction, Sénécal predicts that the author’s latest novel would offend “adversaires de la prostitution, féministes, associations caritatives, droits-de-l'hommistes, musulmans, sans compter une brochette d'organes de presse et d'éditorialistes nommément désignés,” but fails to anticipate that his interview would eclipse the provocative pages of Plateforme (¶ 2).

Houellebecq’s polemical responses to Sénécal would land him in court. He describes Islam as “la religion la plus con” and “une religion dangereuse […] depuis son apparition,” speculating that it would be “condamné […] à long terme” by capitalism—“un moindre mal […] dont les valeurs sont méprisables, mais […] moins destructrices, moins cruelles” (Sénécal ¶ 29, 31).44 France’s Human Rights league, the World Islamic League, the Lyon and Paris Mosques and the National Federation of Muslims brought charges of inciting racial hatred against him (Hendon 198).45 But in September 2002, the author was acquitted by the tribunal correctionnel de Paris, who ruled that his statements were “caractérisés ni par une particulière hauteur de vue, ni par la subtilité de leur formulation […] mais] ne [renferment] aucune volonté d’invective, de mépris ou d’outrage envers [les] adeptes de la religion concernée” (“Poursuivi pour injure” ¶ 2).

44 Houellebecq echoes statements made by Desplechin in Les Particules élémentaires and the Egyptian expatriate and Jordanian banker in Plateforme.
45 In response to Sénécal’s question, “Pour l’Islam, ce n’est plus du mépris que vous exprimez, mais de la haine?”, Houellebecq responds, albeit somewhat evasively, in the affirmative: “Oui, oui, on peut parler de haine” (¶ 26-27).
Michel Houellebecq’s acquittal, however, did not translate to the court of public opinion. In *Ennemis publics*, Houellebecq bitterly complains about his unauthorized biographer Denis Demonpion, who claimed the author’s Islamophobia could be proven. Employing a judicial metaphor, Houellebecq suggests that his 2002 trial never ended: “j’allais vite comprendre que dans les interviews, comme après l’inculpation dans les feuilletons policiers américains, tout ce que j’allais dire ‘pouvait être retenu contre moi’” (*Ennemis* 236).

To be fair, Houellebecq is not an entirely innocent victim of slander. Rather than allowing the *Lire* controversy to smolder, he repeatedly added fuel to the fire. After his 2015 interview with Angélique Chrisafis, “Michel Houellebecq: ‘Am I Islamophobic? Probably, yes,’” a Google search for “Houellebecq Islamophobe” now yields dozens of similarly titled articles from the international press (*Chrisafis*). So, whether Houellebecq is framed as a despicable, unapologetic racist, an opportunistic and unscrupulous provocateur or one of the leading “dissidents de l’islam politique,” his reputed “antipathie prononcée pour l’islam” evidently endures (*Devecchio; Wagner* 120). Nearly two decades later, the jury is still out.

The resonance between the author’s public declarations with his novels reinforces Houellebecq’s reputation as an Islamophobe. As Walter Wagner observes, “En dehors de

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46 Michel Houellebecq describes Demonpion’s claim he could prove the author’s Islamophobia in *Ennemis publics*: “Oui oui, absolument, ça je peux le prouver, ses déclarations l’attestent,” but admits that he is paraphrasing “Je ne garantis pas mot à mot, mais l’esprit est scrupuleusement respecté” (236). However, in his interview with Jérôme Dupuis, Demonpion does not suggest that he can *absolutely prove* Houellebecq’s prejudice. When pressed about Houellebecq’s “convictions personnelles,” Demonpion stops short of absolute declarations: “Est-il raciste? […] s’il ne l’est pas, il n’en est pas loin” (“Acte III”).

ses interventions publiques dans lesquelles il a dénigré l’islam, ses fictions ne manquent pas d’attaques verbales qui s’adressent aux musulmans” (120). In Houellebecq’s novels, Muslims are referred to as “les minables du Sahara,” portrayed as self-righteous and hypocritical “cons,” accused of an “antisémitisme embarassant,” associated with neonazis and dismissed “dans l’ensemble” as “pas terrible” (Plateforme 262, 30; Soumission 51; Particules 266). The Quran is criticized for “[son] ambiance de tautologie” (Houellebecq Plateforme 261). Islam is qualified as a “connerie” and “déraisonnable”—“de loin la plus bête, la plus fausse et la plus obscurantiste de toutes les religions” (Houellebecq Lanzarote 63 ; Plateforme, 259 ; Particules 336). Islam’s “radical” monotheism renders it an “inhumaine et cruelle” religion with “[des] solutions monstrueuses et rétrogrades” (Houellebecq Plateforme 261 ; Lanzarote, 69).

Islam also poses a clear threat to Western civilization in Houellebecq’s novels. Having emerged from “le désert [qui] ne produit que des désaxés et des crétins,” Islam is blamed for Egypt’s cultural stagnation and “néant intellectuel absolu” (Houellebecq Plateforme 262). Fundamentalism is reaching European capitals—“sanctuaire[s] terroriste[s]” where “l’intégrisme islamique avait pris des proportions alarmantes” (Houellebecq Lanzarote 38). Islam even assumes “le rôle […] d’une religion ‘officielle’” in France (Houellebecq Possibilité 358). But Islam’s rise is judged to be an ephemeral phenomenon “à long terme […] condamné” (Houellebecq Particules 336).48 One of

48 When the interviewer Christian Authier alludes to this passage in Plateforme, Houellebecq readily aligns himself with his provocative character: “Oui, je pense que c’est vrai, mais on peut trouver que le long terme est un peu long. Je crois que les masses rêvent effectivement du modèle occidental. Cela me paraît en l’occurrence un moindre mal. Il y a visiblement une lutte entre deux maux dont l’un est pire que l’autre” (Houellebecq, Interventions 2, 196).
Houellebecq’s *grand remplacement* narratives concludes with the “chute de l’islam en Occident” (*Possibilité* 359).

Given the coincidence between the representation of Islam in Houellebecq’s novels and the author’s controversial public remarks, it is tempting to close the case and confidently declare both the author and his novels Islamophobic, but this hasty conclusion could constitute “intellectuellement, une bien mauvaise action” (Houellebecq *Ennemis* 298).

As we observed in Chapter 1: Reading Houellebecq and his Fictions, the author highlights the unreliability of his provocative public persona through his satirical self-portraits and fictional analogues. In separate promotional interviews for *Plateforme* [2001] and *Soumission* [2015], the author espouses positions on Islam that are difficult to reconcile. After writing off Islam as “la religion la plus con” in 2001, Michel Houellebecq sympathizes with the “situation impossible” of French Muslims as an underrepresented political minority in 2015 (Sénécal ¶ 29; Bourmeau ¶ 22). After emphatically declaring that “Quand on lit le Coran, on est effondré... effondré!” in 2001, Houellebecq admits that “au fond le Coran c’est plutôt mieux que je ne pensais, après relecture – après lecture plutôt” in 2015 (Sénécal ¶ 29; Bourmeau ¶ 110). Having formerly emphasized that Muslims are not “tous de bons musulmans […]et que beaucoup d’entre eux […] vivent dans la plus totale hypocrisie” in 2001, the author shifts his criticism to “les djihadistes [qui] sont de mauvais musulmans” with a dishonest and untenable interpretation of the Quran in 2015 (Sénécal ¶ 12; Bourmeau ¶ 110). As Houellebecq himself concludes in the latter interview, “j’ai un peu changé d’avis” (Bourmeau ¶ 110).
Houellebecq’s inconsistent public figure fails to provide a reliable lens for reading his fiction. While not technically “reductio biographica,” the assimilation between the public author and his fictions risks equally reductive readings (Houellebecq Ennemis 295).

Although descriptions of Islam as “la religion la plus con” or “la plus bête […] de toutes les religions” may initially appear equivalent, their meanings remain context dependent (Sénécal; Houellebecq, Particules 336). Jean-Noël Dumont—the author of Houellebecq, La vie absente—stumbles into this trap, attributing the former excerpt from the Lire interview to Les Particules élémentaires. Yet these seemingly interchangeable statements have markedly different implications when uttered in a promotional interview by an author “qualifié de nouveau Céline […] de provocateur” or by the fictional head of the CNRS biology department who facilitates the creation of a post-religious dystopia (Sénécal).

Although Pierre Jourde rightfully notes that “Houellebecq est provocateur, mais prudent […] jouant habilement sur la différence entre auteur, narrateur et personnage,” he erroneously imagines that this discursive play can be resolved by “les convergences entre [la] fiction et [les] propos privés [de l’auteur]” (272, 273). Islamophobic discourse in Houellebecq’s novels is always expressed by fictional characters and mediated by narrators. The direct attribution of controversial character speech to the novelist disregards the “fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel”—the dialogization of “authorial speech, the speeches of narrators

49 While this misattribution could simply reflect a careless error, it also might provide an example of contamination of scholarship on Michel Houellebecq’s novels by his controversial public figure.
[...and] the speech of characters”(Bakhtin 263). The author should not be presumed to extend his unqualified support to his Islamophobic speakers and his public persona does not necessarily determine critical readings of his novels.

So instead, we will proceed in precisely the opposite direction, measuring Houellebecq’s public figure against the implied author derived from his novels. To situate the implied author of these novels, it will be necessary to consider the representation of Houellebecq’s Islamophobic speakers and the context of their speech acts. In line with the work of Raphaël Baroni, we will carefully recontextualize the Islamophobia in Michel Houellebecq’s novels, examining the composition of “la scène énonciative des passages les plus provoqueurs de son roman, en scrutant notamment la manière dont il parvient à atténuer la portée de certains propos, alors que, dans d’autres cas, il apparaît plus enclin à assumer le point de vue de tel ou tel personnage” (Baroni 83). What do Houellebecq’s Islamophobic speakers say? In what circumstances? How does the narrator characterize them? How is the narrator characterized? How are these statements reinforced or challenged by the author’s plot choices? Can the Islamophobia of these characters be extended to the implied author? A narratological analysis will account for the processes of mediation and distancing at work in Houellebecq’s novels, yielding insight into the prejudices, “the emotions and judgements of the implied author” (Booth 86).

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EXTENSION DU DOMAINE DE LA LUTTE: Michel Houellebecq’s first foray into prose fiction, Extension du domaine de la lutte tells the story of a thirty-year-old software
engineer whose crippling social alienation, sexual frustration, existential angst and depression ultimately oblige him to leave his job and enter a psychiatric institution.  


Yet this possible allusion to Muslims in Houellebecq’s first novel remains oblique. Though their leader was a Shi’ite militant, CSAPP also included predominantly Christian organizations—the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia and Lebanese Armed Revolutionary Factions, whose imprisoned Maronite Christian leader they sought to liberate (Charters 110; Department of Homeland Security 19; Baud ¶1; Hijazi ¶6). The narrator’s allusion to “terroristes arabes” proves appropriately vague (Houellebecq *Extension* 27).

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50 The protagonist’s age and profession may encourage biographical readings. Not only did Michel Thomas work as a software engineer, but he was born in 1956, making him the same age as his protagonist in 1986 (Demonpion, 27-35). This might explain why Emmanuel Dion erroneously refers to the unnamed hero of Houellebecq’s first novel as the “Michel dépressif d’*Extension*” (77).

51 The narrator reports that “deux personnes étaient mortes. Une troisième avait les jambes sectionnées et la moitié du visage arraché” and “une femme d’une cinquantaine d’années [a été déchiquetée]” in the successive bombings (Houellebecq, *Extension*, 27). As *Libération* reported, there were indeed “deux morts et un blessé grave” on the Champs-Élysées and another death at the Hôtel de ville (“Les précédents attentats”).
The narrator’s report of Arab terrorism in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* is not necessarily Islamophobic. On the one hand, the novel’s unnamed hero harbors clear prejudice against categories that are semantically linked to Islam--Arabs and the banlieue.\(^\text{52}\) Houellebecq’s protagonist reports his misplaced car as stolen and blames thieves from “[la] proche banlieue,” reasoning that “l’anecdote serait aisément comprise et admise” (*Extension* 13). While visiting a friend in the suburbs, he feels threatened by “deux jeunes Arabes [qui] m’ont suivi du regard” (Houellebecq *Extension* 159).\(^\text{53}\) He even daydreams about being murdered by “une bande de zonards […] des créatures grasses et méchantes, brutalement, parfaitement stupides” in a bus station (Houellebecq *Extension* 152).\(^\text{54}\) On the other hand, the narrator who never hesitates to employ the term “nègre,” tellingly makes no mention of Muslims or Islam in his narrative (Houellebecq *Extension* 94, 136, 143).

Despite the virtual absence of Islam from *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, the author’s portrait of the agonizing Catholic Church and the era of atheism serves to

\(^\text{52}\) Deltombe and Rigouste argue that the media construct of the Arab in France entails “une série d’amalgames et d’ambivalences autour des catégories symboliques de l’’immigré’ et de l’’étranger,’ du ‘musulman’ et de l’ ‘islamiste,’ du ‘jeune de banlieue’ ou du ‘terroriste’” (191).

\(^\text{53}\) Jean-Louis Cornille qualifies this sentence as “très littéralement, une citation non dissimulée, à peine transformée d’une phrase qu’on trouve chez Camus : ‘deux arabes en bleu de chauffe […] venaient dans notre direction’” (141). He draws somewhat forced parallels at the plot level and even claims that the fatal car accident in Houellebecq’s novel is an allusion to the “circonstances tragiques de la mort de Camus” (139). A stylistic comparison would be more compelling—the narrator’s desire to “peindre l’indifférence” through “une articulation plus plate” resonates with *l’écriture blanche* that Barthes attributes to Camus (Houellebecq, 49).

\(^\text{54}\) While the protagonist’s prejudice against the banlieue appears unfounded and illegitimate, his fears do come to fruition in the professional sphere. The narrator learns about the terrorist attacks in Paris after expressing his anxiety about “le premier contact avec un nouveau client” (Houellebecq *Extension* 26). The new client “confirme dès le début toutes mes appréhensions” ; her “agressivité […] étonnante” reinforces his conviction that “nous vivons dans un monde […] basé sur la domination, l’argent et la peur” (Houellebecq *Extension* 31, 170).
contextualize and perhaps mitigate his provocative treatment of Muslims in subsequent novels.

While the promise of a benevolent creator and afterlife could assuage the protagonist’s existential angst and depression, he remains firmly entrenched in his atheism throughout the narrative, professing a worldview “basé sur la domination, l’argent, la peur […] la séduction et le sexe […] et rien d’autre” (Houellebecq Extension 170-171). Religion escapes him, as illustrated in a nightmare where he plummets from the towers of the Chartres Cathedral towards certain death before he can reveal the “secret ultime” to a gathering crowd below (Houellebecq, Extension 164). When a friend encourages him to “retrouver Dieu,” the narrator feels that they hit “une impasse” (Houellebecq Extension 37, 38).

The narrator of Houellebecq’s first novel never succeeds in taking religion seriously. He writes a ridiculous fable entitled “Dialogues d’une vache et d’une poulie” in which “l’éleveur [qui] symbolisait Dieu […] a condamné] la vache, coupable du péché d’orgueil […] à la fécondation artificielle” (Extension 13, 15). When contemplating a romanesque church, he concludes that “l’ancienne vie des pêcheurs sablais, avec les messes du dimanche dans la petite église, la communion des fidèles […] était une vie assez stupide” (Houellebecq Extension 122). Most egregiously, he associates a sermon about “une immense espérance […] au cœur des hommes” with his homicidal fantasies (Houellebecq Extension 82).

By bookending his novel with religious epigraphs, the author visibly distances himself from his blasphemous hero. The protagonist’s plot to kill a couple on Christmas eve elucidates the first chapter’s biblical epigraph: “La nuit est avancée, le jour approche.
Dépouillons-nous donc des œuvres des ténèbres, et revêtons les armes de la lumière” (Houellebecq Extension 9). But the narrator fails to see the proverbial light : “Je regrettais que Tisserand n’ait pas tué le nègre ; le jour se levait” (Houellebecq Extension 143). Likewise, his culminating journey to Saint-Cîgues-en-Montagne evokes the final chapter’s Buddhist epigraph : “il y a un chemin à parcourir, et il faut le parcourir, mais il n’y a pas de voyageur” (Houellebecq Extension 176). Despite dutifully following the arduous path, Houellebecq’s protagonist never transcends individualism, remaining a “prisonnier en [lui]-même” (Houellebecq Extension 181).

The author nevertheless concurs with his protagonist, rejecting the Church as a solution to his hero’s crippling anxieties or the reigning culture of individualism. Houellebecq’s critique of Christianity is most clearly articulated through the figure of Jean-Pierre Buvet, a priest in Vitry. Having attended the same engineering school before “il a bifurqué,” Buvet represents the protagonist’s pious counterpart (Houellebecq Extension 36). Yet the moral failings of this clergyman and his superiors only reaffirm the righteousness of the narrator’s atheism.

When Buvet discovers that his superiors condone the dubious practice of euthanasia in a local hospital, his response leaves much to be desired. Not only does he fail to take a stand against institutional corruption, he fails to fulfill even his most basic

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55 J. Garfield explains the Buddhist idea of self-imprisonment: “The path to liberation, for a self is a mere conceptual imputation, is a path to the authorship of a narrative in which a better self is the protagonist, a self whose actions are conditioned by compassion, sympathetic joy, generosity and confidence. […] However, the freedom achieved through the cultivation of this path […] is a freedom of a conceptually imputed person from the bars of a self-constructed prison” (Repetti 55).

56 The narrator witnesses this atomized society firsthand. At his office, the death of a colleague elicits “quelques paroles” like “c’est nul, c’est la déche” (Houellebecq Extension 139, 34). In a medical emergency, strangers ignore his pleas for help and leave him on the side of the road at the first sign of a “feu vert” (Houellebecq Extension 86).
clerical functions. When a complicit nurse approaches him with her concomitant guilt, Buvet sleeps with her. A twentieth-century Tartuffe, he expounds “l’intérêt que notre société feint d’ éprouver pour l’érotisme” before breaking his vow of celibacy (Houellebecq Extension 36-37). Making matters worse, he reframes his sin as virtuous, recalling the rhetorical gymnastics of Molière’s faux-dévot57: “Je priais beaucoup pendant cette période, je relisais constamment les Évangiles […] je sentais que le Christ me comprenait, qu’il était avec moi” (Houellebecq Extension 162).

The narrator’s reaction to Jean-Pierre Buvet underscores the diminished moral authority of the Church that justifies the broader decline in religious devotion portrayed in Extension du domaine de la lutte.58 The protagonist advises the wayward preacher to confess before conceding that “à l’évidence, je ne pouvais rien pour lui” (Houellebecq Extension 163). His sarcasm befits this ridiculous role reversal in which a confessor confesses his carnal sins to an atheist.

So despite lacking explicit reflections on Islam, Extension du domaine de la lutte still bears implications for Houellebecq’s alleged Islamophobia. The narrator’s passing reference to Arab terrorists and the novel’s more substantial critique of Christianity will contribute to the author’s broader portraits of Islam and religion in his prose fiction.

LES PARTICULES ELEMENTAIRES: In his second novel, Houellebecq elaborates his reflections on the liberalization of the sexual economy—“un second système de

57 In the third scene of Act III, Tartuffe attempts to reconcile religious devotion and adultery : “Mais enfin je connus, ô beauté toute aimable, / Que cette passion peut n’être point coupable, / Que je puis l’ajuster avec que la pudeur,/ Et c’est ce qui m’y fait abandonner mon cœur” (Molière, 80).
58 Buvet’s congregation “[n’a] jamais réussi à dépasser cinq personnes” and a nightclub is “à moitié pleine” on Christmas eve (Houellebecq Extension 160, 127).
différenciation, tout à fait indépendant de l’argent […mais] au moins aussi impitoyable”--that he introduced in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (114). Through the interwoven narratives of the half brothers Michel and Bruno, *Les Particules élémentaires* posits that “la libération sexuelle eut pour effet la destruction de ces communautés intermédiaires […le couple et la famille qui séparaient] l’individu du marché” (Houellebecq 144).

But these novels differ in their responses to society’s atomization. While the narrator of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* resigns himself to his failure, declaring “le but de la vie est manqué,” *Les Particules élémentaires* proposes a solution to “ce processus de destruction [sociale]” (Houellebecq *Extension* 181 ; *Particules* 144). From 2002 and 2009, the protagonist Michel Djerzinski lays the theoretical groundwork for the genetic re-engineering of humanity (Houellebecq *Particules* 370). In the ensuing decades, Frédéric Hubczejak--a charismatic biochemist from Cambridge--rallies the world behind a “proposition radicale issue des travaux de Djerzinski : l’humanité devait disparaître, l’humanité devait donner naissance à une nouvelle espèce, asexuée et immortelle, ayant dépassé l’individualité, la séparation et le devenir” (Houellebecq *Particules* 385).

The science-fiction plot of *Les Particules élémentaires* has implications for our reading of the post-human narrator who declares victory over “l’égoïsme, […] la cruauté et […] la colère” (Houellebecq 394). Post-humans transcend individualism through their “patrimoine génétique rigoureusement identique” (Houellebecq *Particules* 390). They overcome cruelty and competition by abandoning sexual reproduction and the ambitions of their predecessors—“la poursuite du Vrai et du Beau, moins stimulée par l’aiguillon de la vanité individuelle, a de fait acquis un caractère moins urgent” (Houellebecq *Particules* 394). The narrator’s description of what, in many ways, appears to be a
dystopia as a “paradis” demands careful distinctions between sources of speech in the narrative.⁵⁹ Because the post-human era marks the ultimate triumph of science over religion, this narratological task becomes especially urgent when evaluating the novel’s representation of Islam.⁶⁰

Unlike Houellebecq’s first novel, Les Particules élémentaires explicitly portrays Islam as anti-Semitic, violent, stupid and obscurantist. But the characterization of the novel’s Islamophobic speakers consistently casts doubt over their authority and reasoning, punctuating each problematic description of Islam with an asterisk.

The chair of the CNRS biology department, Desplechin develops the most direct criticism of Islam in Les Particules élémentaires, categorically dismissing the faith with a series of disparaging superlatives: “Je sais bien que l’islam—de loin la plus bête, la plus fausse et la plus obscurantiste de toutes les religions—semble actuellement gagner du terrain ; mais ce n’est qu’un phénomène superficiel et transitoire : à long terme l’islam est condamné, encore plus sûrement que le christianisme” (Houellebecq 335-336).⁶¹

Desplechin makes these Islamophobic remarks while meeting with his protégé Michel Djerzinski to discuss his imminent retirement and the logistics of the latter’s future genetic research. When Djerzinski inquires about his retirement plans, Desplechin makes a facetious remark about sex tourism before launching into a monologue about “le

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⁵⁹ This radical difference in perspective can be chalked up to the considerable chronological, ideological and interspecific gulf separating the post-human narrator from the human characters featured in its narrative.

⁶⁰ Raphaël Baroni observes that narratological distinctions are all too often ignored in criticism of Houellebecq’s novels: “de nombreux commentateurs ont fondé leur analyse en niant purement et simplement les frontières qui séparent traditionnellement les opinions de l’auteur de celles exprimées par ses personnages” (75).

⁶¹ Although Michel Houellebecq appears to provocatively paraphrase Desplechin’s assessment of Islam in his 2001 Lire interview—calling Islam “la religion la plus con”—the implied author of Les Particules élémentaires may diverge from the Islamophobic character and public author.
désir de connaissance” motivating a select subset of particularly driven researchers “[qui] sont la puissance la plus importante du monde [...] parce qu’ils détiennent les clefs de la certitude rationnelle [...] tout ce qu’ils déclarent comme vrai est tôt ou tard reconnu tel par l’ensemble de la population. Aucune puissance économique, politique, sociale ou religieuse n’est capable de tenir face à l’évidence de la certitude rationnelle” (Houellebecq Particules 334).

Despite the confident expression of Desplechin’s conclusions, there are reasons for the reader to question his argument about science and religion. First, the CNRS department head circumscribes the role of religion to “des tentatives d’explication du monde,” evacuating its primordial moral function by rejecting the notion that “la valeur d’une religion, c’est la qualité de la morale qu’elle permet de fonder” (Houellebecq Particules 335). Religion, however, does not necessarily attempt to explain the world in the same way that the hard sciences do: spirituality may be construed as a complement to science that addresses the unknowable and unquantifiable aspects of human existence.62 Second, rational arguments may also be employed to prove the existence of god.63 Third, the reader may also question Desplechin’s assertion that “la preuve mathématique, la démarche expérimentale sont des acquis définitifs de la conscience humaine” (Houellebecq Particules 335). The results of experimental science are not as definitive as

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62 Religious institutions are no longer necessarily at odds with science. Catholic Church has acknowledged Darwinian evolution as early as the 1950s (Wofford ¶ 8). More recently, Pope Francis endorsed the Big Bang theory and the science of climate change (Withnall ¶ 5-6; Horowitz ¶ 3 ).

63 For example, Descartes’ proof of God’s existence in his Méditations métaphysiques [1641].
Houellebecq’s speaker suggests; scientific findings should not be presented with absolute certainty, but rather as provisional theories, subject to revision (Botkin ¶ 1).  

Some of these objections to Desplechin’s argument are acknowledged in the scene of enunciation. His interlocutor, Michel Djerzinski, notes how scientific theories—including those that allegedly challenged religious beliefs—have been superseded: “il savait, et depuis très longtemps, que la métaphysique matérialiste, après avoir anéanti les croyances religieuses des siècles précédents, avait elle-même été détruite par les avancées plus récentes de la physique” (Houellebecq Particules 336). Realizing that the most recent advances in physics create a space for “un doute, une inquiétude spirituelle,” Houellebecq’s protagonist retreats to his comfort zone and professes “ce positivisme pragmatique, de base, qui est en général celui des chercheurs” (Particules 336). In response, Desplechin appears to dismiss his metaphysical musings, casting doubt over his claims about rationalism and religion (including Islam): “Je ne suis plus chercheur...[...C’est sans doute pour ça que je me laisse envahir, sur le tard, par des questions métaphysiques. Mais bien sûr c’est vous qui avez raison. Il faut continuer à chercher, à expérimenter, à découvrir de nouvelles lois, et le reste n’a aucune importance[....] Bien sûr, une fois de plus, c’est [Pascal] qui a raison contre Descartes” (Houellebecq Particules 337).

Desplechin’s broader characterization in the novel casts further doubts over his Islamophobic remarks. The post-human narrator of Les Particules élémentaires notes his

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64 Daniel Botkin suggests that “the key to the scientific method is that it is a way of knowing in which you can never completely prove that something is absolutely true. Instead, the important idea about the method is that any statement, to be scientific, must be open to disproof, and a way of knowing how to disprove it exists” (Botkin ¶ 4).
passion (“les yeux brillants”) and “humour,” but qualifies his considerable charm as “un charme désenchanté” and describes Desplechin as “un homme détruit” (Houellebecq 338, 331). When entertaining these metaphysical questions, approaching the end of his career and “[atteignant] la soixantaine; sur le plan intellectuel, il se sentait complètement grillé” (Houellebecq *Particules* 27). Desplechin’s intellectual burn-out could perhaps explain his flawed thinking—including his Islamophobic and xenophobic remarks (he describes Norway and Japan as “ces pays sinistres où les quadragénaires se suicident en masse” (Houellebecq, *Particules* 24).

The other Islamophobic speakers in *Les Particules élémentaires*—Bruno and Christiane—similarly display questionable lucidity in their respective scenes of enunciation and a broader pattern of prejudice.

Michel Djerzinski’s sex crazed half-brother, Bruno, frequently and shamelessly exhibits his prejudice and irreverence. He curses the “salopards de Chinetoques” while struggling to pitch a tent at a swinger retreat (Houellebecq *Particules* 124). When he encounters Rosicrucians, he qualifies their beliefs as “des trucs de pédés et de nazis” and fantasizes about telling them off: “‘Fourre-toi ta croix dans le cul, mon bonhomme…’ songea rêveusement Bruno […] ‘Et rajoute la rose par-dessus…’” (Houellebecq *Particules* 146). After joining “un groupe Foi et Vie” with his wife, he spends meetings ogling “une jeune Coréenne, très jolie […] j’ai tout de suite eu envie de la sauter” (Houellebecq *Particules* 218). It is not just the narrator who shares Bruno’s unsavory thoughts with the reader (“voilà ce que pensait Bruno”), an increasingly emboldened and unhinged Bruno submits an unapologetically racist tract to Philippe Sollers for
publication subtitled “On ne naît pas raciste, on le devient” (Houellebecq Particules 130, 242).  

When Bruno refers to a variant of Islam as “une connerie,” he has completely come off the rails (Houellebecq Particules 314). Bruno is granted a temporary leave from the psychiatric clinic to see his dying mother. Before visiting their estranged mother, Bruno brings his brother up to speed: “Il paraît que la vieille pute s’est convertie à l’islam – à travers la mystique soufie, une connerie de ce genre. Elle s’est installée avec une bande de babas qui vivent dans une maison abandonnée” (Houellebecq Particules 314-315).

This scene showcases Bruno’s mental and emotional instability. As Michel Djerzinski vainly attempts to recenter the conversation with his brother, “soucieux d’en venir au fait,” Bruno digresses into vehement diatribes (Houellebecq Particules 316). He vituperates “la mouvance néo-woodstockienne” to which his mother belongs (Houellebecq Particules 315). He rails against ecologists who reintroduced wolves into the Mercantour national park and banned the public from the dunes of the Cap d’Agde. Increasingly incoherent, he politicizes the animal kingdom: “Ils veulent nous empêcher de partouzer et de manger du fromage de brebis, c’est des vrais nazis. Les socialistes sont complices. Ils sont contre les brebis parce que les brebis sont de droite, alors que les

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65 Bruno’s subtitle alludes to Simone de Beauvoir’s notion in Le Deuxième sexe: “On ne naît pas femme, on le devient,” suggesting that gender is a product of culture. Bruno suggests that his social experience made him racist. Bruno’s racism, however, clearly derives from sexual jealousy towards a student in his class “Le nègre sortait exactement avec celle que j’aurais choisie pour [lui]-même” “[donc il a] passé le week-end à rédiger un pamphlet raciste, dans un état d’érection quasi constante” (Houellebecq Particules 238, 241). After reading the pamphlet, a fictional Philippe Sollers observes that Houellebecq’s protagonist is “authentiquement raciste,” but reproaches “des facilités parfois, j’ai moins aimé le sous-titre” (Particles 242).
loups sont de gauche, pourtant les loups ressemblent aux bergers allemands, qui sont
d’extrême droite. À qui se fier?” (Houellebecq Particules 316).

Throughout the scene, Bruno’s mood swings wildly. One minute, he works
himself up: “[il] s’anima […] Bruno recommençait à s’énerver […] il martelait ses
phrases avec une énergie croissante […] Bruno hurlait presque” (Houellebecq Particules
316). The next minute, Bruno “se tut brusquement. Il avait l’air serein, maintenant, et
presque extatique” (Houellebecq, Particules 323). After perversely telling his mother “Tu
n’es qu’une vieille pute […] Tu mérites de crever […] tous les matins, au réveil, je
pisserai sur tes cendres,” Bruno wistfully belts out “La mamma” “à plein poumons”
(Houellebecq Particules 319, 323). Given his volatility, clinical insanity, mounting
resentment and misdirected rage, Bruno’s disparaging description of Islam as a
“connerie” is hardly the product of a sound mind (Houellebecq Particules 314).

The novel’s third Islamophobic speaker, Christiane, is Bruno’s perfect match. Her
anti-feminism validates his misogyny : “J’ai jamais pu encadrer les féministes […] Ces
salopes n’arrêtaient pas de parler de vaisselle” (Houellebecq Particules 180). She shares
his hatred of “ce milieu libertaire, vaguement beatnik dans les années cinquante […] Je
méprise ces gens […] je les hais. Ils représentent le mal” (Houellebecq Particules 251).
She struggles to empathize with her son or accept his existence: “S’il se tuait en moto
j’aurais de la peine; mais je crois que je me sentirais plus libre” (Houellebecq Particules
266). She also shares Bruno’s overt racism, even if she refers to “noirs,” rather than
employing Bruno’s preferred term—“nègres” (Houellebecq Particules 186, 228, 242).

Christiane makes a passing reference to Muslims while voicing concerns about
her troubled son. Before an impromptu vacation with Bruno, she begrudgingly wires
money to her son despite their strained relationship, explaining: “Il me méprise, mais je vais encore être obligée de le supporter quelques années. J’ai juste peur qu’il ne devienne violent. Il fréquente vraiment de drôles de types, des musulmans, des nazis” (Houellebecq *Particules* 266). This is not the first time she voices her fears of violence:

Il s’est mis à sortir, à avoir de mauvaises fréquentations. Ça surprend beaucoup de gens, mais Noyon est une ville violente. Il y a beaucoup de Noirs et d’Arabes, le Front national a fait 40% aux dernières élections. Je vis dans une résidence à la périphérie, la porte de ma boîte aux lettres a été arrachée, je ne peux rien laisser dans la cave. J’ai souvent peur, parfois il y a eu des coups de feu. En rentrant du lycée je me barricade chez moi, je ne sors jamais le soir. […] Mon fils rentre tard, parfois il ne rentre pas du tout. Je n’ose rien lui dire ; j’ai peur qu’il me frappe (Houellebecq *Particules* 186)

Her remarks betray an engrained prejudice against Muslims and other minorities whom she ties with violence, antisemitism and crime. It also must be noted, however, that Christiane provides no clear evidence tying these minorities to the endemic violence in her town.

Christiane arguably clues the reader into the historical context of her fears, noting both the surprising incidence of violence and the significant presence of *Front national* supporters in her hometown. In 1995, Noyon was the site of a breakthrough for France’s extreme right--the *Front national* really obtained over 40% of the votes in the municipal elections (Jelen ¶ 1). But the journalist Christian Jelen asserts that “le score très élevé du FN à Noyon n’est pas dû, comme dans d’autres villes, à une insécurité alarmante”--“dans l'absolu, la question de l'insécurité ne se pose pas avec acuité à Noyon. […] on trouve
encore des Noyonnais qui ne ferment pas leur voiture à clé. Il n'y a pas de hold-up ni d'agressions” (¶10). The FN successfully exploited Noyon’s “petite délinquance bien réelle” and “forte présence étrangère (18%)” by distributing littérature reporting “les cambriolages, les vols à l'étalage, les vols d'autoradios, les rackets, les petits actes de vandalisme dans les cités, réussissant fort bien à amplifier le sentiment d'insécurité” (Jelen ¶10). Testifying to the success of this propaganda, the majority of FN voters in Noyon erroneously affirmed that “la délinquance connaît une croissance phénoménale” (Jelen ¶10). In light of this historical description of 1990s Noyon, Christiane’s fears appear baseless. Christiane’s authority in Les Particules élémentaires, however, remains ambiguous, as the author may have been gesturing to this baseless FN propaganda campaign or unwittingly attesting to its success.

While the Islamophobic characters in Les Particules élémentaires all harbor prejudice and lack lucidity, the narrator’s failure to explicitly reproach them led Douglas Morrey to accuse the author of placing his “libelous words” in the mouths of his characters—“a rather facile device to evade responsibility […] employed] frequently throughout his novels” (149).

But the absence of narratorial criticism of the Islamophobia in Les Particules élémentaires is consonant with the post-human perspective on their predecessors. Post-humanity is twice removed from a religiously grounded metaphysics: modern science had already supplanted “les croyances religieuses des siècles précédents” for “les hommes de l’âge matérialiste” (Houellebecq Particules 336). Modern men were already “incapables de comprendre ces débats qui avaient agité leurs ancêtres autour des oscillations du péché et de la grâce,” leaving the post-human narrator with little chance of understanding
humanity’s ideological divisions (Houellebecq *Particules* 369). For the post-human narrator, religion constitutes an archaic belief system that mounted vain resistance to Hubczejak’s *Mouvement du Potentiel Humain*. Unsurprisingly, the post-human narrator displays little reverence for “[les] doctrines religieuses traditionnelles” : “il nous arrive d’ailleurs parfois de nous qualifier nous-mêmes—sur un mode, il est vrai, légèrement humoristique—de ce nom de ‘dieux’ qui les avait tant fait rêver” (Houellebecq *Particules* 393, 394). Furthermore, the narrator cannot effectively evaluate the characters’ prejudice, because humanity—including their phenotypic and sociocultural variation—has become virtually extinct : “nous ne ressemblons plus à ces hommes […] nous avons rejeté leurs catégories et leurs appartences” (Houellebecq *Particules* 369). The Islamophobic speakers in *Les Particules élémentaires* conform to the post-human conception of “cette espèce torturée, contradictoire, individualiste, et querelleuse, d’un égoïsme illimité” (Houellebecq 394).

Since Islamophobic discourse in *Les Particules élémentaires* is filtered through dubious speakers and an estranged narrator, where does this leave the implied author? Given the absence of Muslim characters in Houellebecq’s second novel, the author’s potential Islamophobia must be measured against his treatment of other religions.

Michel Houellebecq’s second novel illustrates the erosion of “une anthropologie chrétienne” in the twentieth century (Houellebecq *Particules* 89). Advances in the field of biology and “l’agnosticisme de principe de la République française” facilitate the emergence of a materialist anthropology “radicalement différente dans ses présupposés, et beaucoup plus modeste dans ses recommandations éthiques” (Houellebecq *Particules* 90, 89). Though the narrator claims that “aucune force humaine ne peut interrompre [une
mutation métaphysique],” the author’s writing may be construed as an intervention (Houellebecq *Particules* 10). As the reputedly reactionary writer of dystopian fiction, Houellebecq could conceivably call for a return to the Christian paradigm.

But *Les Particules élémentaires* does not present Christianity as a viable solution to the problems plaguing the materialist era—a hypothetical return to Christian metaphysics appears impossible. The experiences of the fraternal duo at Bruno’s Catholic wedding attest to the fact that materialist men “pouvaient assister sans comprendre ni même sans réellement voir à la répétition des cérémonies rituelles chrétiennes” (Houellebecq, *Particules* 369).

In this satirical scene, the author hardly calls for a return to the Church, presenting Christianity as hopelessly archaic and misogynistic. “Profondément éloignée des catégories chrétiennes,” Michel is thrown by the priest’s reference to “Le Dieu d’Israël”: “Il eut d’abord du mal à reprendre pied : se trouvait-on chez les Juifs ? Il lui fallut une minute de réflexion avant de se rendre compte qu’en fait il s’agissait du même Dieu” (Houellebecq *Particules* 113, 214). When he approaches the priest to compare “cette histoire d’une seule chair” with “les expériences d’Aspect et le paradoxe EPR,” the clergyman turns his back on him, leaving little hope of a reconciliation between religion and modern science (Houellebecq *Particules* 215). Michel’s brother fares no better in his “tentative pour devenir catholique” (Houellebecq *Particules* 218). His wedding sermon is riddled with dramatic irony. The pastor asks that the bride “demeure dans le Christ une

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66 Although Michel’s Djerzinski’s paternal grandmother, Marie Le Roux offers a positive example of a practicing Catholic, belonging to this class of “êtres humains qui travaillaient toute leur vie, et qui travaillaient dur, uniquement par dévouement et par amour [...] qui n’avaient cependant nullement l’impression de se sacrifier,” the author suggests that the current generation is indifferent to these values (Houellebecq *Particules* 115).
épouse fidèle et chaste […] Qu’elle reste attachée à la foi et aux commandements” (Houellebecq *Particules* 214-215). Meanwhile, the pastor informs the groom that “aimer sa femme, c’est s’aimer soi-même. Aucun homme n’a jamais haï sa propre chair, au contraire il la nourrit et la soigne” (Houellebecq *Particules* 214-215). While Anne remains faithful to her husband and close to the church, even hosting “un groupe Foi et Vie” in their home, Bruno persists in his profoundly narcissistic existence (Houellebecq *Particules* 218).

The negative portraits of Christianity and Islam in *Les Particules élémentaires* can be meaningfully contrasted. Spared of explicit criticism, Christianity consistently fares better than Islam. The post-human narrator even acknowledges Christianity’s glorious past as “[une] civilisation de la paix, de la fidélité et de l’amour” (Houellebecq *Particules* 10, 69-70). Because the author offers only implicit criticism of the Christian Church and his Islamophobic speakers, Christianity emerges relatively unscathed, while Islam bears the brunt of the novel’s religious critique. The islamophobia of the author who is “generally regarded as anti-religious” therefore merits further investigation (Lloyd 84).

LANZAROTE: Houellebecq’s next novel, *Lanzarote* is a short travel narrative exploring themes that would be developed more extensively in subsequent full-length novels--tourism, exoticism, sexual relations and religion. The narrator-protagonist encounters adherents of “le mouvement azraélien” and outspoken critics of Islam, anticipating “le
succès foudroyant de l’élohimisme” in *La Possibilité d’une île* and the Islamophobia featured in *Plateforme* (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 45; *La Possibilité d’une île* 302-303).  

*Lanzarote* contains explicit expressions of Islamophobia. “Les pays musulmans” are to be avoided because of “leur religion ridicule” (Houellebecq 9). Their dogma is claimed to offer “[des] solutions monstrueuses et rétrogrades” (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 69). “[La] connerie d’islam” is presented as incompatible with “quelqu’un d’intelligent” (Houellebecq, *Lanzarote* 38). The rise of “l’intégrisme islamique” is tied to a broad spectrum of crime from “délinquance” to terrorism (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 38).

*Lanzarote* also features attenuating factors that undermine the authority of Islamophobic speakers and complicate their relationship with the implied author. Islamophobic discourse is again attributed to problematic characters and balanced by a more substantial critique of another religion—in this case, Azraëlism.

The incipit paints an unflattering portrait of the protagonist’s impetuosity, overt Islamophobia and ineptitude, giving the reader a preview of the atypical travel narrative to follow. Realizing that his “réveillon serait probablement raté,” he impulsively enters “la première agence de voyages” (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 7). After rejecting proposals of Tunisia or Morocco, he reasons “finalement les pays arabes ça pouvait valoir le coup, dès qu’on arrivait à les sortir de leur religion ridicule,” explaining to an astonished travel agent, “ce qui me déplaît c’est pas les pays arabes, c’est les pays musulmans” (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 9).

This example of unabashed Islamophobia reveals the narrator’s propensity for assumptions about other cultures. He is quick to shoot down the agent’s proposal of the

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67 *La religion azraélienne* and *l’élohimism* are thinly veiled references to the real UFO religion, Raëlism.
Maghreb—“Je n’aime pas les pays arabes…coupai-je,” but equally quick to revise his position (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 9). Counter-examples soon give him pause—an escapade with “une Libanaise rencontrée dans une boîte à partouzes” and a hotel he heard about in Hammamet “où des groupes d’Algériennes venaient s’éclater entre femmes, sans la surveillance d’aucun homme” (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 9). The second, parodically orientalist example reveals the narrator’s faith in stereotypes of the proverbial *Other*.68 Second-hand accounts also inform his perception of the agent’s next proposal, Senegal: “J’avais entendu dire que le prestige des Blancs était encore très grand en Afrique de l’Ouest. Il suffisait de se pointer en discothèque pour ramener une nana dans son bungalow” (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 10).

The incipit further highlights the protagonist’s social ineptitude and lack of filter. Once reluctantly engaged in conversation, “[ne voyant] pas comment m’y soustraire,” he commits several faux pas (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 7). After making racist remarks, he fails to take a cue from the travel agent’s “bouche légèrement entrouverte” and continues to verbalize socially unacceptable thoughts: “Je n’ai pas envie de baiser” (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 9, 10). His lack of social skills and cultural savvy do not bode well for his voyage.

The protagonist’s initial characterization sets up *Lanzarote* as an unconventional travel narrative.69 Houellebecq’s hero is not motivated by curiosity, the lure of adventure

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68 The narrator privileges stereotypes and rumours over direct testimony, dismissing a real Luxembourger’s description of Luxembourg: “il parlait du Luxembourg comme d’un Eden perdu, alors que de notoriété publique il s’agit d’un pays minuscule et médiocre, sans caractéristiques bien définies” (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 38).

69 The voyage defies the stereotypical expectations of an enlightening, enriching experience of discovery and exchange with the *other*. Admittedly, this trend in contemporary travel fiction goes back at least as far as Victor Segalen’s posthumously published *Équipée : voyage au pays du réel* [1929], which begins with
or (self) discovery. He rejects the ethos of the *Guide du Routard* “[qui] à force de prises de position ‘sympa’ (écologistes, humanitaires), de coups de cœur, d’appels au voyage ‘intelligent’ et à la rencontre de l’autre (comprendre avant de juger), de recherche quasi frénétique d’une ‘authenticité’ en voie de disparition évidente, a réussi à établir de nouvelles normes dans le domaine de la stupidité internationale” (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 18-19). The narrator’s alternative to the *Routard’s intelligent travel* proves ignorant. Throughout his travels, he compulsively judges before understanding. A woman at the Teguise market “ressemblait tout à fait à une institutrice australienne” (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 46). Dark-skinned combatants on television could be Chechens, Tamils “quoique […] ça pouvait aussi être des Birmans” (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 35). English tourists “[se situent] à l’exact opposé du Français, être vain, si épris de lui-même que la rencontre d’un compatriote à l’étranger lui est probablement insupportable” (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 20). German women “dans l’ensemble […] sont de très braves filles,” while “[les Espagnoles] sont en général de gentilles filles, sans complications et sans vanité, à l’opposé des Italiennes” (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 51, 62). From this perspective, the hero’s Islamophobic remarks reflect his incorrigible penchant for stereotyping and establish *Lanzarote* as an anti-“voyage ‘intelligent’” (Houellebecq 18).

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the following declaration “J’AI TOUJOURS TENU POUR SUSPECTS ou illusores des récits de ce genre” (11).

70 Authenticity is irrelevant to Lanzarote: “[de] L’histoire de Lanzarote […] il ne demeurait d’ailleurs rien, sinon le récit incomplet de certains prêtres espagnols qui avaient recueilli quelques témoignages avant de donner leur bénédiction au massacre des populations locales” (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 40). The vestiges of the early Spanish occupation were destroyed by “une succession de tremblements de terre et d’éruptions” in the eighteenth century—“Donc pour le tourisme culturel, tintin” (Houellebecq *Lanzarote*, 17).
Another francophone tourist with whom the protagonist feels “entièremen
t solidaire” is responsible for the remaining Islamophobic remarks in *Lanzarote*
(Houellebecq 24). Rudi links the rise of Islamic fundamentalism with crime in Brussels:

La délinquance y était envahissante ; de plus en plus souvent les groupes de
jeunes attaquaient les passants en pleine journée […] les femmes seules n’osaient
plus sortir après le coucher du soleil. L’intégrisme islamique avait pris des
proportions alarmantes […] Bruxelles était maintenant devenu un sanctuaire
terroriste. Dans les rues, sur les places, on rencontrait de plus en plus de femmes
voilées (Houellebecq Lanzarote 38-39).

He also laments his wife’s return to the faith: “c’était quelqu’un d’intelligent, de
sensible, de profondément cultivé […] qui s’est tourné] vers les solutions monstrueuses et
rétrogrades de l’islam” (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 69).

While Rudi’s work as a police officer in Brussels and marriage to a Muslim
impart a degree of credibility to his assertions, other factors undermine his authority on
Islam. Foremost among them is his disastrous marriage to a Muslim. His wife returned to
Morocco and “sa connerie d’Islam” with their children (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 63).

Rudi’s personal life, “proche de la catastrophe humaine totale,” exacerbated if not
engendered his Islamophobia and palpable “amertume” (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 39). The
narrator encourages this connection in his transition between Rudi’s description of an
Islamified Brussels and his failed marriage: “Sur le plan personnel, ça n’allait guère
mieux” (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 39).

The broader portrait of Rudi’s dubious character further compromises his
authority as a speaker. Prior to joining an Azraelian community, Rudi displays symptoms
of clinical depression. During the trip, he appears “triste, et même légèrement égaré,” occasionally even “au bord des larmes” (Houellebecq Lanzarote 37, 47). “Renfrogné” and “mélancolique,” he declines invitations and “ne mangeait pas vraiment” (Houellebecq Lanzarote 54, 56, 60). In a parting letter to the protagonist, he describes “le drame de la dépression […] et cette atroce sensation d’angoisse qui l’accompagne” (Houellebecq Lanzarote 69).

Rudi’s worsening depression may impair his already Manichean judgment. He declares an excursion to Fuertaventura “nul; complètement nul. Aucun intérêt” (Houellebecq, Lanzarote 37). His past experiences at “les boîtes pour couples ‘non-conformistes’ move between opposite extremes--“une fête joyeuse et sans tabous” becomes “un exercice de dépravation sans joie” (Houellebecq Lanzarote 68-69). His cultural judgments are equally stark. He speaks about his homeland “comme un Eden perdu,” but describes Belgium as “un pays déliquescent et absurde […] qui n’aurait jamais dû exister” (Houellebecq Lanzarote 38, 39). Furthermore, his dismissal of Belgians “avec une sorte de terreur” as “des êtres scatalogiques et pervers” suggests that his Islamophobia is hardly out of character (Houellebecq Lanzarote 63).

The culminating Azraelian scandal illustrates Rudi’s deeply flawed judgment. Rudi loses any semblance of authority when he is charged with pedophilia and summarily thrown out of the police force. Though he admits “attouchements sexuels sur une mineure […] de 11 ans,” he denies any wrongdoing : “Il n’éprouvait aucun remords. ‘Je n’ai jamais fait que du bien autour de moi…’ disait-il” (Houellebecq Lanzarote 81, 85). Observing the incongruity of his “air serein, et presque heureux” and dire situation, the
narrator questions Rudi’s lucidity: “Était-il conscient des peines qu’il encourait?” (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 84, 85).

The Azraelian pedophilia scandal has important implications for the two Islamophobic speakers of *Lanzarote*. Rudi’s crime reveals the hypocrisy of his Islamophobia: “[sa victime est] une petite Marocaine de 11 ans prénommée Aïcha […] La population musulmane était déchaînée contre lui, surtout en sa qualité d’ex-policier” (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 81). After linking Islam with crime, he becomes a criminal. After reproaching Islam for “[ses] solutions monstrueuses et rétrogrades,” he embraces the Azraelian dogma purportedly “à la pointe de l’évolution des mœurs” that condones pedophilia (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 69, 80). Muslims are therefore twice victimized by Rudi--first by his Islamophobia, then by his sexual predation. By the end of the novel, his Islamophobia lacks concrete evidence, while his profoundly flawed character is proven beyond reasonable doubt.

The Azraelian scandal similarly shows the narrator’s Islamophobia to be misplaced. In contrast with his harsh treatment of Islam, Houellebecq’s hero reserves judgment of Azraelism. Though he is aware that “la secte était classée comme plutôt dangereuse,” he repeatedly gives them the benefit of the doubt: “D’un autre côté, ils pouvaient aussi bien être honnêtes,” “D’un autre côté il se pouvait qu’Azraël soit un bon prophète, que ses idées conduisent effectivement à l’amélioration du sort de l’humanité” (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 45, 73, 74). He dismisses Islam as a “religion ridicule,” but perceives the Azraelian theory of the extraterrestrial origin of humanity as “pas complètement absurde” (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 9, 46, 71).
The conclusion of Houellebecq’s travel narrative provides a clearer picture of the implied author’s relationship with his Islamophobic speakers. The protagonist and his travel companion express an intolerance of Islam and a surprising tolerance for Azraëlism. The author’s plot choices, however, suggest that the ridiculous, monstrous ideology they impute to Muslims more accurately describes the Azraelians who justify pedophilia with an outlandish cosmogonical myth: “la sexualité sous toutes ses formes [...] quelles que soient les considérations d’âge, de sexe, ou de liens familiaux [...] était agréable et excellente aux yeux des Anakims” (Houellebecq Lanzarote 81). While the author provides concrete evidence of the misdeeds of the Azraelian Church in Lanzarote, he never illustrates the alleged crimes of Muslims. The Muslims who intervene in the narrative are not the perpetrators, but the victims of crime. By selecting a Muslim girl as Rudi’s prey, Houellebecq represents the victimization of “la population musulmane” by an overt Islamophobe (Houellebecq, Lanzarote 81).

PLATEFORME: In the wake of Houellebecq’s Lire controversy, certain critics were quick to assimilate the author with his novel and declare both Islamophobic. A

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71 The narrator also calls attention to the sins of the Catholic Church and the hypocritical “prêtres espagnols qui avaient […] donné] leur bénédiction au massacre des populations locales” (Houellebecq, Lanzarote, 40).
72 The portrait of the victim’s father, who proclaims that “il souhaitait voir ‘couper les couilles’ de celui qui avait profané l’honneur de sa fille, et qu’il était tout à fait prêt à s’en charger lui-même,” does not flatter the Muslim community (Houellebecq, Lanzarote 84). But his threat has little to do with Sharia law, where “rape was punishable either with death by stoning or with whipping and exile. […] but] difficult to prove […] given the requirement of] four male eyewitnesses or confession” (“The Oxford Encyclopedia of Women,” 577). Moreover, it is no more barbaric than “la peine de mort” requested by outraged members of the French public in the novel or the chemical castration of recidivist rapists that continues to be debated in France today (Houellebecq, Lanzarote 84; Piquemal).
73 Pierre Varrod describes Plateforme’s “apparence autobiographique” (96). But aside from their common first name, there is little compelling evidence to support his biographical reading.
74 After evoking the Lire interview, Richard Golsan affirms Houellebecq’s “personal distaste for Islam” and declares Plateforme “anti-immigrant, anti-Arab, and anti-Islamist in tone and action” (131).
narratological approach will yield a more nuanced vision of Plateforme and its implied author.

*Plateforme* presents the unlikely love story of Michel—a forty-year-old accountant and shameless sex tourist who describes himself as “ni très beau, ni très amusant […] usé, pas très liant”—and Valérie—a younger, more attractive and more highly-paid professional whom he judges to be “plus intelligente et acharnée que moi-même” (Houellebecq 146, 338). After a failed attempt to commercialize sex tourism, the two lovers envision a quiet life together as expatriates in Thaïland, but their dream is tragically shattered by Islamic terrorism, which claims Valérie’s life and leaves Michel without “une égratignure” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 346).

Houellebecq’s third full-length novel provides more extensive commentary on Islam than his previous works. The Islamophobic claims of Houellebecq’s characters in *Plateforme* will be familiar to readers of his other novels: Islam is called “[une] religion déraisonnable,” “une connerie,” judged to be “condamné,” “inhumaine et cruelle,” and associated with terrorism (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 259, 30, 261, 358). But Islamophobic characters in *Plateforme* go further than their predecessors, attempting to rationalize their anti-Muslim prejudice.

While their self-justification does not insulate them from the strategies of undermining and attenuation at work in Houellebecq’s previous novels, these characters prove particularly problematic and provocative. The outspoken Islamophobes in *Plateforme* are endowed with greater authority than in the past. Their Islamophobia is not balanced by the criticism of other religions in the novel. Finally, and arguably most importantly, the Muslim characters appearing in the narrative validate their claims.
The preponderance of the Islamophobia in *Plateforme* can be attributed to three minor characters: two tourists--an Egyptian biochemist and a Jordanian banker--and the cleaning lady and lover of Michel’s father, Aïcha. Each of these characters intervenes briefly, launching into an unsolicited anti-Muslim diatribe. Their personal experience with Islam bolsters their authority: the tourists hail from Muslim dominant countries, while Aïcha comes from an orthodox Muslim family. Yet, their authority is not cut and dried. Although the narrator remains a mostly passive participant in these conversations, we cannot assume that either Michel (the narrator-protagonist) or Michel Houellebecq (the author of *Plateforme*) endorses the controversial views of these characters. As in Houellebecq’s previous works, the ambiguous portrayal of these Islamophobic speakers merits closer examination.

The narrator-protagonist’s encounter with the Egyptian expatriate who serves up the most vehement condemnation of Islam in *Plateforme* is related in an external analepsis. After pitching “un club où les gens puissent baiser” to Valérie’s coworker, Jean-Yves, while “complètement pété,” a hungover Michel brainstorms alternatives for Arab countries where “compte tenu de leur religion déraisonnable, toute activité d’ordre sexuel semblait exclue” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 250, 249, 259). While entertaining a possible excursion to Sinai, he evokes “l’expression imagée” of an Egyptian he met three years prior--“là où Moïse avait ‘pété les plombs’” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 260). The narrator proceeds to report their conversation from which the pretextual burning bush is conspicuously absent. Jean-Yves’ curt conclusion, “Bon, aventure pour l’Égypte…” underscores the extraneity of this digression (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 263).
The narrator’s conversation with the Egyptian amounts to an anti-Muslim diatribe. His interlocutor claims that the advent of Islam ground Egypt’s venerable cultural production to a halt—“Depuis l’apparition de l’islam, plus rien” (Houellebecq Plateforme 260). He argues that Islam is inherently flawed: “le désert [qui] ne produit que des désaxés et des crétins” imbued the Quran with “[une] ambiance de tautologie” (Houellebecq Plateforme 262, 261). Their radical monotheism “n’est qu’un élan vers l’abrutissement,” ensuring that “en terre musulmane, l’intelligence et le talent ne pourront trouver leur place” and rendering their religion “inhumaine et cruelle” (Houellebecq Plateforme 262, 261). “La succession ininterrompue de guerres d’invasion et de massacres” and the anti-intellectualism marking their history, he suggests, befit Islam’s origin “au milieu de scorpions, de chameaux et d’animaux féroces de toutes espèces […] dans un désert stupide” (Houellebecq Plateforme 261).

Fluent in “cinq langues étrangères,” the Egyptian biochemist initially appears well-educated, cosmopolitan and accomplished: “[il] avait émigré en Angleterre dès la fin de ses études, et y avait brillamment réussi dans le domaine de l’ingénierie génétique” (Houellebecq Plateforme 260, 261). But his problematic discourse casts doubt over his impressive pedigree.

The Egyptian’s speech is sown with vulgarities and stereotypes that shatter his façade of education and culture. “[N’ayant] pas de mots assez durs pour stigmatiser l’islam,” he describes the conceptors of the faith as “des bédouins crasseux qui n’avaient
rien d’autre à faire—pardonnez-moi—que d’enculer leurs chameaux” (Houellebecq
*Plateforme* 261).75

The Egyptian’s reliance on vulgarity and stereotypes invites a less flattering interpretation of his transnational path. As an expatriate, he has a clear predilection for European culture that he professes to the protagonist, praising “[la] noble culture occidentale, que j’admire d’ailleurs, que je respecte” and “le catholicisme, religion subtile, que je respecte” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 262). After decades abroad, he returns home to take guided tours, “en visite” like any other tourist (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 260). Palpable nostalgia informs his perspective—he speaks with “une émotion réelle” “dans son pays natal pour lequel il affirmait une affection intacte” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 261, 260). Like his francophilia, his egyptophilia appears predicated on “[d’]obscures raisons […] sentimentales,” yielding a heavily romanticized vision of pre-islamic Egypt: “Comme notre religion égyptienne […] était plus profonde, plus humaine et plus sage. Et nos femmes ! Comme nos femmes étaient belles !” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 260, 262).

The speaker’s heavy-handed rhetoric belies his education and deprives his argument of nuance. Even the smitten narrator acknowledges that “il exagérait un peu […] pour ] me persuader rapidement” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 260). The expatriate expresses himself emphatically (“Certes ! s’était-il exclamé avec emphase”)
(Houellebecq *Plateforme* 260). He amplifies his argument with stylized repetition, employing anaphora (“Rien de grand ni de noble, rien de généreux ni de sain ; rien qui puisse faire progresser l’humanité”) and redundancy (“Le néant intellectuel absolu, le

75 The speaker’s veneer of politeness fails to compensate for his crude expression and prejudice.
vide total,” “Nous sommes devenus un pays de mendiant poulaille. Des mendiant
pleins de poux, voilà ce que nous sommes”) (Houellebecq Plateforme 263, 260-261, 261 :
emphatic added). He makes hyperbolic, absolute claims: “Quand je pense que ce pays a
tout inventé […] Depuis l’apparition de l’islam, plus rien,” “jamais, tant qu’il existera, la
concorde ne pourra régner sur le monde,” “un dieu sanglant et jaloux qui n’aurait jamais
dû dépasser les frontières du Sinaï” (Houellebecq Plateforme 260, 261, 262 : emphasis
added). He employs superlatives (“l’islam […] impose le monothéisme le plus radical”)
and reductive adverbs (“[le] monothéisme n’est qu’un élan vers l’abrutissement,” “Le
désert ne produit que des désaxés,” “ceux qui ont été attirés par le désert ? Uniquement
des pédérastes, des aventuriers et des crapules”) (Houellebecq Plateforme 261, 262 :
emphatic added).

The reader’s negative impression of the Egyptian derived from his clumsy
rhetoric and ignorance contrasts with the protagonist’s impression of “un homme
intelligent et souvent drôle” (Houellebecq Plateforme 260). 76 While it may appear
extraneous, this flashback reveals the narrator’s flawed judgment, reinforcing the critical
distance of the implied author.

Michel has a comparable conversation with another Islamophobic tourist after the
pivotal terrorist attack in Krabi. After taking temporary residence in Bangkok’s “Grace
Hotel,” he finds consolation in his conversation with a Jordanian banker (Houellebecq
Plateforme 356). One of “[les] touristes sexuels arabes [qui] rasait vraiment les murs,”
the Jordanian invites the protagonist for a drink in the hotel bar and, finding a captive

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76 The protagonist is clearly seduced by his interlocutor’s charm. The Egyptian addresses him in French (“il
faut vous souvenir, cher monsieur,” “croyez-moi, cher monsieur” “songez-y bien, cher monsieur”) and
lavishes praise upon occidental culture (Houellebecq, Plateforme, 261, 262: emphasis added).
audience, “[il] s’enhardit davantage” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 357). His thesis is simple: “le système musulman était condamné” and “les jeunes Arabes […] étaient de plus en plus nombreux à tourner carrément le dos à l’islam” because capitalism offers “le paradis promis par le prophète” at a lower cost (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 358).

The Jordanian banker who presents the second most significant condemnation of Islam in *Plateforme* is flatly characterized as “un banquier jordanien […] d’un naturel affable” (Houellebecq 357). With no mention of his credentials, education, or travels, the Jordanian’s perspective appears to be exclusively informed by his career in finance.

The banker argues that “le système musulman était condamné […]et] le capitalisme serait le plus fort” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 358). From his purely economic perspective, Islam offers a product like any business and that “le paradis promis par le prophète” can be found in countless establishments “dans un rayon de cinq cents mètres autour de l’hôtel”--“des jeunes filles disponibles et lascives […] de nectars enivrants…et] une musique aux accents célestes” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 358). In other words, the prophet was undercut by the competition: “Ces endroits étaient facilement accessibles, pour y entrer il n’était nullement besoin de remplir les sept devoirs du musulman, ni de s’adonner à la guerre sainte, il suffisait de payer quelques dollars” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 358).

When confronted with evidence that the current generation is not jettisoning religion and embracing hedonism, he makes dubious claims about their *secret dreams*: “les jeunes Arabes ne rêvaient que de consommation et de sexe. Ils avaient beau parfois prétendre le contraire, leur rêve secret était de s’agréger au modèle américain : l’agressivité de certains n’était qu’une marque de jalousie impuissante” (Houellebecq
These logical flaws attest to the Jordanian banker’s limited perspective and anti-Muslim bias as an Arab sex-tourist who lived “toute sa vie avec une religion qu’il méprisait” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 358).

Surprisingly, the narrator-protagonist again embraces his Islamophobic interlocutor’s flawed argument: “il m’avait en fait convaincu d’emblée, l’islam était condamné, dès qu’on y réfléchissait cela paraissait une évidence” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 359). But his acceptance speaks more to the fragility of Michel’s mental state than to the solidity of the banker’s argument. Recently discharged from a mental institution where he was surveilled as a suicide risk, the protagonist experiments with Islamophobia as a survival mechanism: “On peut certainement rester en vie en étant simplement animé par un sentiment de vengeance […] L’islam avait brisé ma vie […] les jours suivants, je m’appliquai à éprouver de la haine pour les musulmans” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 355). Emotionally and intellectually drained, “[il avait] beaucoup de mal, maintenant, à supporter les échanges intellectuels [n’ayant] plus du tout envie de comprendre le monde, ni même de le connaître” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 359).

To alleviate the crushing burden of his hatred, the vulnerable protagonist overlooks the argument’s flaws and accepts its comforting conclusion: “L’islam était condamné […] Cette simple pensée suffit, en moi, pour dissiper la haine” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 359).

The narrative’s third most significant illustration of Islamophobia occurs in the opening pages of *Plateforme*. When the protagonist’s father is found dead in his home with multiple skull fractures, an ensuing investigation reveals that the cleaning lady

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77 In *Les Particules élémentaires*, Desplechin’s burn-out cast doubt over his Islamophobic assertions. Here, the narrator-protagonist’s burn-out renders him defenseless against another character’s Islamophobic discourse.
“Aïcha avait entretenu des ‘rapports intimes’ avec [son] père”--“la grande découverte” that elicits her brother’s confession (Houellebecq Plateforme 26). During an awkward drive to the train station, Michel commiserates with Aïcha, who offers an unprompted portrait of Islam as “[une] connerie” that ravaged her family (Houellebecq Plateforme 30). Islam rendered her father distant--“il n’y a plus rien à en tirer”--and transformed her brothers into self-righteous hypocrites--“ils s’entretiennent mutuellement dans leur connerie, ils se bourrent la gueule au pastis tout en se prétendant les dépositaires de la vraie foi” (Houellebecq Plateforme 30). Styling themselves as defenders of the faith, they disapprove of her sexual liberation and professional aspirations : “ils se permettent de me traiter de salope parce que j’ai envie de travailler plutôt que d’épouser un connard dans leur genre” (Houellebecq Plateforme 30). Her conflictual family relationships, therefore, dramatize the antagonism between reactionary and liberalizing tendencies in Islam.

Aïcha’s negative portrait of Islam is bolstered by her positive characterization. Her appearance--“sans sourire […] peu maquillé, ses vêtements plutôt sobres’--gives Michel the impression that she is “une fille sérieuse”--an impression confirmed by her ambitions and sacrifices: “Je fais des études d’infirmière […] mais comme je suis partie de chez mes parents je suis obligée de faire des ménages” (Houellebecq Plateforme 16). Bitter, but otherwise polite, independent, ambitious, assiduous and well-educated, she offers little grounds for reproach.

Given her positive characterization, the narrator has no trouble accepting her personal testimony. While Aïcha refuses to generalize her family’s “connerie,” the narrator steps in for her: “C’est vrai, dans l’ensemble, les musulmans c’est pas terrible…” (Houellebecq Plateforme 30). Her story prompts Michel’s “espèce de vision sur les flux
migratoires comme des vaisseaux sanguins qui traversaient l’Europe; les musulmans apparaissaient comme des caillots qui se résorbaient lentement” (Houellebecq Plateforme 30). This early scene serves to establish the protagonist’s baseline Islamophobia before experiencing Islamist terrorism. Michel does not categorically fear Muslims. He even fetichizes Muslim women, confessing “une certaine attraction pour le vagin des musulmanes” (Houellebecq Plateforme 30).

The narrator’s approval of Islamophobic speakers in Plateforme is partly circumstantial—Michel consistently finds himself in vulnerable situations. His conversation with the Egyptian expatriate “avait littéralement sauvé” an abysmal vacation (Houellebecq Plateforme 260). His conversation with the Jordanian banker “suffit […] à dissiper” his hatred of Muslims, alleviating his post-traumatic stress (Houellebecq Plateforme 359). His conversation with Aïcha offers “une intimité un peu déplacée” after his father’s death (Houellebecq Plateforme, 29).

Michel’s broader characterization in Plateforme, moreover, suggests that he should not be counted on to counter the novel’s Islamophobic discourse, either directly in dialogues or indirectly in his narratorial commentary. The protagonist not only shows irreverence towards religions—comparing both himself and “la chatte des femmes” to God—he also struggles to express himself (Houellebecq Plateforme 169). Even after “une réflexion brève mais intense” he judges his remarks to be “remarquablement stupide[s]” and “[d’une] extrême pauvreté,” leading him to fantasize about “cours de conversation” (Houellebecq Plateforme 49, 29, 127). “De tempérament […] assez mou,” Michel is non-confrontational, failing to reproach a fellow sex-tourist Robert—a “beauf” who celebrates racism (Houellebecq Plateforme 338, 48). While Michel claims “J’aurais pu, en effet,
objecter différentes choses,” his principle objection is egocentric: “nous étions là pour baiser, et […] ces discussions faisaient perdre du temps ; c’était là, au fond, mon objection principale” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 121). Throughout *Plateforme*, the unscrupulous protagonist resigns himself to the role of a “Européen décadent […] ayant pleinement accédé à l’égoïsme” : “Je ne suis pas bon, dans l’ensemble, ce n’est pas un des traits de mon caractère. L’humanitaire me dégoûte, le sort des autres m’est en général indifférent, je n’ai […] jamais éprouvé un quelconque sentiment de solidarité” (Houellebecq 308, 310).

The narrative instance further justifies the narrator-protagonist’s failure to redress his Islamophobic interlocutors in *Plateforme*. Michel begins his autobiography after his traumatic experience of terrorism. His entire narrative, therefore, bears the marks of his clinically diagnosed “déni du reel,” borderline suicidal depression and “sentiment de vengeance […] et de] haine pour les musulmans” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 355, 357).

The episodes of Islamophobia in *Plateforme* showcase the narrator’s poor judgment of character and arguments. Michel leaves the conversation with the impression that his interlocuteurs are “intelligent” or “sérieuse” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 260, 16). He is “convaincu d’emblée” by the “évidence” of their assertions validating his prejudices about Muslims and “leur religion déraisonnable” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 359, 259). He is persuaded by bombastic rhetoric and faulty economic models. He extrapolates from one individual’s experience to “l’ensemble [des] musulmans” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 30). Given the narrator’s visibly flawed judgment, the author could critique his progressive entrenchment in Islamophobia through his plot choices.
The Muslims who intervene in *Plateforme*, however, systematically corroborate the claims of Houellebecq’s Islamophobic speakers.

Aïcha’s brother gives credence to her portrait of the hypocritical and stupid practice of Islamic fundamentalism. Taking it upon himself to “demander des explications” from his sister’s lover, he assumes the role of defender and “[dépositaire] de la vraie foi” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 27, 30). When their discussion degenerates into a violent altercation, he callously leaves Michel’s father for dead. Employing “ses conceptions brutales […] de vengeance,” he hypocritically addresses his sister’s sin (extramarital sex) with a greater sin (murder) (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 27). Once the investigation wraps up, the narrator compares Aïcha’s homicidal brother to sheep: “eux aussi étaient stupides, peut-être encore plus que le frère d’Aïcha,” echoing her description of her family’s “connerie” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 28, 30).

Aïcha’s homicidal brother is the first in a series of violent, fundamentalist Muslims who support the Egyptian expatriate’s claims that Islam is the most “inhumaine et cruelle” religion, responsible for “une succession ininterrompue de guerres […] et de massacres” (Houellebecq, *Plateforme* 261). *Plateforme* features two instances of Islamic terrorism. Terrorists protest the “clubs Aphrodite” of Valérie’s travel agency with a brutal kidnapping, leaving “un message confus, écrit dans un anglais approximatif, qui […] indiquait que les deux jeunes gens seraient exécutés, pour leur comportement contraire à la loi islamique” (Houellebecq 317). Three days later, their mutilated corpses are dumped in a public square: “La jeune fille avait été lapidée, on s’était acharné sur elle avec une violence extrême ; la peau avait éclaté de partout, son corps n’était plus qu’une
boursouflure à peine reconnaissable. L’Allemand avait été égorgé et châtré, sa verge et ses testicules étaient enfoncés dans sa bouche” (Houellebecq Plateforme 317).

Although authorities monitoring “l’activité de mouvements islamistes, soutenus par la Libye, dans la zone frontalière avec la Malaisie” dismiss the incident as “une action isolée,” their reassuring reading is refuted in less than a month’s time by “l’attentat le plus meurtrier qui ait jamais eu lieu en Asie” (Houellebecq Plateforme 317, 318, 345). Three “assailants […] enturbannés” set off a bomb “au milieu du Crazy Lips, le bar le plus important en pleine heure d’affluence,” before turning their weapons on the crowd, claiming 117 casualties (Houellebecq Plateforme 340, 341, 345). The violence of the first attack is multiplied exponentially:

Devant l’entrée du bar une danseuse rampait sur le sol, toujours vêtue de son bikini blanc, les bras sectionnés à la hauteur du coude. Près d’elle, un touriste allemand assis au milieu des gravats soutenait les intestins qui s’échappaient de son ventre; sa femme était allongée près de lui, la poitrine ouverte, les seins à demi arrachés. À l’intérieur du bar stagnait une fumée noirâtre; le sol était glissant, couvert du sang qui jaillissait des corps humains et des organes tranchés. Plusieurs agonisants, les bras ou les jambes sectionnés, tentaient de ramper vers la sortie, laissant derrière eux une traînée sanglante. Les boulons et les clous avaient crevé des yeux, arraché des mains, déchiqueté des visages. Certains corps humains avaient littéralement éclaté de l’intérieur, leurs membres et leurs viscères jonchaient le sol sur plusieurs mètres. (Houellebecq Plateforme 341-342).

The traumatized narrator-protagonist Michel is treated by a psychiatrist who specializes in the treatment of survivors of terrorism since “l’attentat du RER Saint-Michel”
Houellebecq, *Plateforme* 353). This blend of real-life and fictional Islamist terrorism in *Plateforme* supports the Egyptian expatriate’s claims about the cruelty and militancy of Islam.

The Arab sex tourists in *Plateforme* give weight to the Jordanian banker’s claims about the triumph of capitalism over Islam and the current generation of Muslims “[qui] ne rêvaient que de consommation et de sexe” (Houellebecq 358). Michel’s quarter in Bangkok has a notable contingent of Middle-Eastern tourists “[qui] venaient surtout de Turquie ou d’Égypte, mais parfois aussi de pays musulmans beaucoup plus durs, comme l’Arabie Saoudite ou le Pakistan” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 318). Bangkok is not an exception, either—“la présence de ressortissants de pays arabes” in Thailand surprised the protagonist on his first visit (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 318). These tourists are particularly debauched: “[venant] exactement pour les mêmes raisons que les Occidentaux, à ceci près qu’ils semblaient se jeter sur la débauche avec encore plus d’enthousiasme. […] on les retrouvait autour d’un whisky dès dix heures du matin ; et ils étaient les premiers à l’ouverture des salons de massage” (Houellebecq, *Plateforme* 318).

After the first terrorist incident, brothels are even compelled to post signs forbidding Muslim clientele: “‘NO MUSLIMS HERE’ […] We respect your Muslim faith: we don’t want you to drink whisky and enjoy Thaï girls” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 318). The significant presence of Arab sex tourists “en rupture manifeste avec la loi islamique”

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78 The narrator-protagonist Michel sympathizes with the Arab sex tourists, who become scapegoats for terrorism, finding them “en général courtois et charmants” and suggesting that “Les pauvres n’y étaient pourtant pour rien, il était même clair qu’en cas d’attentat ils seraient les premiers visés” (318). Despite this distinction, the narrator is not above conflating Muslims and terrorists. He later claims that “l’islam avait brisé ma vie […] et alors] j’éprouvais un tressaillement d’enthousiasme à la pensée qu’il y avait un musulman de moins” (257).
provides compelling evidence for the Jordanian’s argument (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 318).

The conformity of Muslim characters with Islamophobic discourse in the novel renders the portrait of Islam in *Plateforme* particularly provocative. In previous works, the author casts considerable doubt over his Islamophobic speakers. But the implied author of *Plateforme* is decidedly different. While there are still reasonable grounds to be suspicious of these overtly Islamophobic characters, the author’s fictional world consistently supports their claims.

LA POSSIBILITÉ D’UNE ÎLE: Michel Houellebecq’s next novel, *La Possibilité d’une île*, traces the spectacular development of the fictional Church of Elohimism from marginality to global dominance. The protagonist’s autobiographical narrative provides “une description complète, en même temps que légèrement détachée” of twenty-first century Europe and the congenital corruption of the nascent Elohimite church (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 376). A thousand years later, his genetically identical successor, Daniel25, testifies to the resounding failure of their utopian project. While Elohimism forms the crux of the religious reflections in *La Possibilité d’une île*, Houellebecq again presents his readers with provocative portraits of Islam.

The characters in Houellebecq’s fifth novel reflect a broad spectrum of Islamophobia, from “[un] ton de burlesque islamophobe léger” to sincere fears regarding “le danger représenté par l'intégrisme musulman” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 49, 233).

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79Elohimism offers another thinly veiled portrait of a UFO Religion—the Raëlian cult previously featured in *Lanzarote* as the Azraëlians.
They produce “antiarabe” art—a pornographic film starring “des beurettes authentiques, garanties neuf-trois—salopes mais voilées” and a rap album “Nique les Bédouins.” They assimilate Islam with fundamentalism and “machisme,” qualifying it as a “foi primitive” predicated on “l'ignorance et la contrainte” (Houellebecq Possibilité 357, 359). They portray Muslim men as barbarous terrorists and Muslim women as submissive wives dedicated to “la procréation répétée de futurs djihadistes” (Houellebecq Possibilité 357).

But the narratological recontextualization of the Islamophobic discourse in Houellebecq’s novels has never been more paramount. As a provocative artist with “la réputation d'un comique plutôt littéraire,” Daniel1 represents a metafictional reflection upon the author’s polemical public figure (Houellebecq Possibilité 371).

Daniel1’s work evidently parodies Houellebecq’s novels. His breakthrough evokes the Lire controversy: “‘ON PRÉFÈRE LES PARTOUZEUSES PALESTINIENNES’ fut sans doute le sommet de ma carrière--médiatiquement s'entend. Je quittai brièvement les pages ‘Spectacles’ des quotidiens pour entrer dans les pages ‘Justice-Société.’ Il y eut des plaintes d'associations musulmanes, des menaces d'attentat à la bombe, enfin un peu d’action” (Houellebecq, Possibilité 49).

The narrator-protagonist of La Possibilité d’une île builds a career on provocative and “burlesque”

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80 The album Nique les bédouins references one of the most iconic songs in hip-hop, N.W.A.’s “Fuck the Police.”
81 Neuf-trois, refers to the department of the northern banlieue of Paris, known for a relatively high proportion of immigrants and Muslims. In a provocatively titled article published in Le Monde, the French demographer Michèle Tribalat claims that “L'islam est la première religion de Seine-Saint-Denis” (“L'islam reste une menace” §6).
82 Daniel1’s work becomes explicitly parodic in “une parodie de film porno […] intitulé ‘BROUTE-MOI LA BANDE DE GAZA (mon gros colon juif)’” featured in his breakthrough spectacle (Houellebecq Possibilité 49).
Islamophobia—he proposes parachuting miniskirts on Palestine, tactlessly tackles Middle-Eastern conflict, makes “une variété d’allusions burlesques et salaces autour des bâtons de dynamite que les militantès du Hamas s'enroulaient autour de la taille afin de fabriquer de la pâtée de Juif” and lives up to his tag-line “100% dans la haine” (Houellebecq 49, 59-60). One of his spectacles even reimagines a scene in Plateforme—the torture of “un touriste allemand” by Islamic extremists (Houellebecq Plateforme 317; Possibilité 50). Daniell’s more extreme version foregoes the tragic tone of Plateforme, inscribing “visuellement […] insoutenable” violence in an absurd theoretical framework “qui prenait tantôt la forme d’une interrogation pascalienne sur le fondement de l'identité humaine, tantôt celle d'une méditation économique–un peu à la Schumpeter” (Houellebecq Possibilité 50, 51). Through this all but explicit self-parody, Michel Houellebecq offers insight into his provocative flirtation with Islamophobia.

Daniell’s characterization conforms to the Houellebecq’s definition of a provocateur in Ennemis publics: “celui qui, indépendamment de ce qu'il peut penser ou être […] calcule la phrase ou l’attitude qui provoquera chez son interlocuteur le maximum de déplaisir ou de gêne” (14). The protagonist’s anti-Muslim provocation is calculated. His breakthrough work is “un risque calculé” wagered on “les intégristes islamistes […] des années 2000” (Houellebecq Possibilité 47). Convinced that “la reconnaissance artistique […] allait] à des productions faisant l'apologie du mal,” Daniell incorporates “racisme, pédophilie, cannibalisme, parricide, actes de torture et de barbarie […] la quasitotalité des créneaux porteurs” in his comedy, exploiting “le plus grand
bénéfice du métier d’humoriste […] pouvoir se comporter comme un salaud […] et
grossement rentabiliser son abjection” (Houellebecq Possibilité 51, 159, 23).83

The protagonist’s trademark “ton de burlesque islamophobe” and “alliance de la
méchanceté et du rire” pay off handsomely, netting him “quarante-deux millions
d’euros” (Houellebecq Plateforme 49, 159, 100). He draws comparisons to Chamfort and
La Rochefoucauld as “un observateur acéré de la réalité contemporaine” (Houellebecq
Possibilité 21). He becomes “un héros de la liberté d’expression” (Houellebecq
Possibilité 48). His works are “d’emblée [salués]” as classics “dans les pages ‘Justice-
Société,’” “dans Elle et dans Télérama” (Houellebecq Possibilité 60, 47, 22).

Despite critical and commercial success, Daniel1 has misgivings about his art.
Looking back on his provocative career, he claims “jamais je n’avais été réellement
sincère” (Houellebecq Possibilité 211). He suggests that his signature Islamophobia is not
commensurate with his personal belief, describing his atheism as “monolithique […]et]
radical,” leading him to approach “un chrétien, un musulman ou un juif” with equal
skepticism (Houellebecq Possibilité 258).84 Having adapted his art “aux goûts du
public,” Daniel1 does not consider himself “un artiste authentique,” but rather “comme
tous les bouffons […] une sorte de collabo,” concluding that “aucun de mes lamentables

83 Comedians, incidentally, are Houellebecq’s privileged example in his definition Ennemis publics :
“Beaucoup d’humoristes, dans les dernières décennies ont été de remarquables provocateurs” (Houellebecq
14).
84 The protagonist’s monolithic and radical atheism is borne out in his art, which vehemently attacks other
major religions. “‘LE COMBAT DES MINUSCULES’ [renvoie] les religions du Livre […] dos à dos,”
referring to Arabs, Jews and Christians with an equally egregious irreverence as “vermine d’Allah […]
poux circoncis […] et morpions du con de Marie” (Houellebecq, Possibilité 59). “Un soupçon
d’antisémitisme” and anti-catholicism (via “catholiques intégristes” who commit “[une] suite de différents
massacres” on moral grounds) are introduced to “contrebalancer le caractère globalement antiarabe” of his
works (Houellebecq Possibilité 49, 163).
scénarios, mécaniquement ficelés avec l’habileté d'un professionnel retors […] ne méritait de me survivre” (Houellebecq Possibilité 211, 169).85

Daniel1 could conceivably voice Houellebecq’s regrets over a lucrative commercial strategy that debased his art and made him complicit with “la mise à mort de la morale” (Houellebecq Possibilité 52). However, for La Possibilité d’une île to prove truly pivotal, the author must not only acknowledge his past polemics, but also distinguish his novel from the protagonist’s gratuitous islamophobia and provocation.

On several occasions, Houellebecq follows “la voie de la sagesse” outlined by his protagonist, introducing “un soupçon d’antisémitisme” and anti-Christian elements to counterbalance the Islamophobia in La Possibilité d’une île (49). “Un rabbin de la Commission des Messies (un organisme israélien spécialisé qui suivait les cas de ce genre)” dissuades the Elohimites from laying claim to Jerusalem, hypocritically arguing that “il ne fallait pas se focaliser à l’excès sur les aspects géographiques. Dieu est partout” (Houellebecq Possibilité 112). Later, when the Elohimite church is targeted in two terrorist attacks—“l'un à Istanbul, revendiqué par un groupe islamiste ; l'autre à Tucson, dans l'Arizona, attribué à un groupement fondamentaliste protestant”—the author draws an equivalency between Muslim and Christian extremists through syntactic

85 Daniel1 claims that “les valeurs dominantes […] étaient] axées depuis quelques décennies sur la compétition, l'innovation et l'énergie plus que sur la fidélité et le devoir […] Alors] Toute forme de cruauté, d'égoïsme cynique ou de violence était donc la bienvenue” (Houellebecq Possibilité 52).
parallelism (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 407). But is Michel Houellebecq, like his protagonist, content to merely ride the line of religious provocation? The representation of the Church of Elohimism in *La Possibilité d’une île* could allow the author to surpass the pure provocation of his protagonist, who played “quelque temps, assez vainement, avec l’idée d’un sketch élohimite” (Houellebecq 227). By tracing the evolution of a fictional faith from a marginal cult into a spiritual superpower, the author could ruminate on the nature of religious institutions.

This is not to suggest that the real-world Raëlians are spared in Houellebecq’s portrait of Elohimism. The protagonist initially dismisses the idea of the Elohim as “[des] conneries” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 111). The mainstream media presents the Elohimites “dans le meilleur des cas comme un regroupement d'hurluberlus et de soucoupiestes, dans le pire comme une organisation dangereuse qui propageait des thèses flirtant avec l'eugénisme, voire avec le nazisme” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 264). However, the author’s central criticism of Elohimism does not reside in their articulation of the creation myth and “la promesse fondamentale qui avait été celle de toutes les

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86 The author thereby suggests that Islam does not have a monopoly on religious extremism. While media coverage might suggest otherwise, the FBI reported that the vast majority of terrorism in the US since 9/11 (73%) was committed by non-Muslim, Far-Right extremists (Amarasingam, ¶2).

87 In *Ennemis publics*, Houellebecq likens his work as a provocative novelist to the dangerous exercise of descending mountains in cycling : “Mon travail alors consiste à maintenir la machine sur la route, à la laisser éventuellement frôler l’abîme, sans lui permettre d’y tomber. C’est épuisant si l’on veut, mais pas dans le sens habituel ; c’est surtout dangereux” (231).

88 The Elohim are the advanced extraterrestrial creators of humanity who will return to share the science of immortality with “les plus méritants d’entre nous” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 111).

89 Elohimite church strives to achieve immortality by cloning and ultimately directly resynthesizing their adherents. Their project entails genetic modifications that improve the survivability of their successors, but lacks the ethno-racial dimension of Nazi eugenics.
religions monothéistes,” but rather in the unscrupulous founders who impose a *dangerous organisation* on the globe (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 360, 264).\(^9\)

In private, the engineers of Elohimism acknowledge their dogma to be predicated on lies. While the Prophet qualifies “[la] création par les Élohim […] comme une métaphore,” his humorist describes it less diplomatically as “une bonne blague de camés […] qui avaient] pris des champignons” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 131, 302).

Without genuine faith, the founders run their church like a business. Their headquarters ressemble “une grosse PME” where the Prophet presides as “[un] *chef d’entreprise*” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 365, 366).\(^9\) His number two, the ironically named Jérôme Prieur, looks like “un cadre d’entreprise […] rien en lui n’évoquait le mysticisme, ni même la simple religiosité” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 366). “[Marchant] à la suite du capitalisme de consommation,” Elohimism acquires “les édifices religieux que l’Église catholique n’avait plus les moyens d’entretenir,” before realizing “une OPA ultrarapide sur les courants bouddhistes occidentaux” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 356, 365).

Naturally, the founders of Elohimism endeavor to profit from their enterprise. The original Prophet preaches sexual liberty, but establishes a personal harem, “[se comportant] au sein de sa propre secte comme un mâle dominant absolu” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 279). His successor leverages his position to pursue his concept of contemporary art—“créer son propre monde […] comme] le rival de Dieu”—his illustrated campaign for sexual liberty, “[qui] dans son désir de stylisation […] s’était largement

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\(^9\) To be fair, more widely held beliefs in supernatural creators are no less tenuous and, as Daniel1 observes, “La promesse d’immortalité faite en son temps par le christianisme reposait […] sur des bases encore bien plus minces” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 361).

\(^9\) The acronym PME stands for *petite et moyenne entreprise*.  

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éloigné d’une représentation réaliste,” provides the blueprint for the neohuman race (Houellebecq Possibilité 157-158, 370). Another member of the founding triumvirate, Jérôme Prieur, exploits Elohimism to “se consacrer à sa vraie passion : la création et l’organisation de structures de pouvoir” (Houellebecq Possibilité 123, 302). Their research director, Professor Miskiewicz, fund the exorbitant costs of his laboratory with “l’essentiel des cotisations et des bénéfices [des adeptes]” (Houellebecq Possibilité 243).

To the detriment of their followers, the founders mercilessly pursue their interests, employing deceit and even transgressing “la frontière [du meurtre]” (Houellebecq, Possibilité 289). Under the aegis of these unscrupulous men, Elohimism becomes a cult of individualism “n’imposant aucune contrainte morale, réduisant l’existence humaine aux catégories de l’intérêt et du plaisir” (Houellebecq Possibilité 360). Their short-sighted pursuit of immortality yields a dystopian future. Rather than the promised “conservation indéfinie de […] la jeunesse, et des plaisirs qui lui étaient associés,” the founders achieve “un état de stase illimité” for their immortal adepts, who lead solitary lives punctuated by pixelated video-chats and cybersex (Houellebecq Possibilité 356, 426).

This troubling portrait of the simultaneous success and failure of the Elohimite Church establishes a critical distance between the primary narrator and the implied author of La Possibilité d’une île. “[N’ayant] jamais envisagé la possibilité [d’adhérer à une religion],” Daniel1 embraces Elohimism after his catastrophic mid-life crisis, seduced by the promise of an eternal return to his youth--“le temps du bonheur, sa saison unique”

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92 When the prophet is murdered by a jealous partner, Miskiewicz coldly euthanizes the only witness, dismissing her as “un arrangement temporaire de molécules,” before disposing of the bodies and staging the Prophet’s highly publicized resurrection (Houellebecq, Possibilité 288).
93 Immortal is a misnomer. Each incarnation dies and is replaced by a genetically identical copy who assimilates individual thoughts and memories by “la méditation sur le récit de vie du prédécesseur” (Houellebecq 183).
(Houellebecq Possibilité 257, 393). The development of the narrative demonstrates the erroneous judgment of this self-proclaimed “balzacien medium light,” who falls prey to one of the rare religions that escapes his vicious observational comedy (Houellebecq Possibilité 151).  

By tracing the evolution of the fictional Elohimite Church, the author could distance himself from the Islamophobic provocation of his public figure, past novels and protagonist by shifting shifts his focus from specific religions to the latent potential for corruption inherent to all religious institutions.

But the author’s plot choices in La Possibilité d’une île produce a problematic representation of Islam that casts doubt over his possibile new direction. Daniel25’s historical account of the expansion of the Elohimite Church includes a version of le grand remplacement:

S’appuyant sur une immigration massive et incessante, la religion musulmane se renforça dans les pays occidentaux […] s'adressant en priorité aux populations venues du Maghreb et d'Afrique noire, elle n'en connaissait pas moins un succès croissant auprès des Européens ‘de souche,’ […] En l'espace d'une à deux décennies, l'islam devait ainsi parvenir à assumer en Europe le rôle qui était celui du catholicisme au cours de sa période faste : celui d'une religion

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94 The situation harkens back to Lanzarote, whose Islamophobic narrator displays tolerance towards the Raélian cult that is ultimately involved in a pedophilia scandal.

95 Renaud Camus’s Grand remplacement is a xenophobic and largely discredited theory predicting the replacement of the Français de souche through large-scale immigration from Sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb. Houellebecq notably defends Camus as one of the controversial contemporary authors who found themselves “au coeur d’un scandale, de procès […] dont aucun d’entre eux ne s’en remettra” (Interventions2 264).

96 Surprisingly, this timeline is shared by partisans of le grand remplacement, who claim that it will occur “dans un laps de temps très rapide, quelques décennies” (“Communiqué de lancement du 5/11/2014”).
‘officielle,’ organisatrice du calendrier et des mini-cérémonies rythmant le passage du temps (Houellebecq Possibilité 356-7, 358).

Daniel25’s account offers a few subtle twists on Renaud Camus’ theory. First, Islam’s success is predicated on its christianization: “l'expansion de l'islam ne fut rendue possible que grâce à l'introduction d'une série d'accommodements […] s'inspirant […] de la tradition catholique […], tels que] la conversion et le pardon des péchés, deux notions pourtant relativement étrangères à la tradition islamique” (Houellebecq Possibilité 357). Second, Islam is soon superseded by Elohimism, failing to live up to Camus’ prediction of “le phénomène le plus considérable de l’histoire de France” (445).

But these subtle challenges to this far-right theory are overshadowed by the sheer gratuity of this grand remplacement narrative. Daniel25 charters the remarkably effective evangelism of the Elohimite Church, which spreads “sans résistance sur l'ensemble du monde occidental,” absorbing “les courants bouddhistes occidentaux […] et] avec la même facilité les ultimes résidus de la chute du christianisme” before overtaking Asia (Houellebecq Possibilité 356: emphasis added). While the author could have programmed the absorption of Europe’s Muslim minority “avec la même facilité,” he

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97 Written under a repressive theocracy, Daniel25’s account does not initially inspire confidence. Although Daniel1’s narrative suggests that “le phénomène [de l’intégrisme islamique] s’était progressivement éteint” and testifies to “l’effondrement massif […] des croyances religieuses traditionnelles,” his successor’s tightly timeline checks out (Houellebecq 97, 354). Daniel1’s autobiography extends approximately through the year 2015 (He meets Isabelle at 39, who gives him advice on his breakthrough spectacle in the early 2000s, before leaving her for Esther at the age of 47 and languishing a few years until his suicide (Houellebecq 30, 318). Islam could have overtaken Europe after his death “en l’espace d’une à deux décennies” and collapsed within a halcentury of “la chute […] du communisme,” as stipulated (Houellebecq 358, 359).
chooses to portray Islam’s expansion “pratiquement au même rythme que l’élohîmisme” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 356, 357).

Houellebecq’s *grand remplacement* narrative becomes even more problematic when Daniel25 invokes negative stereotypes to explain the spectacular rise and fall of Islam. His neohuman narrator argues that Islam’s success is “uniquement imputable à son machisme,” which is embraced by European men and women (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 357). Islamic televangelists reinforce this stereotype by diffusing “un scénario de vie édifiant” in which a young woman with “une vie dissolue marquée par l’alcool, la consommation de drogues et la liberté sexuelle la plus effrénée […] rencontre] un jeune musulman intégre et pieux […] et devient une épouse soumise, chaste et voilée” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 357). Daniel25 argues that a “phénomène de reflux” brings Islam’s decadal tenure as Europe’s official religion to a swift end (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 359). “[N’ayant été] maintenus dans leur foi primitive que par l’ignorance et la contrainte,” Muslim countries discover “un mode de vie basé sur la consommation de masse, la liberté sexuelle et les loisirs” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 359). “Un refus soudain des jeunes filles palestiniennes de limiter leur existence à la procréation répétée de futurs djihadistes, et […] leur désir de profiter de la liberté de moeurs” spark a revolution that propagates to “les populations issues de l’immigration” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 359, 358).

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98 The Pew Research Center found, in 2011, that 76.2% of Europeans identify as Christian (“Regional Distribution of Christians”).

99 The edifying scenario for Muslim men makes no mention of sex, reinforcing the impression of a patriarchal double-standard.
While Daniel25’s perception of Islam as misogynistic, primitive and terrorist is literally informed by received ideas, the author’s choice to portray Islam as “un bastion de résistance plus durable” is harder to justify (Houellebecq Possibilité 356). After his acquittal from charges of inciting racial hatred, Michel Houellebecq could have exploited the protagonist of his fifth novel to exorcise his persona as a provocateur. But by incorporating a grand remplacement in his novel—an addition that only serves to validate extreme-right thinkers and reinforce dangerous stereotypes about Muslims—the author reveals a reluctance to put his past polemics behind him.

LA CARTE ET LE TERRITOIRE: The virtual absence of provocation from Michel Houellebecq’s next novel, La Carte et le territoire, initially makes the grand remplacement in La Possibilité d’une île seem like the dying gesture of his provocative persona.100 While the protagonist of Houellebecq’s sixth novel constitutes another artist and analog of the author, he is the antipode of Daniel1. Hardly “une pute […] aux goûts du public,” Jed Martin “suivait simplement l’impulsion du moment,” passing from one medium to another to elaborate “une vision à la fois cohérente et innovante” “[de] la fin de l’âge industriel en Europe” (Houellebecq Possibilité 211; Carte 422, 38, 428). Rather than “racisme, pédophilie, cannibalisme, parricide, actes de torture et de barbarie,”

100 Houellebecq’s fictional analogue in La Possibilité d’une île, Daniel1 comments on the difficulty of leaving behind his provocation : “j’étais un bouffon, je resterais un bouffon, je crèverais comme un bouffon - avec de la haine, et des soubresauts,” remarking, in old age, that “peut-être […] je ferais chier jusqu’au bout” (Houellebecq 118, 417). Daniel1 is repeatedly reincarnated until Daniel25 decides to “[quitter] de [son] plein gré le cycle des renaissances et des morts, […]et se dirigeait vers un néant simple” (Houellebecq Possibilité 481). But Daniel 25 concludes his narrative ambiguously : “Il me restait peut-être soixante ans à vivre […] j’étais maintenant entré dans un espace paisible dont seul m’écarterait le processus létal” (Houellebecq Possibilité 484). The death of Houellebecq’s provocative persona, therefore, cannot be confirmed.
Martin chooses uncontroversial subjects, taking photos of industrial products and Michelin maps, painting portraits of professionals and producing abstract, superimposed videos of vegetation (Houellebecq Possibilité 159). By exchanging his provocative protagonist for “un artiste authentique,” Houellebecq distances himself from past controversies in La Carte et le territoire (Possibilité 211).101 His caricatural, autofictional appearance and death in the novel could announce the burial of his past persona and a new phase in his career.

Moving away from religious controversies, La Carte et le territoire is Houellebecq’s first novel since Extension du domaine de la lutte not to include the words musulman or islam. In contrast with the explicit expressions of Islamophobia in previous novels, the few, fleeting references to predominantly Muslim regions, countries or organizations in La Carte et le territoire convey no clear commentary on Islam.

The novel opens with the ekphrasis of Jed Martin’s mise en abyme portrait of contemporary artists, “Damien Hirst et Jeff Koons se partageant le marché de l’art,” where the Muslim world is literally relegated to the background. The subjects are situated in a room “inspirée par une photographie publicitaire […] de l’hôtel Emirates d’Abu Dhabi” (Houellebecq, Carte 9). Behind them, “une baie vitrée ouvrait sur un paysage d’immeubles élevés qui formaient un enchevêtrement babylonien de polygones gigantesques, jusqu’aux confins de l’horizon […] On aurait pu se trouver au Qatar, ou à Dubai”, a reference “aux nuits de la péninsule arabique” (Houellebecq Carte 9, 30). By juxtaposing these towering figures of the art world and this vaguely Persian cityscape in

101 The lack of controversy certainly helped it to obtain the Prix Goncourt—a prize for which two of Houellebecq’s previous novels—Les Particules élémentaires and La Possibilité d’une île—had been under consideration.
this unfinished “tableau de merde,” Jed may seek to contrast spectacular wealth
predicated on tangible natural resources and the intangible art market “[qui] n’avait aucun
sens” (Houellebecq Carte 30, 232). He also may have chosen this geometrically complex
background on aesthetic grounds. The implications of his choice for Islam, however,
remain elusive.102

Subsequent references to Muslims in La Carte et le territoire prove equally
indirect and inconclusive. In an airport shuttle, Jed finds “à peu près tout le monde à
l’exception des membres actifs, productifs de la société,” retirees, students “et quelques
femmes arabes, accompagnées d’enfants jeunes” (Houellebecq, Carte 160). But
circumstantial factors beyond Islam can justify Jed’s assessment—these Arab women
chaperone small children on a mid-day flight in February (a scholastic vacation rather
than the more typical August vacation for professionals). So, despite being “fort des idées
reçues,” Jed is not necessarily alluding to Islam’s alleged patriarchy and cult of
domesticity (Houellebecq Carte 78).

References to Islamic terrorism in La Carte et le territoire lack commentary on
their religious motivation. While admiring the era of “enthousiasme technologique” that
produced the Shannon Airport, Jed briefly considers “les premiers attentats palestiniens –
plus tard relayés, de manière plus spectaculaire et plus professionnelle, par ceux d’Al-
Qaïda – [qui transformaient] le voyage aérien […] en une expérience infantilisante et
concentrationnaire” (Houellebecq Carte 134). Elsewhere, terrorism is portrayed as a
banality of the mediascape. The detective investigating Houellebecq’s death attributes the
report of “un attentat suicide particulièrement meurtrier de kamikazes palestiniens à

102 Jeff Koons did participate in the inaugural Abu Dhabi Art fair in 2009 (Peers ¶ 2).
Hébron” to “un sommaire très classique” of the nightly news (Houellebecq *Carte* 328).

When Frédéric Beigbeder inquires about Jed Martin’s art “à l’occasion d’un prix littéraire quelconque,” the narrator compares the prestige and technical demands of photographing “les seins de Pamela Anderson […]et] les restes éparpillés d’un kamikaze libanais” (Houellebecq *Carte* 76).

When contextualized in their respective scenes, these indirect references to Islam appear trivial. Martin’s difficulty in rendering “cette somptuosité, ce mystère qu’on associe aux nuits de la péninsule arabique,” pales in comparison to his struggle with Koons, who is “aussi difficile […]à peindre [qu’un] pornographe mormon” (Houellebecq *Carte* 30, 10).103 The Arab women compose only part of a tableau of strangers on the airport shuttle who give Jed the “sensation de partir en vacances” (Houellebecq *Carte* 160). The protagonist does not pin the decline of airline travel on Islamists, but rather on economics—the increased buying power of “les couches populaires” together with “l’ultra-libéralisme […] des compagnies low cost” (Houellebecq *Carte* 134, 135). The Lebanese kamikaze is subordinated in a parenthetical digression, while his Palestinian counterpart is overshadowed by a more extensive development on the implications of “des seins siliconés […] chez la femme” (Houellebecq *Carte* 329-330).

Conceivably, Houellebecq could exploit semantically linked categories to subtly reinforce Muslim stereotypes with impunity.104 But while petromonarchies, Arab housewives and terrorists can all be read as representative figures of Islamic

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103 In his 1990 *Made in Heaven* series, Jeff Koons produced sexually explicit photographs featuring himself and his future wife, the pornographic actress Ilona Staller.

104 Deltombe and Rigouste argue that the media construct of the Arab in contemporary France entails a semantic web—“une série d'amalgames et d'ambivalences autour des catégories symboliques de l'immigré et de l'étranger' du 'musulman' et de l’'islamiste' du 'jeune de banlieue' ou du 'terroriste’” (Deltombe 191).
fundamentalism, the author never mentions, let alone foregrounds, their connection with Islam, preventing readers from confidently inferring a clear religious criticism from his novel.

The few indirect and inconclusive references to Muslims in *La Carte et le territoire* are overshadowed by explicit and uncontroversial claims about the decline of Christianity and rise of Atheism.\(^{105}\) Acknowledging “l’empreinte [des principaux dogmes de la foi catholique] sur la culture occidentale,” the narrator notes “la progression régulière de l’athéisme” (Houellebecq, *Carte* 50, 318). Pope Jean-Paul II “[saluait] une des dernières populations catholiques européennes” and the clergy “autrefois placés au premier rang de la société” fell from favor: “de moins en moins nombreux […et] héritiers d’une tradition spirituelle millénaire que plus personne ne comprenait vraiment, […] les prêtres étaient aujourd’hui […] humbles et désargentés, méprisés de tous” (Houellebecq *Carte* 136, 99-100).

The characters inhabiting Houellebecq’s fictional world corroborate the narrator’s assertion of Christianity’s decline and the rise of atheism. Serving one of the last generations of believers given “la baisse tendancielle du taux de baptême,” the priest presiding over the funeral of Jed’s grandmother is “un vieux routier des enterrements, qui devaient être […] de loin son activité principale” (Houellebecq *Carte* 318, 55). The protagonist’s Jesuit boarding school is patronized “par des gens conservateurs […] pas des catholiques intégristes” and his peers “savaient en général un peu moins sur la vie de Jésus que sur celle de Spiderman” (Houellebecq *Carte* 48-49, 50). As an adult, Jed only

\(^{105}\) A WIN-Gallup poll found that France had one of the four highest proportions of convinced atheists in their sample (29%)--second only to the Czech Republic (Haski, “La Carte de l’athéisme dans le monde”).
attends mass “sous le coup d’une impulsion irraisonnée” with his girlfriend Geneviève after making love (Houellebecq Carte 98). He flirts with the idea of painting a priest, but “les jeunes prêtres urbains constituaient, pour qui ne partageait pas leur croyance, un sujet déroutant et inaccessible” (Houellebecq Carte 99). Likewise, the detective on Houellebecq’s murder case “avait perdu tout contact avec la foi catholique” ; during the author’s Catholic funeral, “la messe […] fut pour lui, comme d’habitude, un moment d’ennui total […] il n’y comprenait rien” (Houellebecq Carte 322).

The treatment of Islam, Christianity and Atheism in La Carte et le territoire might suggest that Michel Houellebecq is finally moving away from religious polemics--a move that is paradoxically announced by the provocatively Islamophobic protagonist of his previous novel. The author’s portrayal of Islam in his novels appears to follow the trajectory of his public persona traced in Chapter 1: Reading Houellebecq and his Fictions: the author’s islamophobic provocation ratchets up with Les Particules élémentaires, culminating in Plateforme, before being acknowledged by the autocritical author and entering a decline.

SOUMISSION: But Michel Houellebecq’s hypothetical career trajectory is complicated by his 2015 novel, Soumission. Marking a return to the subject of his greatest controversies, the title is synonymous with Islam as it has “always been understood in the

106 Houellebecq’s conversion in La Carte et le territoire offers the only exception to rising atheism in the novel. But, as I argued in Chapter 1 Reading Houellebecq and his Fictions, his autofictional conversion serves to highlight the disconnect between the author’s private beliefs and public persona’s “athéisme intransigeant” (Houellebecq 318).
Islamic lands and communities”-- “to surrender oneself, to commit or resign oneself to
the will of God […] the act or state of submission” (Lewis,“Islam: the Religion” 8).

Soumission traces the career of the narrator-protagonist, François—a Huysmans
scholar who loses his professorship following the surprise election of Mohammed Ben
Abbes in the 2022 presidential race. Once in office, the Muslim administration enacts
major social reforms to account for “ce retour du religieux […] une tendance profonde,
qui traversait nos sociétés,” dismantling the republic’s longstanding tradition of laïcité
and overhauling the national education system (Houellebecq Soumission 109). Despite a
healthy pension, François languishes in early retirement before submitting to mounting
pressure from former colleagues, resolving to convert to Islam and thusly return to his
privileged and prestigious position at the Sorbonne.

Based on this synopsis, Houellebecq’s latest novel seems like a return to
provocation. But as in La Possibilité d’une île, the grand remplacement narrative in
Soumission does not exactly play out according to Renaud Camus’ predictions.
Furthermore, the narrative’s focus on the French intellectual elite during this socio-
political sea-change led Adam Gopnik from The New Yorker to qualify Soumission as a
“Francophobic satire” (“The Next Thing”). But readings of the novel as Islamophobic
and Francophobic are not mutually exclusive. To situate the implied author of Soumission
and evaluate his alleged Islamophobia, the discourse on Islam produced by the narrator
and his interlocutors must be measured against the characterization of the speakers and
the interventions of Muslim characters in the narrative.

The newly appointed president of the Sorbonne and best-selling author of the
admittedly “terriblement schématique” Dix questions sur l’Islam, Robert Rediger
provides the clearest commentary on the Islamic dogma in *Soumission* (Houellebecq 259).\(^{107}\) Having been gifted a copy while discussing his rehiring, François notes Rediger’s blend of standard and genuinely novel takes on Islam. After opening with a hackneyed commentary on “l’immensité et l’harmonie de l’Univers, la perfection du dessein, etc,” Rediger takes liberties to adapt Islam to a contemporary “public humaniste”: he evokes “imams 2.0 […] et imams 3.0,” describes halal as “une sorte de bio amélioré” and presents Mohammed as progressive—“[il avait] mis fin à toute forme de discrimination raciale dans les pays qu’il dominait” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 268, 269, 273, 270). François finds Rediger’s most compelling argument in the seventh chapter, confessing that “comme sans doute la plupart des hommes, je sautai les chapitres consacrés aux devoirs religieux, aux piliers de l’islam et au jeûne, pour en arriver directement […] à *Pourquoi la polygamie* ?” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 268). Attempting to reconcile science with religion, Rediger asserts that “les desseins du Créateur s’exprimaient au travers de la sélection naturelle : c’est par elle que les créatures animées atteignaient à leur maximum de beauté, de vitalité et de force”\(^{108}\) (Houellebecq, *Soumission* 268-269).\(^{109}\) Polygamy is framed as a weapon in a demographic and

\(^{107}\) Houellebecq’s character appears to reference Robert Redeker, a high school philosophy teacher in France who received death threats after a controversial op-ed in *Le Figaro* “Face aux intimidations islamistes, que doit faire le monde libre ?” (“Un appel en faveur de Robert Redeker”). While Redeker agrees with Rediger that “L’islam tente d’obliger l’Europe à se plier à sa vision,” he considers this to be a disaster rather than a positive development (Redeker, ¶4). Unlike Redeker, Rediger is compensated for his support of Islam in *Soumission*. Perhaps the author is suggesting that champions of Islam are more successful than Islam’s detractors in contemporary France.

\(^{108}\) Rediger’s remarks echo those of Daniel1 in *La Possibilité d’une île*: “Et, sur l’amour physique, je ne me faisais guère d’illusions. Jeunesse, beauté, force : les critères de l’amour physique sont exactement les mêmes que ceux du nazisme. En résumé, j’étais dans un beau merdier” (Houellebecq 74).

\(^{109}\) Rediger previously used this strategy, reminding François that the “plus grands scientifiques” embraced intelligent design—Newton, Voltaire, Einstein (Houellebecq *Soumission* 252). While Newton and Voltaire did affirm god’s existence through watchmaker analogies, Rediger’s interpretation of Einstein’s “Dieu ne joue pas aux dés” as an affirmation of intelligent design is a stretch (Houellebecq *Soumission* 252).
ideological struggle for existence: “si certains se voyaient accorder la jouissance de plusieurs femelles, d’autres devraient nécessairement en être privés […] C’est ainsi que s’accomplissait le destin de l’espèce” (Houellebecq Soumission 269).

François’ hasty and highly selective reading of Dix questions sur l’Islam yields a surprisingly accurate impression of its author’s perverse and misogynistic vision of Islam. In confidence, Rediger reveals an epiphany “qu’il hésiterait à exposer devant [ses] coreligionnaires” : “il y a pour moi un rapport entre l’absolue soumission de la femme à l’homme, telle que la décrit Histoire d’O, et la soumission de l’homme à Dieu, telle que l’envisage l’islam” (Houellebecq Soumission 260).110 As Rediger suggests in his lesser known publications, Islam’s ambition to “dominer le monde” demands “le rejet de l’athéisme et de l’humanisme […] la soumission de la femme […] et le retour au patriarcat” (Houellebecq Soumission 274, 275).

François’ younger colleague at the Sorbonne, Godefroy Lempereur reinforces Rediger’s portrait of an intrinsically patriarchal and expansionist Islam.111 When urban violence interrupts the trimestrial cocktail of the Journal des dix-neuviémistes, Lempereur invites François to take refuge in his nearby apartment where he makes audacious claims about “les affrontement inter-ethniques” (Houellebecq Soumission 56). First, he accuses the government of a media blackout to prevent Marine Le Pen’s

110 Dominique Aury’s Histoire d’O [1954] portrays the heroine’s voluntary and extreme sadomasochistic servitude.

111 The latter charge reflects the global ambition of jihad: “From an early date Muslim law laid down, as one of the principle obligations of the head of the Muslim state and community, the conduct of jihad, a term commonly, if inaccurately, translated as “Holy War.” The Arabic word literally means striving, and it is often followed by the words fi sabil Allah, in the path of God. Until relatively recently it was usually, though not universally, understood in a military sense. It was a Muslim duty[…] to fight in the war against the unbelievers […] until all mankind either embraced Islam or submitted to the authority of the Muslim state” (Lewis Islam and the West 9).
election, knowing that “toute image de violences urbaines, c’est des voix de plus pour le Front national” (Houellebecq Soumission 67). Lempereur concedes that far-right militants consistently instigate hostilities--“chaque fois […] il y avait au départ une provocation anti-islam : une mosquée profanée, une femme obligée d’enlever son niqab sous la menace, enfin un truc de ce genre”--but ultimately defends their logic--“ils ont de toute évidence raison” (Houellebecq Soumission 66, 70). Brandishing a pamphlet entitled “PRÉPARER LA GUERRE CIVILE,” he explicates and endorses the position of the self-proclaimed “indigènes de l’Europe […] qui refusent la colonisation musulmane” (Houellebecq Soumission 69, 68). The identitarians couch fears of a grand remplacement in a pseudo-scientific framework, making the specious argument that transcendence is a heritable trait and “un avantage sélectif: les couples qui se reconnaissent dans l’une des trois religions du Livre, chez lesquels les valeurs patriarcales se sont maintenues, on davantage d’enfants que les couples athées ou agnostiques” (Houellebecq Soumission 69). Consequently, “l’humanisme athée, sur lequel repose le “vivre ensemble” laïc, est donc condamné à brève échéance” (Houellebecq Soumission 70). Although their logic applies to all Abrahamic religions, the xenophobic identitarians single out Muslims--“c’est en particulier le cas de la population musulmane--sans même tenir compte de l’immigration”--and strive to provoke a war “entre les musulmans et le reste de la population [européenne]” while retaining their dwindling demographic advantage (Houellebecq Soumission 70).

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112Far-right politics are gaining traction in France, as evidenced by the 2017 presidential race in France, where the Front national candidate Marine Le Pen obtained 33.9% of the vote in the final round.
113The identitarians normalize their position by asserting that “Le rejet des musulmans est à peu près aussi fort dans tous les pays européens” (Houellebecq Soumission 70).
Alain Tanneur, the loquacious husband of François’ fellow dix-neuviémiste, provides extensive analysis of Mohammed Ben Abbes’ campaign platform and strategy after the Socialist Party’s first-round upset. Though Tanneur presents the Muslim regime in a positive light, his claims resonate with Rediger and Lempereur’s reductive vision of Islam.

Tanneur distances France’s Fraternité musulmane from Islamist and fundamentalist movements. He affirms that “jamais on n’a pu établir la moindre connexion” between jihadists and the Fraternité musulmane, underscoring Ben Abbes’ moderation: “c’est un musulman modéré, voilà le point central : il l’affirme constamment, et c’est la vérité. Il ne faut pas se le représenter comme un taliban ni comme un terroriste, ce serait une grossière erreur” (Houellebecq Soumission 142, 154). The candidate’s plan to annex Muslim majority nations and shift “le centre de gravité de l’Europe” “n’avait rien à voir avec le fondamentalisme islamique” “[ni les] monarchies du Golfe,” reflecting instead “ses ambitions personnelles […] de devenir à terme le premier président élu de l’Europe” (Houellebecq Soumission 155, 157-158). To support his claims, Tanneur describes Ben Abbes’ public incarnation of Islam as “la forme achevée d’un humanisme nouveau, réunificateur” (Houellebecq Soumission 152).

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114 Houellebecq’s fictional Fraternité musulmane has a real counterpart—the Muslim brotherhood with alleged links to terrorist organizations. The former secretary of Homeland security, Michael Chertoff writes: “Today, the Muslim Brotherhood publicly renounces violence. […] unquestionably, its early formation and development, influenced heavily by western totalitarianism, helped produce not only the ideology but eventually the leadership for today’s violent Islamist extremism” (Chertoff, 17). Recent congressional debates concerned “whether the Brotherhood served as a firewall against or a conveyor belt toward violent extremism” (Lynch).

115 Tanneur’s phrasing, however, should arouse the reader’s skepticism. He suggests that the Fraternité musulmane candidate disapproves of terrorist methods: “il n’a jamais eu que mépris pour ces gens. […] au fond, il considère les terroristes comme des amateurs” (Houellebecq Soumission 155). The implication is that Ben Abbes is a professional, whose political project can be construed as a non-military Jihad.
The Muslim candidate selects a Roman Catholic running mate (François Bayrou), cultivates “de bonnes relations avec le grand rabbin de France” and visits the Vatican “[pas ] moins de trois fois” (Houellebecq Soumission 157, 153). Envisioning “la France [...comme] partie du dar al islam,” he prescribes a less rigorous version of Sharia law that is not “révolutionnaire […mais] rassurante, traditionnelle--avec un parfum d’exotisme” (Houellebecq Soumission 153).\textsuperscript{116}

But as Tanneur delves further into the Muslim party’s politics, his claims about their moderation become increasingly questionable. Taking aim at “le véritable ennemi des musulmans […] le sécularisme, la laïcité, le matérialisme athée,” the party advocates for an “enseignement islamique [qui] est à tous points de vue, très différent de l’enseignement laïc” (Houellebecq Soumission 156, 82). Beyond modifying “les règles concernant le régime alimentaire des cantines […et les] cinq prières quotidiennes,” the proposed system imposes limits on the faculty, curriculum and student body (Houellebecq Soumission 82). Teachers “sans exception, devront être musulmans,” the curriculum “devra être adapté aux enseignements du Coran,” and “seules certaines filières seront ouvertes aux femmes […] qui seront] orientées vers des écoles d’éducation ménagère” (Houellebecq Soumission 83, 82). Budget cuts render their proposal even more problematic: “l’école républicaine […] deviendra une école au rabais et tous les parents un peu soucieux de l’avenir de leurs enfants les inscriront dans l’enseignement musulman” (Houellebecq Soumission 84). The party’s marital reform would operate on a similar principle: “le mariage républicain restera inchangé […] Le mariage musulman,

\textsuperscript{116}The Oxford Dictionary of Islam defines "Dar al-Islam as a “region of Muslim sovereignty where Islamic law prevails"
éventuellement polygame, n’aura aucune conséquence en termes d’état civil, mais il […] ouvrira des droits […] fiscaux” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 83). Ben Abbes’ campaign for “la restauration de la famille, de la morale traditionnelle et implicitement du patriarcat,” therefore, clearly constitutes a reactionary return to Islam before the influential nineteenth-century debates on women’s rights (Houellebecq *Soumission* 153; Esposito, “Woman and Islam”).

So despite Tanneur’s perplexing insistence upon Ben Abbes’ religious moderation, his description of *La Fraternité musulmane* coincides with far-right theories and stereotypes about Islam’s patriarchy, expansionism and antisemitism. The Muslim president’s plans for France evoke Renaud Camus’ *grand remplacement* and, as Tanneur even acknowledges, Bat Ye’or’s “fantasme de complot Eurabia” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 158). His party’s aggressive “bataille des idées” amounts to a non-military jihad: “Pour eux, l’essentiel c’est la démographie, et l’éducation ; la sous-population qui dispose du meilleur taux de reproduction, et qui parvient à transmettre ses valeurs, triomphe […] celui qui contrôle les enfants contrôle le futur, point final” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 153, 82). Their veneer of religious tolerance hardly appears “parfaitement sincère”--in practice, they tolerate Christians as prospective converts who could be convinced to “faire un pas de plus” and hope “[les Juifs] se décideront d’eux-mêmes à quitter la France” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 152, 156, 157).117

117 Ben Abbes’ alleged antisemitism imparts a sinister dimension to Tanneur’s assertion that his “grand reference […] c’est l’Empire romain”--a reference that is shared with the Third Reich (Houellebecq *Soumission* 157). Tanneur’s claims also validate the fears of François’ lover, Myriam, whose family believes that “Quand un parti musulman arrive au pouvoir, ce n’est jamais très bon pour les Juifs” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 104).
The vision of Islam shared by these speakers remarkably transcends their politics. Rediger is “célèbre pour ses positions propalestiniennes” and “ses positions promusulmanes,” Lempereur is identitarian and Tanneur admires the moderate Muslim president, declaring that “le moment est maintenant venu […] d’une alliance [avec l’islam]” (Houellebecq, *Soumission* 36, 84, 148). Yet, their consensus does not necessarily extend to the narrator or the implied author. As with Houellebecq’s other Islamophobic speakers, details of the characterization of Robert Rediger, Godefroy Lempereur and Alain Tanneur cast doubts over their claims.

Rediger harbors a profoundly misogynistic version of Islam, which he understands by analogy to the sado-machistic submission of the heroine in *Histoire d’O*. After turning to Catholicism and identitarianism in search of “un moyen de sortir de l’humanisme athée,” he rationalizes his subsequent leap to Islam: “sur le rejet de l’athéisme et de l’humanisme, sur la nécessaire soumission de la femme, sur le retour au patriarcat: leur combat […] était exactement le même” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 254, 275). While proselytizing Francois, he pushes polygamy as Islam’s selling point: “[Ia] métaphysique […] ce n’est pas ça qui intéresse vraiment, en général, les hommes ; mais les vrais sujets sont […] plus embarrassants à aborder […] quel va être mon traitement ? à combien de femmes vais-je avoir droit?” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 292). Flaunting his subservient wives while flouting “les devoirs religieux” with a bottle of Meursault, Rediger blatantly perverts Islam (Houellebecq *Soumission* 268).118

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118 Meursault is a French wine from the Beaune region of Burgundy. It also, of course, nods to Albert Camus’ protagonist in *L’Étranger*, M. Meursault, who kills an Arab while inebriated. Drunk on Meursault in this scene, Rediger commits another form of violence against Arabs by butchering their beliefs in his liberal, blasphemous interpretation of Islam.
Godefroy Lempereur confirms his rumored “relations avec la mouvance identitaire,” but spins the “identitaires catholiques” as “des nostalgiques, des romantiques au fond” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 30, 68). Like Rediger, he suggests that his identitarianism is behind him: “J’ai appartenu en effet à un mouvement identitaire […] au moment où je préparais ma thèse […] Mais tout ça a complètement changé, j’ai perdu le contact” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 68). But he betrays a familiarity with identitarian literature when recommending a specific pamphlet as “un des plus synthétiques, avec les statistiques les plus fiables […] même si leurs conclusions sont partout les mêmes” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 69). Lempereur’s knowledge of “toutes ses informations […] dans la nébuleuse identitaire” leads François to conclude “qu’il jouait encore un rôle au sein du mouvement, et peut-être un rôle décisif” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 87).

Alain Tanneur initially appears to be the most impartial and legitimate authority on Islam in *Soumission*. While employed by the DGSI (*Direction générale de la sécurité intérieure*), he devoted “pratiquement toute [sa] carrière à la surveillance des mouvements islamistes” including “quinze ans […] sur [la Fraternité musulmane]” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 142, 155). But he also has a troubling proclivity for Christianity. While intoxicated one evening, Tanneur urges François to make a pilgrimage to Rocamadour, describes Medieval Christianity as “une grande civilisation,” evokes the myriad “batailles entre la chrétienté et l’islam” and recites “par coeur des strophes entières de Péguy” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 161, 148, 163).

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119 Péguy’s poem is a Christian call to arms in WWI: “Heureux ceux qui sont morts pour des cités charnelles./ Car elles sont le corps de la cité de Dieu./ Heureux ceux qui sont morts pour leur âtre et leur feu./ Et les pauvres honneurs des maisons paternelles./ Car elles sont l’image et le commencement/ Et le
militancy and his work at the DGSI, Tanneur spent years considering Muslims antagonists and extremists, doubtlessly skewing his notion of moderate Islam.\textsuperscript{120}

Although the characterization of these speakers and their ties with organizations that were historically hostile to Islam should arouse suspicion, François emerges from each conversation with positive impressions of his interlocutors and their claims.

Aware that Rediger “avait un sourire charmant […] et qu’il savait s’en servir,” the narrator nonetheless falls prey to his charms (Houellebecq \textit{Soumission} 240). The Sorbonne’s new president conspicuously furnishes his personal library with François’ doctoral dissertation, which he praises for “cette incroyable […] profusion d’idées” (Houellebecq \textit{Soumission} 246). Made to feel eminently “désirable,” François finds himself “vraiment content de le revoir” (Houellebecq, \textit{Soumission} 249, 288). Rediger’s not so subtle charm facilitates the protagonist’s conversion. Despite acknowledging the banality and flaws of the arguments presented in \textit{Dix questions sur l’islam} (“la démonstration […] paraissait fausse”), François admires Rediger’s “discours bien rodé,” his “[écriture] clair[e] et synthétique” and “pointe d’humour” (Houellebecq \textit{Soumission} 274, 270, 273). Under the influence of Rediger’s rhetoric, François concedes that “[son] athéisme ne repose pas sur des bases très solides,” asks himself “[s’il] pourrait se convertir à l’islam” and ultimately resolves to convert to Islam (Houellebecq, \textit{Soumission} 250).

corps et l’essai de la maison de Dieu./ Heureux ceux qui sont morts dans cet embrassement. /Dans l’étreinte d’honneur et le terrestre aveu.” (Houellebecq \textit{Soumission} 162).

\textsuperscript{120} The DGSI initially presumed that the Fraternité musulmane was terroristic in nature: “Forcément, quand la Fraternité musulmane s’est créée, ils étaient dans notre collimateur. Il nous a fallu des années pour nous convaincre que […]son projet] n’avait rien à voir avec le fondamentalisme islamique” (Houellebecq 155).
Before Lempereur says anything remotely substantive, the narrator has “l’impression […] qu’il allait me dire des choses importantes” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 58). Finding “[son] cachet intellectuel de droite assez séduisant,” he notes that “il paraissait en savoir plus [sur la politique] enfin, c’est l’impression qu’il donnait” (Houellebecq, *Soumission* 60 67). François finds that the identitarian civil war “paraît logique,” deeming his colleague “malheureusement pas [trop alarmiste]” and giving Lempereur his most unequivocal endorsement by seeking his advice during “la situation politique […] très instable” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 72, 87).

The narrator’s favorable impression of Alain Tanneur is also presumptuous: “Il me donna d’emblée une impression d’agilité intellectuelle presque anormale” (Houellebecq, *Soumission* 81). In subsequent conversations, Houellebecq’s hero finds him to be “bienveillant, sans illusions et sagace” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 143). While admittedly “pas convaincu pour ma part que la république et le patriotisme aient pu ‘donner lieu à quelque chose,’ sinon à une succession ininterrompue de guerres stupides,” François considers Tanneur to be a veritable authority on politics and history, who may even write a book “maintenant qu’il était à la retraite” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 163, 147, 159). As with Lempereur, François endorses Tanneur by seeking his input on the troubling political developments: “il avait peut-être une idée sur la question […] et semblait avoir des idées sur beaucoup de choses” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 144).

The narrator-protagonist’s broader characterization explains why he might give credence to dubious characters who ascribe fundamentalist beliefs to mainstream Islam. Despite boasting about his place in “la minime frange des ‘étudiants les plus doués,’” his “rapport de thèse […] presque dithyrambique,” his “articles nets, incisifs, brillants,” and
his production of “le meilleur texte jamais écrit sur Huysmans,” François proves remarkably ignorant beyond his esoteric field (Houellebecq Soumission 18, 47). He confesses that “[il ne prétait] qu’une attention anecdotique, superficielle, à la vie politique” “[et] ne [connaissait] au fond pas bien l’histoire” (Houellebecq Soumission 144, 104). He struggles to understand Huysmans’ Catholic trilogy: “le sentiment qui s’imposait peu à peu à l’athée confronté aux aventures spirituelles de Durtal […] c’était malheureusement l’ennui” (Houellebecq, Soumission 49). His conversation with Rediger marks “la première fois de ma vie [que] je m’étais mis à penser à Dieu, à envisager sérieusement l’idée d’une espèce de Créateur” (Houellebecq Soumission 262). François’ negligence of religion, history, and politics makes him susceptible to prejudiced portraits of Islam painted by Rediger, Lempereur and Tanneur.

The narrator-protagonist’s negative characterization has implications for our understanding of Soumission and its author. Soumission could present the cautionary tale of a protagonist whose ignorance allows him to embrace a reductive, fundamentalist vision of Islam. The idea that Soumission focuses more on France’s erroneous perception of Islam than on Islam itself underpins Gopnik’s contention that “Houellebecq […] is not Islamophobic. He’s Francophobic” (¶11). The sharp criticism of contemporary France in Soumission makes a case for his reading. Given the etymology of his name, François can be read as a stereotype of le Français whose dubious politics and misogyny are mirrored in the novel’s portrait of French society.121

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121 François acknowledges his representativity : “l’humanité […] me dégoûtait même, je ne considérais nullement les humains comme mes frères, et c’était encore moins le cas si je considérais une fraction plus restreinte de l’humanité, celle par exemple constituée par mes compatriotes, ou par mes anciens collègues.
Over the course of his narrative, far-right ideology stirs François from his state of apathy. Initially, “[il se sentait] aussi politisé qu’une serviette de toilette,” abandoning the presidential debates “[pour] zapper vaguement entre des téléréalités quelconques sur l’obésité” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 50, 116). Houellebecq’s hero is only roused from his apathy by “la progression de l’extrême-droite […] qui avait rendu la chose un peu plus intéressante” by reintroducing “le frisson oublié du fascisme” (*Soumission* 51). His interest piqued, François becomes receptive to the identitarian theses voiced by Rediger and Lempereur.

The gravitation of France’s political sphere towards far-right and fascist ideologies follows François’ personal trajectory from apathy to identitarianism. Rising political violence is met with general indifference—“les gens en général semblaient s’être lassé d’entendre aborder ce sujet” (Houellebecq, *Soumission* 56). The intellectual elite is no exception: “l’homme de gauche était profondément endormi” in François’ colleagues (Houellebecq *Soumission* 30). “De plus en plus ouvertement à droite,” France must choose between the reactionary politics of the *Front national* and the Fraternité *musulmane* in the 2022 election (Houellebecq *Soumission* 51).

François also maladroitly defends patriarchal values in *Soumission* as a self-proclaimed “macho approximatif”: “je n’ai jamais été persuadé que ce soit une si bonne idée que les femmes puissent voter, suivre les mêmes études que les hommes, accéder

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Pourtant, en un sens déplaisant, je devais bien le reconnaître, ces humains étaient mes semblables ” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 207).

122 The author highlights the fascist dimension of the *Front national* through Marine Le Pen’s enthusiastic, Hitlerian gesticulation: “les mouvements de Marine Le Pen se faisaient plus vifs, elle assénait des coups de poing dans l’air devant elle, à un moment elle écarta violemment les bras” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 111).
aux mêmes professions” (Houellebecq 41). He applies double standards in professional and private spheres, judging female colleagues by their rumoured “indiscrétions sexuelles” and exploiting “cette inégalité de base qui veut que le vieillissement chez l’homme n’altère que très lentement son potentiel érotique” to justify dating his students (Houellebecq Soumission 62, 23-24).

French society mirrors François’ patriarchal values in Soumission. His colleagues include coureurs de jupons who manifest their “avidité […] dès le premier jour de la rentrée” (Houellebecq Soumission 24). When women attempt to interject, their male colleagues “ne [l’entendirent] même pas” (Houellebecq Soumission 59). François’ friend’s wife struggles to balance domestic and professional duties. Each day, she must employ “un dosage complexe” to dress “conformément à son statut professionnel,” deliver her children to daycare and begin a work day that will leave her “épuisée” (Houellebecq Soumission 93). Despite being the breadwinner, she is also expected to single-handedly deliver “un dîner presque parfait” to her guests on the weekend (Houellebecq Soumission 92). The narrator finds her experience representative of “la vie […] de toutes les femmes occidentales” (Houellebecq Soumission 94).

If François’ flawed character satirizes the apathy, politics, and patriarchy of French society, his prejudice against Muslims could critique the rise of Islamophobia that is signalled in Soumission by the alarming incidence of “provocation[s] anti-islam” and the rise of the Front national (Houellebecq 66).

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123 François’ private thoughts suggest that these remarks were not made purely in jest—he concludes that his girlfriend would be “probablement” “bonne à jeter” in the revived patriarchy (Houellebecq, Soumission 44, 43).
Throughout *Soumission*, François displays fears, ignorance and fantasies of Islam—“au fond […] une religion que je connaissais mal” (Houellebecq 245). He mixes up Muslim majority nations—“Dubaï (ou au Bahreïn ? ou au Qatar ? je les confondais” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 30). He draws distinctions between “les immigrés musulmans et les populations autochtones d’Europe,” celebrates the absence “de Noirs ou d’Arabes” from his neighborhood and objects to Ben Abbes’ candidacy—“C’est tout de même un musulman…” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 55, 73, 154). François exhibits an aversion for Islamic culture, perceiving “la musique arabo-andalouse” to be “lancinante et sinistre,” “[n’aimant ni] le thé à la menthe, ni la grande mosquée de Paris” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 235, 28). His Islamophobia also entails orientalist elements. He fantasizes about burqa clad Saoudians “[qui] se transformaient le soir en oiseaux de paradis, se paraient de guêpières, de soutiens-gorge ajourés, de strings ornés de dentelles multicolores” (Houellebecq, *Soumission* 91). When perusing prostitutes online, he selects “Nadiabeurette” and Rachida—“une Marocaine de 22 ans”—explaining that “ça m’excitait assez, compte tenu des circonstances politiques globales, de choisir une musulmane” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 185, 196). But François’ actual interactions with Muslim characters challenge his unapologetic Islamophobia.

Returning from a fruitless spiritual retreat at the Ligugé Abbey on the TGV, François observes “un homme d’affaires arabe d’une cinquantaine d’années […] face à lui, deux jeunes filles à peine sorties de l’adolescence,” whom he hastily concludes are “sans doute ses épouses” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 225). Yet François cannot understand the business man who speaks “à voix basse” on his cellphone—“je ne comprenais pas de quoi il était question” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 226). With little to grasp onto, François
maps stereotypes of Muslim gender politics onto the situation: “En régime islamique, les femmes […] suffisamment jolies pour éveiller le désir d’un époux riche—avaient au fond la possibilité de rester des enfants pratiquement toute leur vie” (Houellebecq Soumission 226-227). He pushes his fantasy further, imagining “peut-être en avait-il une ou deux autres [épouses] à Paris, il me semblait me souvenir que le nombre maximum était de quatre, selon la charia” (Houellebecq, Soumission 227).

Numerous qualifiers highlight the speculative nature of the narrator’s speech—“devait […] sans doute […] donnait l’impression […] sembla […] peut-être”—giving way to another, more convincing reading of the situation (Houellebecq Soumission 225-227). The businessman’s paternalistic reproach, together with their considerable age difference, suggest that he is their father: “Avec de grands éclats de rire, les deux jeunes filles arabes s’étaient plongées dans le jeu des sept erreurs de Picsou Magazine. Levant les yeux de son tableur, l’homme d’affaires leur adressa un sourire de reproche douloureux. Elles lui sourirent en retour, continuèrent sur le mode du chuchotement excité” (Houellebecq Soumission 226). Ultimately, this scene reveals more about François’ assumptions than these inaccessible strangers on a train.

Other scenes in Soumission challenge the narrator’s assumptions about Muslims more directly. François likens the Fraternité musulmane candidate to “un bon vieil épicien tunisien de quartier” (Houellebecq Soumission 108). But the future French president is far from the stereotypical arabe du coin.124 Though the narrator claims that his corpulence and character “[le faisaient] parfaitement oublier,” Ben Abbes has an impressive pedigree as “un des plus jeunes polytechniciens de France avant d’intégrer

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124 The notion of the arabe du coin has existed since World War I (Withol de Wenden, ¶ 17)
l’ENA, dans la promotion Nelson Mandela” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 108). While his father was, in fact, “un bon vieil épicier tunisien de quartier,” his grocery was located in the affluent Parisian suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine, “pas dans le 18e arrondissement, […] à Bezons ou à Argenteuil” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 108).

François also misjudges his presumably Muslim escort: “De fait Nadia, d’origine tunisienne, avait complètement échappé à ce mouvement de réislamisation qui avait massivement frappé les jeunes de sa génération […] et n’avait jamais envisagé de porter le voile” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 185). Nadia fails to live up to his orientalist fantasies, proving “assez conventionnelle,” both sexually and intellectually (Houellebecq *Soumission* 186). She makes love “de manière assez mécanique” and “sur tous les sujets, de l’élection de Mohammed Ben Abbes à la dette du tiers-monde, elle pensait exactement ce qu’il était convenu de penser” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 186). Nadia consistently defies François’ expectations. She is not a veiled Muslim. She grew up in “les beaux quartiers” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 185). She is the “fille d’un radiologue,” not a grocer (Houellebecq *Soumission* 185). There is nothing remotely exotic about her sexuality or politics.

François’ encounter with “trois types d’une vingtaine d’années, deux Arabes et un Noir, [qui] bloquaient l’entrée [de sa salle de cours]” puts his fears of Muslim men to the test (Houellebecq *Soumission* 32-33). The narrator’s observation of an absence—“aujourd’hui ils n’étaient pas armés”—reveals his expectations of violence (Houellebecq

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125 Bezons and Argenteuil are reputed for their immigrant populations. The INSEE published statistics from a 2013 study showing that of the 134,672 inhabitants of the Argenteuil-Bezons metropolitan region, 26,026 were foreigners (roughly 19%) (NAT1). The 18th arrondissement “was one of the neighborhoods perceived to have been the most altered by this [North African] immigration” (Davidson, 130).
Soumission 32). Despite noticing that “[ils] avaient l’air plutôt calmes,” he asserts his authority : “Je suis professeur dans cette université, je dois donner mon cours maintenant” (Houellebecq Soumission, 33). But the narrator’s “ton ferme” speaks more to his fears than to the threat posed by his interlocutors “[qui n’avaient] rien de menaçant” (Houellebecq Soumission 33). Their behavior is deferential--submissive, even. They acquiesce to his demands with a “pas de problème, monsieur,” pointing to their sisters “d’un geste apaisant” before issuing a peaceful parting phrase--“la paix soit sur vous, monsieur” (Houellebecq Soumission, 33). The protagonist’s civil exchange with these Muslim men highlights the tenacity of his fears. Reeling and paranoid, he entertains “rumeurs d’agressions d’enseignants” “difficilement vérifiable[s]”--“ça s’est bien passé cette fois-ci” (Houellebecq, Soumission 33, 34).

The author’s implicit criticism of his protagonist’s Islamophobia potentially influences our reading of Soumission. Conceivably, Houellebecq’s political novel could illustrate how the ignorant and apathetic protagonist embraces the reductive, radical vision of Islam promulgated by identitarians, Islamic fundamentalists and government agents charged with “la surveillance des mouvements islamistes” (Soumission 155). Read as a representative Français, François could reflect the rise of far-right politics and Islamophobia in France.

But this reading of Soumission becomes untenable when the whole narrative is taken into consideration. After a strong showing in the first round of the election, the Front national is superseded by the Fraternité musulmane with “la large victoire de Mohammed Ben Abbes”-- a self-proclaimed “musulman modéré” (Houellebecq Soumission 164, 154). The newly elected president ostensibly will provide the most
unequivocal application of mainstream Muslim values in Houellebecq’s novel. Ben Abbes’ moderate reforms, however, validate François’ seemingly “alarmiste” Islamophobic informants (Houellebecq *Soumission* 72, 141).

Many of Tanneur’s seemingly predictions come to fruition. Ben Abbes avoids explicitly anti-semitic policies, establishes law and order in the banlieue, legalizes polygamy, reforms the educational system to privilege private Muslim schools, rewrites “[les] statuts de l’université islamique de Paris-Sorbonne” to exclude women and non muslims from the faculty, begins his project to extend the EU to the Maghreb, and refuses to kowtow to “[les] monarchies du Golfe” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 178, 158). If anything, Tanneur’s predictions were not alarmist enough. The ex-DGSI agent claims there would be “aucune divergence” in Abbes’ economic policy from the Socialist party (Houellebecq *Soumission* 91). Yet, once elected, Ben Abbes radically reshapes the economy: “La première mesure présentée, symboliquement, par le nouveau gouvernement” programmed “la sortie massive des femmes du marché du travail […] et la revalorisation considérable des allocations familiales […] conditionnée à la cessation de toute activité professionnelle” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 199).

So while many of Tanneur’s predictions play out, his global assessment that the *Fraternité musulmane* “n’avait rien à voir avec le fondamentalisme islamique” cannot be maintained (Houellebecq, Soumission 155). In *Soumission*, the nation’s journalists and electorate are universally “hypnotisés” by Ben Abbes’ suave rhetoric and “image d’un homme de modération et dialogue” (Houellebecq, 109, 115). Tanneur is no exception—if anything, his alarmist predictions are not alarmist enough. By portraying the reactionary reforms of France’s first Muslim president conceived to “transmettre ses valeurs
[…contrôler] les enfants [et contrôler] le futur,” Houellebecq casts far-right Islamophobes as contemporary Cassandras whose “prédictions pessimistes [sont] constamment réalisées” (Soumission 82, 55-56).

This problematic plot-level portrait of Muslims obliges us to reconsider Gopnik’s assertion that the author is not Islamophobic, but Francophobic. Soumission certainly paints an unflattering portrait of the ignorance, prejudice, misogyny, apathy, and egocentrism of François and the contemporary Français. The grand remplacement narrative can even be construed as anticlimactic--the hero returns to the Sorbonne with a higher salary, doubting “que les choses aient significativement changé” (Houellebecq Soumission 299). For French women and children, however, “la France était en train d’évoluer rapidement, et […] en profondeur” (Houellebecq, Soumission 201). François’ ignorance, prejudice, misogyny, apathy, and egocentrism attain their apogee in his final “acte […] de collaboration” with the reactionary Muslim administration, rendering Houellebecq’s Francophobic satire equally Islamophobic (Soumission 287).

126 The author hardly celebrates the Front national, associating them with identitarianism and fascism. Marine Le Pen delivers a speech supposedly ghost-written by Renaud Camus while gesticulating with Hitlerian enthusiasm--“elle assénait des coups de poing dans l’air devant elle, à un moment elle écarta violemment les bras” (Houellebecq Soumission 111).

127 Soumission could have become a purely Francophobic satire that refuted the Islamophobia of France’s far-right. Mohammed Ben Abbes could have governed in accord with his “image d’un homme de modération et de dialogue,” demonstrating sincere “respect pour les trois religions du Livre” and passing policies that had “rien à voir avec le fondamentalisme islamique” (Houellebecq Soumission, 115, 152, 155). Soumission also could have portrayed the election of Marine Le Pen and the implementation of radical anti-Muslim policies predicated on nationalism, xenophobia and racism. But the author’s actual plot choices only validate the novel’s Islamophobic characters.
CHAPTER CONCLUSION: While we still cannot ascertain whether the flesh and blood author, Michel Houellebecq, is personally Islamophobic, our narratological approach to his novels reveals trends that speak to the Islamophobia of the implied author.

First, Michel Houellebecq’s prose fiction devotes scenes, chapters, and even entire novels to the criticism of religious institutions, living up to the author’s “anti-religious” reputation-- (Lloyd, 84). But, however scathing they might be, these critiques of religion--from the bimillenial tradition of Christianity to the “phénomène authentiquement moderne” of Raëlism--cannot efface the Islamophobic discourse in his novels (Houellebecq Possibilité 227).

Second, Islamophobic speech in Houellebecq’s novels is consistently qualified by the speaker’s negative characterization. The author’s Islamophobic speakers are never presented as uncomplicated, trustworthy authorities on Islam--some detail of their character always casts doubt over the objectivity and credibility of their anti-Muslim discourse. Houellebecq’s Islamophobes include alcoholics, career burn-outs, present or former mental patients, residents of Front national strongholds, pedophilic cult members with Muslim ex-wives, victims of Islamic terrorism, disillusioned expatriates from Arab countries, female family members of Islamic fundamentalists, staunchly materialist neo-liberal bankers, shock comedians who exploit Islamophobia to further their career, founders of a UFO religion in competition with Islam, identitarians and counter terrorism officials with penchants for Péguy.

Third, the characterization of Houellebecq’s narrators gives the reader little hope that they will correct their Islamophobic interlocutors. They display both irreverence and
antagonism towards religious institutions and signs of a startling lack of solidarity with mankind--prejudice, privilege, egocentrism, apathy, alienation, and misanthropy.

So, to situate the implied author’s position, it becomes necessary to measure the claims of his Islamophobic speakers against the rare, but deeply significant interventions of Muslim characters in these novels. Here, another trend emerges--the portrait of Islam in Houellebecq’s novels is overwhelmingly negative. Extension du domaine de la lutte contains an allusion to the September 1986 bombing campaign in Paris led by a Shi’ite militant (Houellebecq 27). The intelligent, but grossly negligent mother of the fraternal duo in Les Particules élémentaires practices “la mystique soufie” with “une bande de babas” before her death (Houellebecq 314-315). In Lanzarote, a Muslim father threatens to “couper les couilles’ de celui qui avait profané l’honneur de sa fille” (Houellebecq, 84). In Plateforme, the protagonist observes hypocritical “touristes originaires du Moyen-Orient […] qui semblait se jeter sur la débauche […] en rupture manifeste avec la loi islamique” (Houellebecq 318). Furthermore, fundamentalists on the opposite end of the religious spectrum bookend the narrative with brutal violence. Plateforme opens with “une petite brute ordinaire […] avec une] réaction violente […] programmée dans [ses] gènes” who beats his sister’s lover to death to defend her honor (Houellebecq 27-28). Towards the end of the narrative, Muslim terrorists murder and mutilate a German sex-tourist and “la jeune fille thaïe qui l’accompagnait,” before committing “l’attentat le plus meurtrier qui ait jamais eu lieu en Asie” (Houellebecq Plateforme 317, 345). In La

128 There are more neutral examples: Aïcha, the victim of pedophilia in Lanzarote who only intervenes through brief excerpts of her testimony; the Muslim brothers in Soumission who visit their sisters in class before politely complying with François’ request for them to leave; and the overwhelmed Arab businessman on the train.
Possibilité d'une île, peaceful and terroristic responses to the protagonist’s Islamophobic comedy are provocatively juxtaposed: “Il y eut des plaintes d'associations musulmanes, des menaces d'attentat à la bombe” (Houellebecq 47). Moreover, this roman d’anticipation realizes a version of le grand remplacement—“l’islam […] parvient à assumer en Europe le rôle […] d’une religion ‘officielle’” in the twenty-first century (Houellebecq Possibilité 358). La Carte et le territoire alludes to Islamic kamikazes in the media and Al-Qaida’s influence on air travel. Finally, while many Muslims make brief appearances in Soumission, remaining “impénétrables,” the Muslim character who shapes the narrative conducts jihad “[par] la voie des urnes,” refashioning the secular Republic into a fundamentalist Islamic state (Houellebecq 28 142).

Ultimately, these Muslim characters who intervene in Michel Houellebecq’s novels speak the most to the author’s alleged Islamophobia. However carefully he cultivates doubts and ambiguities, the author paints a coherent and overwhelmingly negative portrait of Muslims that coincides with the vision of his Islamophobic speakers.
CHAPTER 3: HOUELLEBECQ’S MISOGYNISTIC CHARACTER(S)

Though lacking a scandal commensurate with the *Lire* controversy, Michel Houellebecq’s reputation for misogyny is no less established than his alleged Islamophobia. A full year before Frank Wynne’s English translation of *Les Particules élémentaires* hit the shelves, the *New York Times* was already reporting on the “unlikely new star of French letters” “(pronounced WELL-beck),” whose detractors denounced his latest book “as reactionary, misogynist, nihilistic and pornographic” (Riding ¶ 1, 4, 3).

Michel Houellebecq’s reputation for misogyny has not only pervaded popular publications, but also polarized professional criticism, where sides are readily taken, but rarely defended persuasively. Some critics gloss over the “éléments de discours misogynes,” “polémiques […] contre le féminisme,” and representations “frôlant parfois avec la misogynie” in the novels as if the author’s position were a foregone conclusion (Stemberger 190; Carlston 29; Rabosseau 47). Others mount dubious defenses of Houellebecq, sublimizing his pornographic scenes as “une tentative de créer une nouvelle image du corps sexuel humain” or pointing to the “grande capacité d'initiative professionnelle, amoureuse, sexuelle” of a single female character to dispel “des reproches que l'on a pu faire sur la misogynie de l'auteur” (Baggesgaard 241; Varrod 103).

Even more troubling, arguably, is the tendency among critics to appeal to extraliterary sources to construct an authorial ethos capable of resolving textual ambiguities (Altes 111). Raphaël Baroni’s literal reading of Houellebecq’s equivocal essay on Valerie Solanas leads him to conclude that “la symphonie antiféministe [des
romans] […] constitue] une assertion sérieuse de l’auteur” (91). Sensing that “the author is not exactly an impartial observer” of his provocative characters, other critics speculate on authorial intent and the implications of the author’s biography (Armus 38). Bruno Viard confidently asserts that an anti-feminist passage in Les Particules élémentaires is written “avec une fausse innocence”—alleging that the author insincerely adopts a provocative position only to ensnare “critiques bien pensants” (92). Seth Armus appears visibly unsatisfied by an interview where “to balance the oft-stated charges of misogyny, Houellebecq points out that the greatest outrage is […] patriarchal society” (38) Instead, Armus argues that the novelist “downplayed his personal similarities with […] his protagonists] dishonestly,” “[his] life is not far behind much of the action [of his first two novels]” (39). Nancy Huston wades further into biographical criticism, tying the mistreatment of female characters in Houellebecq’s novels to “the disaster of his childhood” (23, 31).129

The strong, seemingly visceral reactions of these professional critics testify to the remarkably provocative misogynist discourse featured in these texts. Michel Houellebecq’s novels contain a panoply of derogatory epithets for women: “bimbos” (Plateforme 42); “boudins” (Extension 10, 100); “conne[s]” (Possibilité 19); “connasse[s]” (Extension 9); “créatures, aux seins lourds” (Lanzarote 24); “proies” (Extension 65); “pétasses” (Possibilité 58, 19; Extension 120); “salopes” (Extension 168; Possibilité 208, 220; Plateforme 49); and “pute[s]” (Particules 314).

129 Though Nancy Huston is perhaps best known as a novelist; her essay on Houellebecq was published in a journal of literary criticism, Salmagundi.
Women are not only demeaned, but also dehumanized and objectified in Houellebecq’s novels. They are compared to “du bétail” (“une truie,” “une vache,” “l’animal domestique”) and imbued with “une attitude de soumission canine” or “[une] placidité animale” (Houellebecq *Particules* 290; *Extension* 101; *Possibilité* 97, 11; *Plateforme* 48; *Lanzarote* 33). They are reduced, in a particularly tasteless and sexist synecdoche, to “le gras qu’y a autour du vagin” (Houellebecq *Possibilité*, 22). They are triaged on the basis of their beauty: unattractive woman are dismissed as “un petit tas” and “[un] pauvre petit bout de femme, au vagin inexploré,” while beautiful women, on the other hand, “n’[étaient] au fond [bonnes] qu’à baiser” (Houellebecq *Extension* 100, 118; *Particules* 95; *Carte* 78-79; *Possibilité* 219). Superficial features not only reflect a woman’s worth, but are also taken to convey a woman’s “intention de trouver un partenaire,” her insistence upon contraceptives, her “bonne volonté érotique” and her status as a “salope” (Houellebecq *Extension* 128; *Carte* 329; *Particules* 122).

In addition to this verbal violence, women are subjected to graphic physical violence in Michel Houellebecq’s narratives—randomly targeted by murder plots, administered a humiliating “paire de claques” and a devastating “coup de pied au niveau du plexus solaire,” brutally gang-raped in the metro, “lapidée” and mutilated beyond recognition, pierced by bullets “à la poitrine ou à la gorge,” “[leurs] bras sectionnés” by bombs (*Extension* 135, 156; *Carte* 375; *Plateforme* 205, 317 340).130

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130 Men are not spared such cruel treatment in Houellebecq’s novels, where they are at times referred to as “singe[s],” sexually objectified as “des bites sur pattes,” and subjected to brutal violence—“égorgé et châtré, sa verge et ses testicules étaient enfoncés dans sa bouche” (*Possibilité* 97, 237; *Plateforme* 317). Examples of mistreated males, however, are fewer and farther between. Moreover, negative discourse about women takes on a different meaning given their minority status and history of oppression.
Unsurprisingly, the reification of women in Michel Houellebecq’s novels is accompanied by essentialist notions of gender. Women are either associated with “la séduction et le sexe” or endowed with “affection,” and “un esprit de dévouement et d’amour” (Houellebecq Extension 170; Plateforme 26; Particules 116). Relative to their male counterparts, women are “plus proches de l’amour,” “plus caressantes, plus aimantes, plus compatissantes et plus douces ; moins portées à la violence, à l’égoïsme, à l’affirmation de soi, à la cruauté” -- “décidément […] meilleures” (Houellebecq Possibilité 412; Particules 205). This essentialist vision of male and female identities lays the foundation for reactionary gender politics--romanticization of a bygone era when “La femme reste à la maison et tient son ménage […] L’homme travaille à l’extérieur […] et Les couples sont fidèles et heureux,” as well as arguments in favor of “le retour au patriarcat” the withdrawal of women from the workplace (Houellebecq Particules 64, Soumission 275;).

The misogynist discourse in Michel Houellebecq’s novels certainly appears damning. Undoubtedly, these works contain textbook manifestations of misogyny--“social exclusion, sex discrimination, hostility, androcentrism, patriarchy, male privilege, belittling of women, violence against women, and sexual objectification” (Code 346). But several factors, both literary and extraliterary, should give us pause before condemning the author and his work. Of course, critical readers would be remiss to neglect the novel’s intrinsic heteroglossia and the context-dependent meaning of any utterance contained therein. Hypothetically, the implied author may not even remotely correspond to the
reputedly misogynist public author. The thematics of gender and sexuality in Houellebecq’s work, therefore, may prove less straightforward than some critics have claimed. While virtually all of his novels explore sexual commerce and the politics of gender in society, the author’s position and perceived theses are complicated by the often negative characterization of misogynistic speakers, as well as the dystopian and tragic conclusions of his narratives.

Once again, a careful narratological analysis of Michel Houellebecq’s novels will facilitate a more reasoned and reliable assessment of the alleged misogyny of the implied author and his works. The present chapter’s analysis will simultaneously draw upon and distinguish itself from the practice of feminist narratology articulated by Robyn Warhol in *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates*.

Warhol attempts to push her readings farther than “the time-honored feminist practice of examining ‘images of women’ in order to expose stereotyping and to praise an author’s ability to move outside expected sex roles in creating their characters” (Herman 11). These more traditional feminist critics challenge the binary construction of gender “as opposite ends of a continuum, as discrete and non-overlapping […] and as biologically defined” (Hess 12). In doing so, they contest a reductive vision of women “Both [...] positive and negative images [that] have been used to justify oppression of women” (Ruble 192). This classic feminist approach to literature, however, proves problematic. A female character’s conformity to stereotypes provides only a partial picture of the author:

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131 Recall that our analysis in Chapter 1: Reading Houellebecq and his Fictions suggests that the author’s misogyny may have been ratcheted up for publicity purposes before the publication of *Les Particules élémentaires* (as evidenced by the distinct takes on gender in the first and second editions of *Interventions*) and is parodied, and thereby perhaps discredited, in the opening letter of *Ennemis publics*. 

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conventional representations of women may be construed as subversive, just as unconventional images of women--such as the relatively recent stereotype of the “liberated woman”--may be reactionary (Basow 6). Warhol, therefore, conceives of characters as “functions of discourse” and proposes broadening the focus of feminist criticism to reveal the “attitudes towards gender oppression” reflected in fiction--the broader discourse on gender and the dominant patriarchal ideology in which female characters are inscribed (Herman 121, 13).

The specific concerns of this dissertation, however, require us to adopt Robyn Warhol’s vision of feminist narratology with some reservations. Although Warhol insists upon the heuristic value of “the identity, experience, and socio-cultural historical circumstances of the author,” we will privilege a more classical narratological approach distinguishing the creator from his work (Herman 39). Invoking the provocative public author would risk compromising the objectivity of both our textual analysis and our picture of the implied author--invalidating the project’s fundamental comparison between Michel Houellebecq’s distinct authorial figures. Moreover, while acknowledging Warhol’s assertion of the intersectionality of feminist criticism--the ways in which “white privilege, class privilege, heteronormativity, and other positions of relative power complicate hierarchies of gender”--our approach targets transversal trends in Houellebecq’s representation of women (Herman 9). This chapter will therefore pursue the analytical method employed in Chapter 2: Houellebecq’s Islamophobic Character(s)--examining the presentation of misogynist discourse in the novel--the specific scene of

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132 In her analysis of romance novels, Muriel G. Cantor suggests that the “patriarchal culture [that] dominates popular women’s literature” does not preclude readings “subversive of those values” (209).
enunciation, the broader characterization of the speaker and the narrator through which this discourse is mediated--before measuring it against representations of female characters, who may constitute *functions of this misogynist discourse* or, alternatively, *counterdiscourse*. Examining the ways in which female characters corroborate or contest the explicit misogynist discourse in Michel Houellebecq’s novels will reveal whether the implied author truly merits the public author’s reputation as a “misogyne honteux” (Houellebecq *Ennemis* 7).

EXTENSION DU DOMAINE DE LA LUTTE: *Extension du domaine de la lutte* helped forge Michel Houellebecq’s reputation for misogyny. The title alludes to the narrator’s central analogy between economic liberalism and “le libéralisme sexuel [qui également] produit des phénomènes de *paupérisation absolue*” (Houellebecq *Extension* 114). Though neither explicitly gendered nor antifeminist, this analogy may be construed as a reactionary reproach of the women’s liberation movement. Provoked, perhaps, by these polemical gender politics, certain critics have assimilated narratorial and authorial discourse--attributing the narrator’s “philosophical goal” to the author and reading the protagonist’s tragic fate as an illustration of “Houellebecq’s main thesis in this novel” (Huston 29; Abecassis 810; Green 550). But upon closer examination, the presentation of misogynistic discourse, sexist speakers and female characters in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* complicates the relationship between Michel Houellebecq and his antihero.

While his coworkers boast about “des *histoires de cul*” and profess designs on “minettes,” Houellebecq’s narrator-protagonist is responsible for the most significant expressions of misogyny in the novel--celebrating “la chute du féminisme,” questioning a
woman’s “droit de s’habiller comme elle voulait,” enumerating the emotional risks of “trop d’amants” and espousing a stereotypically gendered worldview--“un système [masculin] […] et un système féminin” (Extension 65, 61, 10, 131, 170). These expressions of misogyny, however, are consistently attenuated in their respective scenes of enunciation.

The programmatic opening scene at a colleague’s party simultaneously establishes and undermines the narrator’s unabashed antifeminism. Following a woman’s burlesque striptease, two other women sit down to voice their approval of “une fille du service [qui] était venue au boulot avec une mini-jupe vachement mini,” contending that “elle avait bien le droit de s’habiller comme elle voulait, et que ça n’avait rien à voir avec le désir de séduire les mecs” (Houellebecq Extension 10). The narrator dismisses them as “une connasse” and “deux boudins,” highlighting the absurd conduct of the former “[comme] une fille qui ne couche avec personne” and the “platitudes” of the latter--“les ultimes résidus, consternants, de la chute du féminisme” (Houellebecq Extension 9-10).

Far from an endorsement of the protagonist’s authority, this scene showcases his social ineptitude, self-destructive behavior and fear-borne hostility towards women. Eschewing normal social interactions, he drinks too much vodka and must lie down behind a couch. In this condition of marginality and inebriation, he voices his anti-feminism. In “un rêve pénible,” he recasts the feminists in a ridiculous light--“[elles] se tenaient bras dessus-bras dessous […] en chantant à tue-tête”--and dresses “la fille à la mini-jupe” in more

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133 The abandonment of traditional concepts of masculinity and femininity or, more radically, the abandonment of gendered categories altogether may be necessary to eliminate patriarchy and close the gender gap once and for all. While we could debate whether a gendered worldview constitutes misogyny, the protagonist’s gendered worldview certainly fits into a broader pattern of misogyny.
austere attire—“une longue robe noire, mystérieuse et sobre” (Houellebecq *Extension* 10-11). He awakens in a pool of his own vomit, only to realize that he has lost his car keys.

The protagonist’s subsequent attacks upon women’s sexual freedom and gender expression exhibit a behavioral pattern that undermines his authority as a speaker. He expresses his antifeminism after avoiding conversation with women, rejecting the “plutôt amical” gestures of concerned men and bitterly brooding—often in a dire state of inebriation—in a self-imposed position of marginality—behind a couch, “[à] l’extrémité de la plage” or at a removed table “légèrement en surplomb” in a nightclub (Houellebecq *Extension* 131, 122, 128).

Female sexuality evidently disgusts Houellebecq’s hero, who experiences an overwhelming “sentiment déplaisant” and helplessness at the thought of “[une] jeune fille [qui] aille se faire sauter dans une boîte” (*Extension*, 123). The narrator considers her symptomatic of “la liberté de mœurs qui caractérise l’époque moderne […] appauvrit l’être humain, lui infligeant des dommages parfois graves et toujours irréversibles,” extinguishing one’s capacity for love (Houellebecq *Extension* 130-131). Although Houellebecq’s narrator takes care to universalize his message—referring to the “génération sacrifiée” encompassing “nous tous”—his chosen examples reveal the androcentricity of his gender politics (*Extension* 130-131). A male colleague, Raphaël Tisserand, drives his reflections on sexual pauperization, while his ex-girlfriend—whom he tellingly compares to Eve—exemplifies the corruptive effects of “trop de discothèques et d’amants” (Houellebecq *Extension* 131). Yet again the enunciative context undermines his already problematically androcentric discourse on sexual freedom. After aimlessly wandering the deserted beaches of Les Sables d’Olonne, the protagonist projects the
sexual exploits of the youngest daughter of a family of vacationers upon the empty stage 
of an empty resort—a combination supermarket, pizzeria and nightclub that crystallizes 
his analogy between unbridled capitalism and sexual commerce. Moreover,
Houellebecq’s hero elaborates his criticism of “vagabondage sexuel” after vomiting and 
masturbating in a bathroom stall and before collapsing on the dance floor (Extension  
131). His vision of “l’amertume et le dégoût, la maladie et l’attente de la mort” 
characterizing his generation appears to be a projection of his self-destructive and 
atypical social behavior (Houellebecq Extension 131).

Naturally, notions of gender normativity bolster the narrator’s antifeminism. 
When lamenting “la femme en analyse” whose “innocence, générosité, pureté […]et] 
aptitude à l’amour” have been supplanted by “mesquinerie, égoïsme, sottise arrogante, 
absence complète de sens moral,” he visibly objects to the liberated woman’s 
appropriation of stereotypically masculine traits (Houellebecq Extension 118; Basow 6). 

The scene of enunciation further undermines his gender normative criticism of la 
femme en analyse, which emerges from his maudlin mood “au bout du troisième cognac” 
and lingering bitterness from a traumatic breakup (Houellebecq Extension 116). His ex-
girlfriend, Véronique serves as the archetypal femme en analyse. She lacks contrition 
after failing to transmit an urgent message from a family member that may have 
prevented her colleague’s suicide and subsequently dismisses the protagonist’s own 
suicide attempt as “chantage affectif” (Houellebecq Extension 116, 119). When their

134 Houellebecq’s protagonist envisions “un système [masculin] basé sur la domination, l’argent et la peur” 
(Extension, 170). His perspective evokes the author’s gender categories traced in Interventions : feminine 
values (“empreintes d’altruisme, d’amour, de compassion, de fidélité et de douceur”) and the male sphere 
(“un monde plus dur, plus compétitif, plus égoïste et plus violent”) (117).
argument degenerates, he prepares to be taken from her apartment by force, gripping her
table with trembling hands. The narrator’s lingering bitterness manifests itself in violent
fantasies: “j’aurais mieux fait de lui casser les deux bras […] je regrette de ne pas lui
avoir tailladé les ovaires” (Houellebecq Extension 119-120). Given his deplorable
behavior and sentiments, Houellebecq’s antihero lacks adequate authority to condemn
women’s “avarice […] mesquinerie […] bassesse et […] égoïsme” (Extension 120).

The protagonist’s homicidal plot erodes any lingering authority of his
commentary on the degeneration of his generation. Under the familiar spell of alcohol
and alienation, he nearly coerces his crestfallen companion to murder the woman who
rebuffed his advances: “Ces femmes que tu désires tant tu peux, toi aussi, les posséder
[…] Lance-toi dès ce soir dans la carrière du meurtre […] c’est la seule chance qu’il te
reste. Lorsque tu sentiras ces femmes trembler au bout de ton couteau, et supplier pour
leur jeunesse, là tu seras vraiment le maître ; là tu les posséderas, corps et âme”
(Houellebecq Extension 135). In a paroxysm of impotence and resentment, the
protagonist desperately attempts to reassert a gendered world: “un monde tellement
simple [où] il y a un système [masculin] basé sur la domination, l’argent et la peur […]et]
un système féminin basé sur la séduction et le sexe” (Houellebecq Extension 170).

While the aforementioned scenes already paint a damning portrait, the narrator-
protagonist’s broader characterization casts further doubts over his polemical gender
politics. Despite a preliminary dismissal of novelistic “notations psychologiques […]
comme pure foutaise,” his narrative abounds with psychological fodder—self-image
problems, social anxiety, repressed homosexuality, borderline agoraphobia and fantasies
of self-castration that could conceivably explain his misogyny (Houellebecq Extension
20). However, it suffices to observe that *Extension du domaine de la lutte* portrays the hero “en train de déjantner,” relapsing into clinical depression, suicidal ideation and insanity (Houellebecq 177). His professional leave of absence prefigures “une succession d’internements de plus en plus longs, dans des établissements psychiatriques de plus en plus fermés et durs” (Houellebecq *Extension* 174).

Michel Houellebecq’s novel proposes two polar conceptions of the hero’s madness. The protagonist identifies with Maupassant, whose “conscience aigüe” of the world’s workings and the human condition allegedly drove him mad (Houellebecq *Extension* 174). Empowered by the delusional epiphany that his fellow mental patients “n’étaient pas le moins du monde dérangés ; ils manquaient simplement d’amour,” he envisions himself as a messiah–“un peu comme, dans les Évangiles, le Christ” (Houellebecq *Extension* 173). His psychologist’s perspective is predictably more down to earth. After dismissing “la folie de Maupassant […] comme un stade classique du développement de la syphilis,” she reproaches the protagonist for speaking “en termes trop généraux, trop sociologiques” “trop dans l’abstrait”–“[ainsi établissant] une barrière derrière laquelle vous vous protégez” (Houellebecq *Extension* 171, 170, 168-169). In other words, the sociological theories of Houellebecq’s hero may possibly reflect an unbearable lucidity or, more probably, a mere evasion of “[ses] problèmes personnels” (*Extension* 169).

Measuring these misogynistic claims against the world portrayed in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* will provide a clearer picture of the narrator-protagonist’s authority. Do the male and female characters in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* support his polemical vision of gender politics?
Few characters persuasively illustrate the narrator’s thesis that “le libéralisme sexuel produit des phénomènes de paupérisation absolue” (Houellebecq Extension 114). Speculating about the sexual misery of his successful colleagues, he transforms them into “vainqueurs [sur le plan économique…et] vaincus [sur le plan sexuel]” that testify to “un second système de différenciation […] indépendant de l’argent” (Houellebecq Extension 115, 114). Armed only with sparse details about their private lives, Houellebecq’s hero concludes that “un technicien de haut mérite” is a virgin, that a colleague earning “trente mille francs par mois” committed suicide over his involuntary celibacy and that a stereotypical career-woman “avait tellement besoin d’être tranchée” (Extension 45, 116, 53).

Setting these speculative examples aside leaves us only with the protagonist and his accomplice, Tisserand, as the novel’s sexual paupers. Neither, however, appears hopelessly or systematically oppressed--they simply squander their romantic opportunities. Instead of striking up conversation with “une fille était assise à la table voisine de la mienne, seule” or responding to the flirtation of the very career-woman he alleges to be “hors d’état d’essayer quoi que ce soit avec un mec,” he excuses himself to vomit and masturbate in a bathroom stall (Houellebecq Extension 129, 33). When he observes the perfect ambiance in a café, he hypocritically critiques the passivity of his companion--“l’imbécile” (Houellebecq Extension 74). His psychologist makes the compelling argument that deeper mental issues prevent him from engaging in “des

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135 Fables written by Houellebecq’s hero already render his sociological theses in a ridiculous light--a cow “condamnée aux mornes jouissances de la fécondation artificielle” incarnates the sexually pauperized, a chimpanzee who questions the capitalist “ordre du monde” is executed by a bevy of swans and a poodle affirms that “la sexualité est un système de hiérarchie sociale” in a satirical Socratic dialogue (Extension 15, 147, 106).
procédures de séduction […] des relations normales avec des jeunes femmes” (Houellebecq *Extension* 172). Tisserand, on the other hand, does not appear to be the defeatist “[sans] force […]ni] courage” that the narrator portrays him to be—infact, “il essaie de toutes ses forces” and even succeeds in engaging a beautiful woman in conversation “[qui] le regardait avec calme et sans dégoût” (Houellebecq *Extension* 74, 62, 130). But he maladroitly mishandles these promising situations—drinking excessively, pestering uninterested women and throwing “des quinze-vingts ans” around the dancefloor “avec brutalité” (Houellebecq *Extension* 127, 133). Had he not perished prematurely in a car accident, he conceivably could have found success in a planned trip with his own age group. The hero’s examples of *absolute sexual pauperization*, therefore, appear to be predominantly fictional projections—not unlike his fable about a woman “[qui] ne pouvait qu’assister, avec une haine silencieuse à la libération des autres” (Houellebecq *Extension* 104).

Furthermore, the characters in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* transcend the protagonist’s gendered spheres. A female client’s “agressivité […] étonnante” is matched by a male manager’s “hostilité sourde” (Houellebecq *Extension* 22). Alongside secretaries “paniquées” in front of a computer for the first time, we find male employees who are deemed “incompétent,” who know “rien au sujet traité” and who demonstrate “[une] médiocrité […] éprouvante” (Houellebecq *Extension* 68, 65, 40, 23). The narrator encounters both cold and compassionate male and female characters. He hears men and women respond to a colleague’s death in vulgar language that does not befit “un sujet en soi assez triste,” revealing their cold indifference (Houellebecq *Extension* 34, 120). He also senses the genuine sympathy of his female psychologist “[qui] faisait ce qu’elle
pouvait [...et] était gentille” and his male manager, who commiserates with him over his stolen car “avec émotion” (Houellebecq Extension 170, 30). This female psychologist, moreover, proves more efficacious than her male superior (“le médecin-chef [qui lui] fut d’un faible secours” ), representing the voice of reason in a “dialogue de sourds” with the illogical protagonist (Houellebecq Extension 167, 169). Evidently, Houellebecq’s characters do not adhere to stereotypes dictating that “men should be strong, rational, aggressive; women should be weak, emotional, submissive” (Basow vii).

Given the disparity between the narrator’s ideas about gender (“[les] phénomènes de paupérisation absolue,” “un monde tellement simple […divisé en un système masculin et un système féminin”) and the illustrations of male and female characters in Extension du domaine de la lutte, the implied author does not necessarily endorse his antihero’s misogyny (Houellebecq 114, 170).

LES PARTICULES ÉLÉMENTAIRES : Les Particules élémentaires pursues the hypothesis that the sexual liberation opened “un nouveau champ […] à la compétition narcissique,” compounding “la compétition économique féroce” (Houellebecq 82). Interweaving the narratives of Michel and Bruno—two estranged half-brothers and the products of “ce milieu libertaire, vaguement beatnik dans les années 50”--Houellebecq’s second novel illustrates the erosion of traditional family values, the increasing impossibility of love and “la montée historique de l’individualisme” (Particules 251, 144). As in Extension du domaine de la lutte, this transversal social critique may be construed as a reactionary rebuke of women’s liberation. Yet despite their common
thematics and polemics, Michel Houellebecq’s first two novels present distinct characters, narrators and implied authors who must be read on their own terms.

Bolstering critics who assert Houellebecq’s tendency “to blame feminism for many of the cultural calamities he describes,” the novel’s characters question the feminist preoccupation with “la vie professionnelle” and argue that “la vie de mère au foyer” is better suited to women’s innate “besoin d’avoir un être à aimer” (Morrey 149; Houellebecq *Particules* 231, 210). The scenes of enunciation and the broader characterization of these speakers, however, attenuate their misogynistic discourse, suggesting that the author does not necessarily share in their consensus.

Bruno’s love interest, Christiane, provides the clearest articulation of anti-feminism in *Les Particules élémentaires*. She trivializes feminist concerns (‘leur grand sujet de conversation, c’était la vaisselle’) and underscores the vanity of their enterprise:

En quelques années, elles réussissaient à transformer les mecs de leur entourage en névrosés impuissants et grincheux. À partir de ce moment--c’était absolument systématique--elles commençaient à éprouver la nostalgie de la virilité. Au bout du compte elles plaquaient leurs mecs pour se faire sauter par des machos latins à la con. [...] puis elles se faisaient faire un gosse et se mettaient à préparer des confitures maison avec les fiches cuisine Marie-Claire. J’ai vu le même scénario se reproduire, des dizaines de fois (Houellebecq *Particules* 182-183).

Although Douglas Morrey argues that Houellebecq simply places his “libelous words in the mouth of Christiane,” the scene of enunciation and the speaker’s

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136 *Impuissant* as in sexually impotent, rather than merely emasculated, given her previous remark that “les hommes […] qui ont du mal à bander” had been “durement atteints [par le féminisme]” (Houellebecq *Particules* 175).
characterization undermine her authority and preserve the author’s possible difference of opinion (149). Christiane’s anti-feminist diatribe follows her unpleasant encounter with an “ex-féministe” she considers “[une] conne” (Houellebecq *Particules* 181, 182). The mere sight of her antagonist imbues Christiane’s speech with vitriol and vulgarity—“ces salopes […] plaquaient leurs mecs pour se faire sauter par des machos latins à la con […] Bref elles s’en tapaient deux ou trois, parfois plus pour les très baisables” (Houellebecq *Particules* 182-3). Her attempt to “encadrer les féministes” in this scene aligns with the broader portrait of her subjective prejudices—her fears of “Noirs […] et Arabes” and hatred of “ce milieu libertaire, vaguement beatnik” that are similarly predicated on strained personal relationships with her son, “[qui fréquente] des musulmanes,” and her “cons de parents [beatniks]” (Houellebecq *Particules* 182, 266, 185, 261). Furthermore, despite her prodigious promiscuity, Christiane’s questionable liberation undermines the authority of her antifeminism. She describes pleasing her ex-husband as “[sa] plus grande joie” and remains sexually submissive after her divorce and liberation—“Se [laisse] prendre à la chaîne” (Houellebecq *Particules* 177, 305: emphasis added).

While stopping short of generalizing from his ex-wife “[à laquelle] la vie de mère au foyer […] convenait parfaitement,” Bruno questions the idea that “l’épanouissement des femmes passait par la vie professionnelle […] ce que tout le monde pensait ou faisait semblant de penser à l’époque” (Houellebecq *Particules* 231). These dubitative terms reflect his gender essentialism. Echoing the “[positive pole of] the pedestal-gutter

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137 In his 1998 essay on Valerie Solanas, “L’Humanité, second stade,” Michel Houellebecq ridicules feminists’ “incompréhensible appétit à l’égard du monde professionnel et de la vie de l’entreprise […] et de l’épanouissement’ offerts par le travail” (*Interventions* 2 165). Yet, as we observed in Chapter 1: Reading Houellebecq and his Fictions, this is precisely the moment where he appears to ratchet up the provocation of his persona by drawing, sometimes verbatim, from the speech of his characters.
syndrome […] presenting women] as love goddesses and wholesome mother figures,” he imagines love to dictate their social behavior, sexuality “faisant appel […] à l’amour” and desire for children—“elles continuent à éprouver le besoin d’avoir un être à aimer” (Ruble 190; Houellebecq Particules 273, 210).

However, the scenes of enunciation and Bruno’s broader characterization undermine his misogynist claims. He conjectures about female sexuality in an article on the “proposition humaniste” of public orgies that was “refusé de justesse par la revue Esprit” (Houellebecq Particules 267, 273). He remarks upon women’s place in the domestic sphere during an all-night, alcohol fueled confession “[qui a] dépassé les limites de la décence implicitement requises dans le cadre d’une conversation humaine” (Houellebecq Particules 224). With false contrition and crocodile tears, Bruno invokes gender essentialism to rationalize his failures as a father and husband: “en réalité, jamais les hommes ne se sont intéressés à leurs enfants, jamais ils n’ont éprouvé d’amour pour eux, et plus généralement les hommes sont incapables d’éprouver de l’amour” (Houellebecq Particules 209). In a textbook case of projection, he accuses children of an “égoïsme [qui] ne connaît plus de limites,” before admitting that he dosed his infant son with sedatives to visit a prostitute (Houellebecq Particules 228). Bruno’s self-serving, misogynistic discourse epitomizes his sociopathic disinterest in “la psychologie d’autrui” and his incarnation of humanity’s “égoïsme illimité” in Les Particules élémentaires (Houellebecq 86, 394).

Bruno’s brother Michel articulates yet another critique of liberated women forsaking love for “[leur] avenir professionnel” (Houellebecq Particules 351). By engaging in meaningless sex as “un divertissement” and subsequently entering a
“mariage raisonné,” “elles se coupaient ainsi de toute possibilité de bonheur […laissant] le champ libre à l’ennui, à la sensation de vide, à l’attente angoissée […laissant] de la mort” (Houellebecq Particules 351). The implication, it seems, is that they would have been better off as housewives. Michel’s antifeminism reflects a deeply engrained gender essentialism: “décidément, les femmes étaient meilleures que les hommes […] plus caressantes, plus aimantes, plus compatissantes et plus douces ; moins portées à la violence, à l’égoïsme, à l’affirmation de soi, à la cruauté […] plus raisonnables, plus intelligentes et plus travailleuses” (Houellebecq Particules 205).

Though the narrator praises the protagonist’s insights during periods of “absolu détachement mental” and “stimulation intellectuelle,” Michel’s mental states are decidedly more dubious in these scenes (Houellebecq Particules 350, 203). He theorizes gender differences during a two-week bout of agoraphobia and fasting. He reflects on women’s liberation at the bedside of his comatose partner who intentionally overdosed on her medication. Moreover, he derives sweeping generalizations about gender from “[quelques] fils de paysans” who gleefully engage in animal cruelty, his highschool sweetheart who fails to find love among “des dizaines [d’amants],” and a television series, La Vie des animaux, in which maternal love offers the only respite from “ce carnage permanent qu’était la nature animale” (Houellebecq Particules 204, 290, 205). Nourished by his grandmother’s “idées modérées sur le bonheur [conjugal],” Michel’s reactionary gender politics reflect his circumscribed social life spent “seul, dans un vide sidéral” and “sans frottement” (Houellebecq Particules 63, 356, 265).

While the questionable authority of the misogynistic speakers in Les Particules élémentaires creates space for the author’s hypothetical dissent, the narrator’s socio-
historical narrative makes playing devil’s advocate more difficult. Responsible for “l’éclatement […] du couple traditionnel” and “la destruction [de la famille],” the sexual revolution forms the crux of the narrator’s account of “la montée historique de l’individualisme” and “la destruction progressive des valeurs morales au cours des années 60, 70, 80 puis 90” (Houellebecq Particules 36,144, 260). But the narrator’s send up of sexual liberation consistently and unfairly emphasizes the role of women. The description of the landmark Neuwirth Law lifting France’s ban on birth control only cites “la pilule […] désormais en vente libre dans les pharmacies” (Houellebecq Particules 144).138 The overview of 1974’s legislative breakthroughs glosses over the legalization of adultery and divorce, elaborating the role of “la loi Veil autorisant l’avortement” in the decline of Christianity “[qui] accordait une importance illimitée à toute vie humaine” and the rise of a materialist anthropology “radicalement différente dans ses présupposés, et beaucoup plus modeste dans ses recommandations éthiques” (Houellebecq Particules 89). Finally, the analysis of popular literature passes over “la part d’organes de presse d’inspiration libertaire,” to focus extensively on women’s magazines, where the ideological conflict between “[l’âge] d’or du sentiment amoureux […]et] la consommation libidinale de masse […] se [cristallisa]” (Houellebecq Particules 70-71).

The fictional characters interwoven with this socio-cultural history further attest to the narrator’s gendered view of the sexual revolution. Annabelle’s first kiss and later deflowering mark “la conscience douloureuse […] de son existence individuelle” and “

138 Bearing implications for the implied author’s misogyny, public health studies reveal that “The invention of the birth control pill contributed very little to the rise in premarital sex among teenagers […] The reason is simple. The pill is not used by a large number of teenage girls and once this number is allocated to other methods [in a counterfactual experiment where the pill was never invented] the overall effects are small” (Greenwood 913).
premier stade d’une irrémédiable déchéance” (Houellebecq Particules 98, 76).

Meanwhile, Bruno’s antisocial adolescence “terrorisé par les filles” and sexual obsession are blamed on his prude first date--“tout est de la faute de Caroline Yessayan” (Houellebecq Particules 79, 66). So the narrator’s account of the sexual liberation disproportionately shifts the blame onto women, betraying a nostalgia for a halcyon era when “La femme reste à la maison et tient son ménage […] et Les couples sont fidèles et heureux” (Houellebecq Particules 64).

The narrator’s characterization, however, again gestures towards the author’s possible difference of opinion. Les Particules élémentaires presents “une reconstitution crédible” from a single source--Michel Djerzinski’s journal relaying “les événements de sa vie […] et les drames qui conditionnèrent sa vision particulière de l’existence” (Houellebecq 383). As the literal product of “l’activité intellectuelle solitaire de Djerzinski,” Houellebecq’s neohuman narrator is informed by the hero’s perspective, echoing, for example, his conclusion that “la plupart des gens qu’il connaissait avaient mené des vies comparables à celle de Bruno”--“Bruno était représentatif de son époque” (Particules 370, 220, 81-82). Sharing Michel’s limited frame of reference, the narrator naturally affirms “[ces] temps malheureux et troublés […] où les hommes passèrent leur vie […] dans la solitude et l’amertume” and “cette espèce torturée, contradictoire, individualiste et querelleuse, d’un égoïsme illimité” (Houellebecq Particules 9, 394). However, the dystopian overtones of the future conceived by Djerzinski and hailed by his
neohuman progeny as “un paradis” cast doubt over their shared social vision and polemical gender politics.\(^{139}\)

But does the author of *Les Particules élémentaires* merit the benefit of the doubt extended to him throughout our analysis of the novel’s misogynist discourse? From certain vantage points, Houellebecq appears more misanthropic than misogynistic in his second novel. “The mercilessness of his descriptions of women” is rivaled by the brutality of his portraits of men: “[son corps] blanchâtre, minuscule, répugnant, obèse,” “l’abjection de son ventre gonflé, de ses bajoues, de ses fesses déjà pendantes,” “ses greffes de cheveux” “ses grosses couilles velues,” “sa trop petite queue,” “sa bite de treize centimètres et ses érections espacées” (Morrey 151; Houellebecq *Particules* 77, 189, 257, 126, 304).\(^{140}\) Negligent mothers and fathers contribute to the deterioration of society in the narrative—refusing “la fin de [leur] jeunesse” and “les soins fastidieux que réclame l’élevage d’un enfant jeune […] peu compatibles avec leur idéal de liberté personnelle,” they prove “tous deux responsables” “d’une dislocation familiale abjecte” (Houellebecq *Particules* 36-37, 232, 79). The novel may even mount a challenge to gender essentialism and the patriarchal ideology of separate spheres by presenting female characters who utterly lack maternal instincts, display “des aptitudes intellectuelles hors du commun,” deservingly take over the reins at “une des meilleures équipes [de

\(^{139}\) A biochemist rallies the world behind “cette proposition radicale issue des travaux de Djerzinski : l’humanité devait disparaître […] et donner naissance à une nouvelle espèce, asexuée et immortelle, ayant dépassé l’individualité, la séparation et le devenir” (Houellebecq *Particules* 385). As if humanity’s disappearance were not alarming enough, the neohumans transcend individualism by eliminating genetic variation and overcome competition by abandoning the cultural and intellectual ambitions of their predecessors.

\(^{140}\) While Morrey cites a scene “when Houellebecq observes that a woman has ‘blow-job lips’” the narrator’s discourse is focalized through the misogynistic and sexually obsessed protagonist: “[elle avait ce ] qu’on appelle communément ‘bouche à pipes’ […] Belle femme, de la classe. Une vieille pute quand même, songeait Bruno” (Morrey, 150 ; Houellebecq *Particules* 136).
recherches scientifiques] européennes” and comfortably move between “la vie de mère au foyer […] et la vie professionnelle” (Houellebecq *Particules* 35, 18, 25, 231).

The particularly harsh fates reserved for liberated women in *Les Particules élémentaires*, however, shatter the illusion of a gender-neutral critique of sexual liberation, suggesting that the implied author concurs with his misogynistic characters and narrator. Janine, Annabelle and Christiane--“une mère dénaturée” “[qui] eut de nombreuses aventures,” a beautiful lady “[qui se donnait] trop facilement” and a divorcée “qui baise avec tout le monde”--all suffer degrading deaths (Houellebecq *Particules* 80, 35, 289, 174). Janine wastes away in a remote abandoned house where opportunistic hippies inveigle their way into her will. Having grossly neglected her children and figuratively made her bed, this “créature brunâtre, tassée au fond de son lit […] d’une extrême maigreur [qui] respirait difficilement […] visiblement à la dernière extrémité” faces Bruno’s psychotic rage--“Tu n’es qu’une vieille pute […] Tu m’émites de crever […] je pisserai sur tes cendres”--and Michel’s understandable indifference--“Après tout ce n’était que la deuxième fois qu’il voyait sa mère” (Houellebecq *Particules* 315, 319, 318). Michel’s highschool sweetheart, Annabelle, fails to recognize that “du premier coup, […] elle se trouvait en présence du grand amour” (Houellebecq *Particules* 72). After squandering years with “des dizaines d’hommes […] dont] aucun ne valait la peine qu’on s’en souvienne,” she rekindles their relationship, but is soon diagnosed with an aggressive uterine cancer “[dont] le fait de ne pas avoir eu d’enfants constituait un facteur

141 Critics who decry “les images du féminin […] stéréotypées, pitoyables d'irréalisme […] un défilé de caricatures,” underestimate the novel’s interrogation of gender essentialism (Canto-Sperber 277).

142 While hardly granted happy endings--Marc Djerzinski disappears under mysterious circumstances in Tibet, Serge Clément loses much of his fortune, Michel presumably leaps off a cliff and Bruno is committed to a psychiatric institution--the male representatives of the sexual revolution fare considerably better than their female counterparts.
d’aggravation du risque,” leading to her third abortion, a traumatic hysterectomy and an intentional overdose on the date-rape drug, Rohypnol (Houellebecq *Particules* 290, 342). Christiane suffers even more explicitly from her liberated lifestyle. While fellating Bruno in a swinger club “les jambes bien écartées, la croupe offerte aux hommes qui passaient derrière elle,” her necrotic back gives out, permanently confining her to a wheelchair (Houellebecq *Particules* 306). She too commits suicide, sparing Bruno the burden “[de] s’occuper d’une invalide” (Houellebecq *Particules* 309).

So, the scathing portrait of sexual liberation in *Les Particules élémentaires* proves skewed towards women’s liberation. While the science-fiction epilogue portrays a fanciful post-human future, the central narrative makes the more modest proposal of a superior “FÉMININ” future if women were to follow the example of Bruno’s ex-wife, Anne--an exception from the liberated generation who assumes “la vie de mère au foyer,” fulfills her duties and manages to raise a decent young man in spite of his negligent and narcissistic father (Houellebecq *Particules* 212, 231).

LANZAROTE: Following a French protagonist to the Spanish Canaries, *Lanzarote* also marks the author’s thematic departure from French society. Despite the relative dearth of polemical theses on women’s liberation and gender essentialism in *Lanzarote*, the

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143 The choice of Rohypnol is particularly provocative. While the drug may be prescribed for sleeping problems, there are many, less provocative alternatives the author could have chosen. Annabelle’s overdose on this date-rape drug suggests that she is complicit in her own sexual objectification. Her sexual liberation and long standing resistance to a traditional role (marriage, kids) contributed to her cancer and death.

144 A stay at home mom and faithful wife, Anne serves as the control group in her liberated generation.

145 Anne, like Michel’s paternal grandmother, embodies the rare class of humans “qui travaillaient toute leur vie, et qui travaillaient dur, uniquement par dévouement et par amour” (Houellebecq *Particules* 115). Like Michel’s catholic grandmother, she is also religious—“[une] BCBG protestante” (Houellebecq *Particules* 212)
narrator and the salacious centerpiece of his narrative invite now familiar “[accusations] de misogynie et d’objectivation du corps féminin” (Baggesgaard 241).

The incipit leaves little doubt that Houellebecq’s unnamed narrator is a misogynist. His misogyny manifests itself before his voyage even begins as he disparagingly questions the expertise of his female travel agent: “Je connaissais très bien le Sud marocain, et probablement mieux que cette conne” (Houellebecq Lanzarote 10). The subsequent narrative of his voyage is riddled with generalizations about women that reinforce the reader’s initial impression. Houellebecq’s narrator pigeonholes professional women as travel agents (“le (ou le plus souvent la) professionnelle assise en face de vous”) and school teachers (“Elle ressemblait tout à fait à une institutrice”) (Lanzarote 8, 46). He evokes female compassion (“Décidément les hommes sont moins doués, pour ce genre de choses”) and materialism (“quelle femme n’apprécie pas les cadeaux ?”) (Houellebecq Lanzarote 63, 10). He routinely reduces women to sexual objects—muting his television to masturbate to “toutes ces minettes qui se trémoussent en petit haut […] dans un clip de rap,” relaying rumours that “en Afrique de l’Ouest […] il suffisait de se pointer en discothèque pour ramener une nana dans son bungalow,” reminiscing about “une Libanaise rencontrée dans une boîte à partouzes : ultra-chaude, bonne chatte, bien douce, avec de gros seins en plus” and generalizing about “[les Espagnoles qui] aiment le sexe […] et ont souvent de gros seins” (Houellebecq Lanzarote 36, 10, 62).

Yet once again, a careful reading of Houellebecq’s prose reveals the imprudence of assimilating the author with his narrator.146 The incipit not only establishes the hero’s

146 Michel Houellebecq encourages this assimilation with his nameless narrator by incorporating his personal photos of the island in a deluxe two volume edition of Lanzarote. In the novella however, the
misogyny, it also paints a decidedly unflattering portrait of the protagonist’s petulance and prejudice, his lack of culture or social graces. Reluctantly engaged in dialogue, Houellebecq’s narrator would have preferred to return home “pour me gratter les couilles en feuilletant des catalogues d’hôtels-clubs” (*Lanzarote* 7). While discussing vacation packages, his thoughts turn to orientalist and neocolonial fantasies—“l’hôtel […] d’Hammamet, où des groups d’Algériennes venaient s’éclater entre femmes, sans la surveillance d’aucun homme” and Senegal, whose promiscuous women demonstrate that “le prestige des Blancs était encore très grand” (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 9, 10). In what should be a straightforward conversation and commercial transaction, Houellebecq’s hero makes a series of *faux-pas*—bluntly blurring out Islamophobic ideas (“‘Je n’aime pas les pays arabes, coupai—je. Enfin […] ‘Ce qui me déplait c’est pas les pays arabes, c’est les pays *musulmans*’”) and sexual desires (“Je ne voyais pas pourquoi je pensais à tout ça ; de toute façon je n’avais pas envie de baiser. ‘Je n’ai pas envie de baiser’ dis-je”)* (Lanzarote* 9, 10). Unsurprisingly, the travel agent struggles to cope with the socially inept protagonist and his inappropriate remarks, making efforts “pour briser le silence” and betraying “surprise” “[dans] les yeux” “[et] la bouche légèrement entrouverte” (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 10, 9). Meanwhile, the narrator grows unreasonably frustrated with the travel agent who, of course, fails to read his mind : “C’était peut-être très beau, mais ce n’était pas *mon genre*, voilà ce qu’il fallait lui faire rentrer dans la tête”
(Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 9). This undeniably unflattering portrait of the protagonist points to a potential cleavage, rather than a coincidence, between the author and his narrator.\textsuperscript{147}

The initial characterization of the protagonist sets up Michel Houellebecq’s parody of travel literature in *Lanzarote*, which follows a prejudiced philistine with no filter to a desolate destination offering “paysages sans intérêt,” “attractions touristiques […] peu nombreuses” and “pour le *tourisme culturel*, tintin” (34, 21, 17). In his unconventional travel narrative, Houellebecq relegates the generic tropes of exploration, encounters, discovery and conquest to the realm of sexuality, playing with the imbrication between exoticism and eroticism. In an ironic realization of “ce matériau porteur de rêves qu’est le ‘voyage’” and the voyager’s “désirs […] et espérances secrètes,” the hero departs “[sans] envie de baiser,” but experiences “larmes de bonheur” and develops a taste for travel during his sexual encounters with German bisexuals (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 8, 10, 58).

While the hero’s manifest misogyny arguably participates in the novella’s parody of travel fiction, the implied author must still be held accountable for his presentation of misogynistic discourse in the text. While the narrator-protagonist relates the experience that salvaged his vacation from “tous les signes d’un solide ennui” with understandable enthusiasm, the author’s plot choices prove more problematic (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 20). In *Lanzarote*, Houellebecq imagines a non-exclusive lesbian couple who responds surprisingly well to the hero’s audacious sexual advances, maladroitly formulated in

\textsuperscript{147} The heterodiegetic narrator may provide a clearer criticism of the protagonist. The homodiegetic narrator, the first-person narrator, can complicate the task of ascertaining the implied author’s beliefs. For this reason, I believe it is paramount to measure the discourse of prejudiced speakers against the portrait of minority characters in the narrative.
broken English--“‘You have very nice breast,’” “You look a good girl. May I lick your pussy?” (34, 56). Their friendly commerce quickly develops into a vacation ménage à trois that surpasses the narrator’s voyeuristic fantasy “[de] voir deux femmes se branler et s’entrelécher la chatte” (Houellebecq Lanzarote 24). His blow-by-blow account of their encounters spares no detail of techniques (“une manière très particulière de sucer, pratiquement sans bouger les lèvres, mais en passant la langue tout autour du gland, parfois très vite, parfois avec d’exquis ralentissements”) or anatomy (“elle avait une jolie chatte épilée, avec une fente bien dessinée, pas très longue […] avec un clitoris épais”) (Houellebecq Lanzarote 57, 54-55). This graphic sex scene culminates in the signature convention of pornographic films--“the money shot” : “[Elle] dirigea ma queue vers la poitrine de Barbara et recommence à branler par petits coups très vifs, ses doigts en anneau à la racine du gland. Barbara me regarde et sourit ; au moment où elle presse ses mains sur le côté de ses seins pour accentuer leur rondeur, j’éjaculai violemment sur sa poitrine” (Williams 94 ; Houellebecq Lanzarote 58). By rewarding his hero’s borderline sexual harassment, bringing male fantasies of lesbians and no-strings-attached sex to fruition and deploying a notoriously demeaning genre’s “most representative instance of phallic power and pleasure,” the author could arguably lend credence to the accusations of misogyny brought against him (Williams 95).148

When recontextualized, however, the narrator’s explicit proposals and pornographic descriptions do not necessarily corroborate the author’s alleged

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148 Of course, the parodic nature of the novella complicates our assessment of the implied author. The narrative could parody not only travel fiction, but also pornography.
Upon closer examination, the female characters exercise agency throughout *Lanzarote*. Pam and Barbara initiate consensual sexual commerce with the protagonist—prompting his immodest proposal and participation with exhibitionist sex, a suggestive invitation to “come closer” and rhetoric (“une longue tirade en allemand”) (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 54, 64). Moreover, their threesome proves egalitarian, rather than androcentric: all three participants reach orgasm in an order that is reversed between scenes (Pam, Barbara, Protagonist: Protagonist/Barbara/Pam). These women also exercise agency beyond the bedroom. While exploring the island, they impose “une idée très précise de l’organisation de leur journée” upon their male companions (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 51). Finally, unlike Houellebecq’s protagonist, they possess a life outside Lanzarote with legitimate professional and personal aspirations:

“Barbara travaillait dans un salon de coiffure […] Pam dans] les services financiers,”

“Elles envisagent de s’installer en Espagne […] À Majorque ou sur la Costa Blanca,” “[et elles] voulaient avoir des enfants. Ce serait plutôt Barbara qui les porterait, elle avait très envie d’arrêter de travailler” (*Lanzarote* 59-60, 61). So, given their contributions and relative character development in the narrative, Pam and Barbara cannot be easily reduced to mere sexual objects.

Yet, without the explicit sociological framework and narratorial commentary present in Houellebecq’s previous novels, the meaning of the explicit sex in *Lanzarote*

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149 While Mads Anders Baggesgaard rather generously claims that Houellebecq’s foray into erotic fiction constitutes “l’examen des conditions de la sexualité humaine dans la société d’aujourd’hui,” I concur that “les accusations d’objectivation ne semblent pas toujours fondées” (241).

150 Houellebecq’s narrator-protagonist in *Lanzarote* never mentions his occupation and aspires to nothing: “on peut très bien vivre sans rien espérer de la vie ; c’est même le cas le plus courant […] les gens restent chez eux, ils se réjouissent que leur téléphone ne sonne jamais […] Dans l’ensemble, les gens sont comme ça ; et moi aussi” (75).
risks eluding the reader. Fortunately, the denouement’s revelations elucidate these seemingly gratuitous sex scenes, bringing the author’s gender politics into sharper focus.

After leaving Lanzarote, the protagonist’s maudlin travel companion Rudi joins the Azraëlìan cult and becomes the protagonist of their highly publicized pedophilia scandal. His lack of contrition attests to the dubious “érotisme sacré” of the Azraëlìan church that advocates “la sexualité sous toutes ses formes […] quelles que soient les considérations d’âge, de sexe ou de liens familiaux” (Houellebecq Lanzarote 84, 82). The novella’s concluding portrait of the “rapports sexuels très libres” of “[une] secte […] dangereuse, à surveiller,” however, does not imply the author’s categorical condemnation of sexual liberty (Houellebecq Lanzarote 79, 45: emphasis added). Instead, Houellebecq’s narrative establishes a clear contrast between a harmless form of sexual freedom “[qui] ne prête pas à conséquence” and the Azraëlìans’ abhorrent concept of sexual freedom (Houellebecq Lanzarote 60). The members of the menage à trois escape the author’s judgment, while the criminal cult members face a literal judgment and sentencing. Rudi’s behavior further highlights the incomparability of these forms of sexual freedom. While on Lanzarote, he declines invitations to participate in group sex with consenting adults, renouncing his past experiences in “les boîtes pour couples ‘non-conformistes’ “[comme] un exercice de dépravation […] des monstres sexuels” (Houellebecq Lanzarote 68-9).

Situated on the sidelines of the narrative’s consensual sex scenes, “à quelques mètres, mélancolique et ventru,” his marginal position reinforces the distinction between the

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151 It is worth noting that women are also implicated in the Azraëlìan scandal : “Nicole, 47 ans, avouait clairement avoir eu pendant plusieurs années des rapports incestueux avec ses deux fils, aujourd’hui âgés de 21 et 28 ans” (Houellebecq Lanzarote 80).
legitimate sexual freedom of the narrative’s threesome and the perversion of sexual
freedom in his pedophilic cult (Houellebecq Lanzarote 56).

By providing relatively positive portraits of sexual freedom and liberated women,
Lanzarote nuances Michel Houellebecq’s allegedly reactionary gender politics,
complicating his reputation as a “misogyne honteux” (Houellebecq Ennemis 7).

PLATEFORME: The story of an unlikely romance sown amidst Thailand’s seedy sex
industry, Plateforme offers yet another variant on the “liberalized libidinal economy”
(Abecassis 810). While Extension du domaine de la lutte draws parallels between
neoliberal economics and post-liberation sexuality, Plateforme explores their intersection
in Thailand, “the world’s sex tourism capital” (Guzder). Houellebecq literalizes the
thematics of sexual commerce and gender politics as his protagonists transform the
vacation villages of “le premier groupe hôtelier mondial” into “clubs Aphrodite”--an ill-fated venture to exploit regional red-light districts that culminates in political violence
and a presidential rebuke (Plateforme 155, 265).

By wading into Thailand’s illicit sex trade, Houellebecq does little to allay his
reputation for sexism. His hero’s advocation of sexual tourism and graphic depictions of
prostitution offer perhaps the most compelling grounds thus far for the charges “de
misogynie et d’objectivation du corps féminin” brought against the author (Baggesgaard
241).152 Predictably, critics read the novel as “une apologie du tourisme sexuel,”
assimilating the author with his eponymous narrator-protagonist: “comme le constate

152Patriarchal labor divisions are grotesquely manifested in sexual tourism: “In the labour markets of
industrialized countries […] Women perform the least qualified jobs […] Globalisation and economic
liberalisation have […] intensified their] commodification and modern-day slavery” (Ghosh 975).
Houellebecq, les échanges sexuels s’opèrent à présent entre les pays du Tiers-monde et le monde occidental pour le plaisir du plus grand nombre […] ‘C’est une situation d’échange idéale,’ comme le constate Michel dans Plateforme” (Robosseau 48 ; Dumas 216). But the author’s dubious portraits of reactionary gender politics, sexual tourism and their defenders demand a more rigorous narratological analysis.

Once again, the narrator-protagonist provides the most significant source of misogynistic discourse in Houellebecq’s novel. Despite noteworthy attempts to generalize “[le] phénomène sociologique, massif” “[du] dépérissement de la sexualité en Occident,” Michel’s analysis carries a reactionary critique of women’s liberation (Houellebecq Plateforme 251). 153 “Les Occidentaux n’arrivent plus à coucher ensemble” because “[les] femmes modernes” refuse to submit to sexual objectification and the cult of domesticity (“[devenir] une gentille épouse qui tienne leur ménage et s’occupe de leurs enfants”) (Houellebecq Plateforme 250, 152). Seducing modern women entails “[des] vexations et [des] problèmes” : “Quand on considère les conversations fastidieuses qu’il faut subir pour amener une nana dans son lit, et que la fille […] vous fera chier avec ses problèmes […] et qu’il faudra impérativement passer avec elle au moins le reste de la nuit, on conçoit que les hommes puissent préférer s’éviter beaucoup de soucis en payant une petite somme” (Houellebecq Plateforme 153). Liberated women, moreover, seem slated to follow suit : “[à mesure qu’elles s’adaptent] aux valeurs masculines” “[et] à leur vie professionnelle […] elles trouveront plus simple, elles aussi, de payer pour baiser”

153 Houellebecq’s narrator employs gender neutral pronouns : “offrir son corps comme un objet agréable donner gratuitement du plaisir ; voilà ce que les Occidentaux ne savent plus faire. [Les Occidentaux] ont complètement perdu le sens du don […] Nous sommes devenus froids, rationnels, extrêmement conscients de notre existence individuelle et de nos droits” (Plateforme 254: emphasis added).
So, while hardly championing masculine values, Michel implies that women’s transgression of traditional gender roles triggered the crisis in sexuality.

The narrator’s manifest misogyny, of course, by no means guarantees the author’s complicity. The scenes of enunciation cast doubt over “[sa] thèse,” reinforcing the critical portrait of the protagonist and pointing towards Houellebecq’s potential difference of opinion (Plateforme 251). When Valérie asks Michel to explain “ce que les Thaïes ont de plus que les Occidentales,” Michel suppresses his gut-reaction “Rien” in favor of “une idée pas très bonne” (Houellebecq Plateforme 132). To tilt the power dynamics in his favor, Michel shakes her self-confidence by handing her an edition of the Phuket Weekly extolling the virtues of Thai women. In a thinly veiled advertisement for an international matchmaking agency, the founder presents cultural stereotypes that serve his business interests:

*The Western women want someone who looks a certain way, and who has certain "social skills", such as dancing and clever conversation, someone who is interesting and exciting and seductive. Now go to my catalogue and look at what the girls say they want. It's all pretty simple, really. Over and over they state that they are happy to settle down FOREVER with a man who is willing to hold down a steady job and be a loving and understanding HUSBAND and FATHER. That will get you exactly nowhere with an American girl! (Houellebecq Plateforme 132-133).

Despite privately acknowledging that these conclusions are “non sans culot,” Michel reaffirms them when pressed by Valérie (Houellebecq Plateforme 133). Her compelling counterexample—“Mais toi, tu n’es pas comme ça ; je vois bien que ça ne te dérange pas du tout que j’aie un poste de responsabilité, un salaire élevé”—only underscores the reliance of his gender politics upon received ideas, rather than personal experience.
(Houellebecq *Plateforme* 152). When Michel subsequently broaches the subject of gender politics, the scene again undermines his authority. While Valérie and Jean-Yves discuss their company’s failing vacation villages, Michel proposes “un club où les gens puissent baiser” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 250). His tentative terms belie his alleged “lucidité aiguë” “au milieu de l’imprégnation alcoolique, juste avant l’abrutissement”:

> “Il doit certainement se passer quelque chose, pour que les Occidentaux n’arrivent plus à coucher ensemble ; c’est peut-être lié au narcissisme, au sentiment d’individualité, au culte de la performance, peu importe […] il était vain de vouloir [l’expliquer] par tel ou tel facteur psychologique” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 250-251 : emphasis added).

“Complètement pété,” Michel casts doubt over his previous sociological explanations, reducing the phenomenon to pure economics: “d’un côté tu as plusieurs centaines de millions d’Occidentaux qui […] n’arrivent plus à trouver de satisfaction sexuelle […] De l’autre côté tu as plusieurs milliards d’individus qui n’ont rien […] C’est simple, vraiment simple à comprendre” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 249, 252).

Michel’s broader characterization further erodes the authority of his theories. Houellebecq’s narrator candidly and accurately describes himself as unremarkable (“un individu médiocre, sous tous ses aspects”) and immoral (“Européen décadent […] ayant pleinement accédé à l’égoïsme,” “Je ne suis pas bon […] ce n’est pas un des traits de mon caractère”) (*Plateforme* 369 308, 310). But more importantly, he dismisses women as “salopes,” culture as “un peu chiant,” economics as a personal “blocage” and “tout ce qui avait trait à l’actualité politique, aux pages société ou à la culture” as extraneous (*Plateforme* 131, 46, 49, 55, 57, 85, 299, 131, 87, 223, 289). Michel’s profound,
multifaceted ignorance severely undermines his theories on sexual commerce and gender politics.

The novel’s decidedly negative presentation of the narrator and his misogynistic discourse should give us pause before deeming Plateforme a defense of sexual tourism. To better situate the implied author, however, it will be necessary to examine his female characters and fictional world. Do Houellebecq’s plot choices corroborate or contest his hero’s polemical social theses?

Although Houellebecq’s hero claims that “c’est une atmosphère dans laquelle elles ont du mal à s’épanouir,” the female professionals prominently featured in Plateforme thrive in the workplace (26). Michel’s superior, Marie-Jeanne, plays a role that is “en réalité le plus complexe,” admirably managing his “assiduité professionnelle décroissante” with well chosen words of encouragement (“Et voici l’homme le plus important du service!”) and sympathy (“elle utilisait des paroles socialement acceptables extraites d’un catalogue restreint”) (Houellebecq Plateforme 23, 170, 26). Distinguishing herself as “une très bonne vendeuse,” Michel’s partner Valérie finds success at Nouvelles Frontières--“[où] sa carrière avait véritablement décollé. On l’avait mise en équipe avec Jean-Yves […] qui tout de suite l’avait beaucoup appréciée, lui avait fait confiance, et, […] lui avait laissé une grande marge d’initiative” (Houellebecq Plateforme 149-150). Jean-Yves “qui ne connaissait […] rien au tourisme” merely negotiates their salaries, while Valérie lays the groundwork for their success, developing innovative models (“Eldorador Découverte”) and collaborating with tourist agencies (“ce fut surtout Valérie qui s’en chargea”) (Houellebecq Plateforme 150, 181, 185).
The success of Marie-Jeanne and Valérie is even more impressive given the prevalence of workplace sexism in the novel. Male characters baselessly belittle working women: “Mon inutilité était quand même moins flamboyante que celle de Babette et de Léa,” “Marie-Jeanne ne [fait] à proprement parler rien,” “Cécilia […] était une CDD, voire une TUC, quelqu’un en résumé d’assez négligeable,” “[Aïcha est traitée de] salope parce [qu’elle a] envie de travailler,” “[la carrière [d’Audrey…] était loin d’être aussi brillante qu’elle le racontait” (Houellebecq Plateforme 93, 23, 24, 30, 270). Despite their competence (“[Brigit] est assez douée,” “Sandra était plutôt une bonne artiste”), female professionals weather “harcèlement sexuel” and are passed over in favor of less meritorious men (Houellebecq Plateforme 210, 314, 211). The implied author’s plot choices therefore provide a far more compelling portrait of workplace discrimination than female incompetence, undermining his misogynistic speakers.

The author’s plot choices also contest Michel’s claims about the waning sexuality of European women. In a case of confirmation bias, Houellebecq’s narrator mistakes an absence of evidence for evidence of an absence: “Elles avaient apparemment rencontré des garçons, mais je ne pensais pas qu’elles allaient coucher avec eux,” “ils donnaient l’impression de n’avoir pas baisé depuis trente ans,” “des filles comme Marjorie et Géraldine […] j’avais du mal à leur imaginer la capacité d’abandon nécessaire à […] n’importe quel rapport sexuel” (Plateforme 99, 48, 199). But the sex lives of professional women detailed in Plateforme hardly appear repressed: Aïcha—a nursing student and the

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154 Rather than promoting Sandra Hallyday, Michel advocates for Bertrand Bredane “avec acharnement” even though “il n’avait jamais eu beaucoup de succès […] il s’obstinait dans une veine trash un peu datée. Je sentais en lui une certaine authenticité—mais c’était peut-être simplement l’authenticité de l’échec” (Houellebecq Plateforme 192)
housekeeper of Michel’s father—“avait entretenu des ‘rapports intimes’ avec [son] père”;
Nicole—“une infirmière” that Michel encounters at the swinger bar 2+2—engages in uninhibited group sex; Eucharistie—Jean-Yves’ second babysitter “une fille […] sérieuse, qui travaillait bien à l’école […] et voulait devenir médecin”—has multiple lovers and “[faisait] l’amour pour le plaisir”; Audrey—the wife of Jean-Yves and a lawyer in a Parisian firm—plays the role of dominatrix in sadomasochistic clubs; and Valérie— the novel’s most developed and financially successful female professional—maintains a healthy and adventurous sexual relationship with the hero (Houellebecq Plateforme 26, 266, 299, 300). Moreover, the novel explicitly illustrates eleven male and ten female orgasms, providing a relatively egalitarian portrait of sexual relations and pleasure. Houellebecq’s female characters issue commands to their male sexual partners (“Alors, lèche-moi. Ça va me faire du bien”) and ignore their pleas (“Elle éclata de rire, contente de son pouvoir, puis continua à descendre”) (Plateforme 152, 53).

While the portraits of liberated women in the professional and private sphere in Plateforme contest Michel’s misogynistic vision of sexual commerce, the author’s representation of sexual tourism makes it difficult to defend him against accusations of misogyny.

155 Arguably, sadomasochistic practices represent an affirmation of female sexual agency (“Si je suis un majeur consentant, reprit-elle, et que mon fantasme c’est de souffrir, d’explorer la dimension masochiste de ma sexualité, je ne vois pas au nom de quoi on pourrait m’en empêcher”) and a questioning of patriarchal power dynamics (female dominatrices in the S&M club Bar-bar outnumber male masters 2:1 in Plateforme) (Houellebecq 196).
156 For this reason, critics who qualify Valérie as “a sexual dynamo whose primary goal in life seems to be to get Michel off” diminish her character development and career, becoming complicit in her sexual objectification (Morrey, Humanity 66). Valérie is endowed with a sex drive of her own. A tabulation of their sexual encounters in the novel reveals that she experiences five orgasms to his six. She offers him pleasure, because “ça me fait plaisir” (Houellebecq Plateforme 254).
Houellebecq’s narrative systematically undermines critics of sexual tourism by portraying them as overzealous or misinformed. Sylvie reacts to the protagonist’s confession that he visited a massage parlor with “un regard horrifié” before confronting him: “‘Vous ne pouvez tout de même pas approuver l’exploitation sexuelle des enfants !...’ s’exclama-t-elle avec angoisse” (Houellebecq Plateforme 71). Another tourist, Josiane refuses to engage in a reasonable dialogue about sexual tourism, deafly repeating her objection that “c’est absolument honteux que des gros beaufs puissent venir profiter impunément de la misère de ces filles” with mounting vehemence and frustration: “[elle] rembraya avec une énergie décuplée […] C’est de l’esclavage sexuel! hurla Josiane, qui n’avait pas entendu […] elle] tremblait de tous ses membres […] glapit [ses paroles…] d’une voix suraiguë […] et finit par reposer] violemment son assiette, qui se brisa en trois morceaux, se retourna et disparut dans la nuit” (Houellebecq Plateforme 78-79).

Likewise, the authors of the Guide du Routard respond viscerally to sexual tourism: “[les] ‘Occidentaux gras du bide’ qui se pavanaient avec des petites Thaïes […] les faisait ‘carrément gerber’” (Houellebecq Plateforme 58). Mainstream media and politicians prove no more measured, issuing a stronger condemnation of the sexual tourists and prostitutes targeted by the terrorist attack in Krabi than of the murderous perpetrators: the local government is “[épinglé…] pour sa complaisance envers la prostitution,” while the victims are “[stigmatisés]” by Jacques Chirac and vilified in “véhément [mais] peu documenté” articles as “DES VICTIMES AMBIGUÈS” (Houellebecq Plateforme 348-349).

But the hero’s experiences discredit these critical voices. Michel does not pay prostitutes with a mere “bouchée de pain,” he offers them the rough equivalent of “le
salaire mensuel d’un ouvrier non qualifié en Thaïlande” (Houellebecq Plateforme 79, 113). Citing a handbook of sexual tourism, he asserts that “il n’y a pas tellement de prostitution enfantine en Thaïlande. Pas plus qu’en Europe” and declares a nineteen year old Thai prostitute, Oôn, “toute jeune” (Houellebecq Plateforme 85, 53). His consensual commerce with prostitutes does not appear exploitative, but rather mutually satisfying and beneficial: Oôn “se leva avec une satisfaction visible” upon her selection, takes “une initiative personnelle” and revels in her sexual power, while Sîn manifests an “envie de faire l’amour” and reaches orgasm twice in their exchange (Houellebecq Plateforme 53, 123). Each prostitute expresses gratitude for their pay, “avec un grand sourire en joignant les mains à hauteur de son front,” “Elle prit les billets avec incrédulité, me salua plusieurs fois, les mains jointes à la hauteur de la poitrine. ‘You good man’ dit-elle” (Houellebecq Plateforme 54, 125-126). These fictional sex workers act as “autonomous [agents] choosing to sell [their] sexual labour,” rather than “[victims] of male sexual violence” (Taylor 45). So, although Oôn and Sîn briefly allude to unsavory aspects of their profession, Michel’s experiences with sexual tourism appear positive and mutually beneficial (Houellebecq Plateforme 125).

The author’s decision to deemphasize the disconcerting and seedy side of sexual tourism becomes more conspicuous through his plot choices that deflect criticism of the sex industry on to Europe. Houellebecq situates scenes where women are subjected to economic exploitation, sexual violence, slavery, humiliation and borderline pedophilia in a European context. Valérie finds herself “prise dans un système qui ne m’apporte plus grand-chose […] mais je ne vois pas comment y échapper” : she works “beaucoup trop,” returning home to collapse “recroquevillée par la fatigue, sur le canapé du salon”
Valérie’s coworker, Marylise Le François, becomes the victim of sexual violence on a metropolitan train: “Ils l’avaient pénétrée violemment, sans engagements, par tous les orifices. […] ils la traitaient de salope et de vide-couilles […] et finirent par lui cracher et lui pisser dessus” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 205). In a Parisian S&M club, the protagonists encounter “une femme […] menottée, bâillonnée, [qui] tournait dans une cage […] une esclave que son maître allait mettre aux enchères pour la durée de la soirée” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 194). Finally, “la question de la légitimité [des] rapports” between adult men and teenage girls is raised by Jean-Yves’ affair with Eucharistie—a fifteen-year-old babysitter less than half his age (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 301). By situating these scenes of economic exploitation, sexual violence, slavery, humiliation and sex with minors in Europe, the author obliquely responds to common critiques of sexual tourism, dishonestly portraying Thailand’s sex industry as innocuous.  

So, although considerable doubts are cast over the misogynistic speakers and their polemical social theses in *Plateforme*, Houellebecq’s deceitful idealization of Thailand’s sexual tourism industry—a legitimate humanitarian crisis and a grotesque manifestation of patriarchal labor divisions—belies his misogyny.

157 The specific objections raised by Houellebecq’s characters demonstrate the author’s familiarity with the subject matter: researchers describe the complacency and complicity of Thai institutions in the sex industry, the prevalence of pedophilia (an estimated “800,000 children [are sexually exploited] in Thailand”), “the modern day slavery of marginalized women of the Asian countries”—predominantly “girls who come […] from the poor regions of the country (particularly the North)” who “eke out a living” (Hobbs 80; Razdan 545; Ghosh 974, 976, 977). These well-documented realities, however, are not only largely absent from his fictional representation, but even, occasionally, contested by fictional sources (“The White Book,” for example, allegedly refutes the prevalence of pedophilia in Thailand) (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 85).
POSSIBILITÉ D’UNE ÎLE: A comedian reputed for his “franchise tout à fait anormale” and “honnêteté presque incroyable,” the narrator-protagonist of La Possibilité d’une île is commissioned to write an autobiography that would provide “une description complète, en même temps que légèrement détachée” of the nascent Elohimite Church (Houellebecq 37, 400, 375-376). La Possibilité d’une île, therefore, charts the shifting socio-cultural values of “une génération de kids définitifs,” “une humanité factice, frivole […] dans une quête de plus en plus désespérée du fun et du sexe” that transform Elohimism--a religion predicated on the promise of eternal youth and sexual freedom--into a spiritual superpower (Houellebecq 37). Through Daniel1’s narrative, Michel Houellebecq again interrogates the role of gender politics in the rise of individualism and social atomization in contemporary Europe.

Several prominent characters in La Possibilité d’une île produce misogynistic discourse, expressing gender essentialist and patriarchal ideals. The protagonist’s second wife Isabelle envisions women as sexually subservient to virile men: “La récompense qu’elles peuvent offrir au type qui risque sa peau […] c'est leur corps” (Houellebecq Possibilité 36). The original prophet of the Elohimite Church reduces women to their erotic value, declaring exhibitionism consubstantial to femininity and encouraging female cult members to wear “[des] tenues scintillantes, transparentes ou moulantes” (Houellebecq Possibilité 125). His son and alleged reincarnation, Vincent, qualifies women as “plus proches de l'amour” and emphasizes their “mission de donner la vie” (Houellebecq Possibilité 412). However, the scenes of enunciation and broader characterization of these speakers undermine the authority of their gender politics.
Isabelle’s remarks about women’s sexual subservience are qualified by their context. After sleeping with Daniel1, she stokes his ego so well that “[ses] seules paroles suffirent à [le] faire bander,” praising his bravery as “un torero” “[devant] le public […] un gros animal dangereux” and speculating about his copious sexual conquests (Houellebecq Possibilité 38, 36). Her belief in the “mécanismes primitifs” of gender roles coincides with her broader characterization as traditional--“par rapport […] aux femmes de sa génération : elle était plus généreuse, plus attentive, plus aimante” (Houellebecq Possibilité 36, 351).

The prophet’s eroticization of women must be situated in a dubious Elohimite conference outlining their conviction in absolute sexual freedom among “adultes consentants”—a conference that also features speakers who advocate against condom use (Houellebecq Possibilité 124). “Un mâle dominant absolu,” the prophet attempts to “castrer ses auditeurs” “[par son] éloge redondant des valeurs féminines et […]par] des charges impitoyables contre le machisme” (Houellebecq Possibilité 279-280).

His successor’s claims about women’s proximity to love and creating life must be contextualized in his immersive art installation entitled l’amour that inspires “un intense désir de disparaître, de [se] fonder dans un néant lumineux” (Houellebecq Possibilité 411). Ironically, Vincent associates l’amour—a piece that deals with transcending individualism—with a broader artistic ambition to “créer son propre monde […] comme] le rival de Dieu” that he megalomaniacally and disastrously pursues at the helm of the Elohimite Church (Houellebecq Possibilité 158). Moreover, a childhood traumatism provides further insight into his impression of women’s reproductive mission; his mother
committed suicide soon after giving birth to him, unable to bear “[les] infidélités continuelles [de son père]” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 284).

As in many of Michel Houellebecq’s novels, the first-narrator provides the most significant source of misogynist discourse in *La Possibilité d’une île.*¹⁵⁸ Sexist remarks permeating Daniel’s narrative advance an implicit critique of women’s liberation by advocating for their social and sexual subordination to men. The protagonist relegates women to the role of homemaker and supportive housewife, expecting them to “modifier la décoration, […] ranger [la maison]” and extend their “compréhension” to embattled men “[qui] vivent de naissance dans un monde difficile[…] aux enjeux simplistes et impitoyables” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 152, 329). Houellebecq’s hero qualifies women as historically “faibles,” lacking “humour en général,” and intelligent in so far as “[elles savent] à quel moment il convient de poser [leur] main sur la bite de l'homme” (*Possibilité* 341, 24, 96). He objectifies women in crude terms, describing “la femme” as “le gras qu'y a autour du vagin”--and reducing them to “des orifices adéquats” for virile men (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 22, 24). He plots the “décroissance de leur valeur érotique” “aux approches de la quarantaine,” when they will inevitably be supplanted by “de nouvelles pétasses toujours plus jeunes, toujours plus sexy” : “au bout du chemin […] il y aura] une somme de frustrations et de souffrances […] insoutenables” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 24-25, 58). Finally, Houellebecq’s hero predictably subscribes to a double-standard of sexuality, harboring “le rêve de tous les hommes […] de rencontrer des petites salopes innocentes, mais prêtes à toutes les dépravations,” yet qualifying his

¹⁵⁸ Houellebecq may prefer first-person narrators for their potential as unreliable narrators, whose “[ values] depart from those of the implied author” (Booth, 431). The possible effects of irony in Houellebecq’s novels are often difficult to confirm or circumscribe, making the author’s position particularly elusive.
partner’s experimentation “dans le domaine sexuel” as “quelque chose de mal” (Possibilité 208-209).

But the scenes of enunciation again highlight the imbrication between Daniel1’s sexism, dubious artistry and romantic failures. This critical portrait of the misogynistic narrator’s flawed thinking and character preserves the author’s possible divergence from his protagonist.

In his opening chapter, Daniel1 provides insight into his lucrative art of abjection: “le plus grand bénéfice du métier d'humoriste […] c'est de pouvoir se comporter comme un salaud en toute impunité, et même de pouvoir grassement rentabiliser son abjection, en succès sexuels comme en numéraire, le tout avec l'approbation générale” (Houellebecq Possibilité 23). Marveling that he can indulge in “des dérapages machistes […] sans cesser d’avoir de bonnes critiques dans Elle,” he cites an example: “Tu sais comment on appelle le gras qu'y a autour du vagin ? -Non. - La femme” (Houellebecq Possibilité 22). Having declared humor “[une] des qualités viriles,” likened “succès sexuels” to financial compensation and claimed the prerogative to behave like a bastard with impunity, Houellebecq’s narrator naturally has no qualms objectifying groupies as “des orifices adéquats,” critiquing their “coûts [qui] n’eurent rien d’éclatant” and confirming “la décroissance de leur valeur érotique” (Possibilité 24).

Daniel1’s misogyny manifests itself while visiting a friend and fellow artist—a professional and personal foil for the protagonist: “[Vincent le] ramenait toujours à une plus claire conscience de [ses] limites: limitations créatrices, d'une part, mais aussi limitations dans l'amour” (Possibilité 322). A visionary “artiste authentique” who establishes Elohimism’s “nouvelle orientation vers la monogamie,” Vincent stands in
stark contrast with Houellebecq’s hero—“un professionnel retors” and “pute” beholden to “[les] goûts du public” “[qui] pendant toute [sa] vie […ne s’était] intéressé qu’à [sa] bite ou à rien” (Possibilité 211, 307, 352). After inheriting his grandparents’ home, Vincent preserves their original décor. Daniel1’s impression that “aucune femme n’avait probablement jamais mis les pieds dans ce pavillon [parce que] le premier geste d’une femme aurait été de modifier la décoration” reinforces the contrast between his pursuit of sex through “[ses] lamentables scénarios, mécaniquement ficelés […] pour divertir un public de salauds” and Vincent’s pure pursuit of “[l’art […] comme] cosa individuelle” (Houellebecq Possibilité 152, 211, 153). Ironically, Houellebecq’s hero suggests that Vincent—who expresses a predilection for kitsch aesthetics and situates himself artistically in “le camp des décorateurs”--requires a woman to redecorate his demoded and “ringarde” abode (Possibilité 157, 152).

The narrator’s other misogynistic generalizations are born from romantic failures. After returning home to discover his second wife’s weight gain, he reduces female intelligence to sexual utility as he verges on an epiphany that would justify his divorce: “cette opposition entre l’érotisme et la tendresse m’apparaissait, avec une parfaite clarté, comme l’une des pires saloperies de notre époque” (Houellebecq Possibilité 95). After a particularly poor sexual performance with his far younger girlfriend, Esther, Daniel1 affirms the need for feminine understanding: “je jouis beaucoup trop vite, et pour la première fois je la sentis un peu déçue” (Houellebecq Possibilité 329).¹⁵⁹ He qualifies

¹⁵⁹ A similar scenario occurs early on in their relationship: “J’ouvris ma braguette et la pénétrai, mais malheureusement le trajet en voiture m’avait tellement excité que je jouis presque tout de suite ; elle en parut un peu déçue” (Houellebecq Possibilité 194 : emphasis added). The narrator’s oversight underscores
women’s sexual freedom as “mal” “[sous] le choc […] assez douloureux” of the salacious details of his partner’s “passé dépravé de petite salope”: “[des lignes] de coke sur le sexe des garçons […] Quelques partouzes, oui. Un peu de SM” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 207-208). Finally, when a public break-up during her going-away party leaves him “[recroquevillé] sur le sol” in tears, Daniel1 contrasts historically weak women with the current generation of women “devenues fortes […] indépendantes et libres,” presenting himself as “[un] monstre préhistorique avec [ses] niaiseries romantiques”--the victim of “[une] génération [pour laquelle] la sexualité […] n'impliquait aucun engagement sentimental” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 340-341). Houellebecq’s hero even declares love to be “une fiction inventée par les faibles pour culpabiliser les forts,” implying that women’s renunciation of love helped to realize “le projet millénaire masculin […] consistant à ôter à la sexualité toute connotation affective pour la ramener dans le champ du divertissement pur” (*Possibilité* 341).

Evidently, the objectivity of Daniel1’s commentary on women and gender politics is compromised by his extreme emotional states in these scenes. In each case, misogynistic generalizations self-servingly palliate feelings of guilt, emasculation, jealousy, public humiliation and heartbreak. When he divorces his wife over weight gain, ejaculates too quickly during intercourse, becomes jealous of his partner’s sexual history or suffers a public break-up, it is not a reflection of his personal failures, but of social phenomena beyond his control--the fallacious distinction between sex and love, the inherent challenges of male existence, the sexual depravity of a loveless generation or the

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his narcissistic preoccupation with his own sexual gratification, possibly indicating the author’s critical distance from his hero.
fiction of love. In virtuosic displays of narcissism and rationalization, Daniel1 consistently shifts the blame from himself onto others.

The narrator’s broader characterization beyond these scenes bears further implications for our reception of the novel’s misogynist discourse. Daniel1’s narcissistic and unscrupulous behavior in his personal relationships suggests that his polemical “personnage comique habituel” merely amplifies an authentic personal “abjection” (Houellebecq Possibilité 214, 23). Houellebecq’s hero maintains little or no contact with his “conne de soeur”--“la petite pétasse”--or his parents (Possibilité 19, 23). He abandons his first wife and unborn son with “une pension alimentaire minable,” spinning his paternal negligence as a “geste noble” in protest of the “holocauste de chaque génération au profit de celle appelée à la remplacer” (Houellebecq Possibilité 29, 395, 394). He shows no semblance of sympathy for his suicidal son, “ce petit trou du cul […] insupportable […] qui n’aurait pas dû être” : “Je n’avais jamais aimé cet enfant […] sa disparition était loin d’être une catastrophe” (Houellebecq Possibilité 321, 29-30).

Houellebecq’s hero progressively loses any friends that might have compensated for his disastrous family life, dismissing them as “[des] vautours hypocrites” (Possibilité 66).

His sexual relationships prove no less catastrophic. Daniel1 treats his biggest champion “de manière impitoyable” in both their exchanges and his narration, where he dubs her “Gros Cul” and ruthlessly details “ses cuisses flasques, ses bourrelets blafards […] et son clitoris pendant” (Houellebecq Possibilité 317, 319). Following the suicide of his second wife, Daniel1 feels “un vide” that pales in comparison to his “crise de larmes” upon his dog’s death when “quelque chose céda en [lui] […] qui n’avait pas cédé lors du départ d’Esther, ni de la mort d’Isabelle” (Houellebecq Possibilité 377, 388-389).
Daniel1’s sociopathic lack of empathy or remorse in his personal relationships arguably compromises the authority of his social critique, revealing his condemnation of “une génération […] factice, frivole […] dans une quête de plus en plus désespérée du *fun* et du sexe” as pure hypocrisy (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 37). So, when the narrator endorses the novel’s other misogynistic speakers, his seal of approval only casts further doubt upon their discourse.

The questions raised in our analysis suggest that “the emotions and judgments of the implied author” may not align with the sexist speakers in *La Possibilité d’une île* (Booth, 86). Daniel1 simultaneously embodies the most strident voice and salient example of the author’s social critique. The neohumans who serve as intradiegetic readers of his autobiography judge him to be “répugnant”--“un individu certes honnête mais limité, borné, assez représentatif des limitations et des contradictions qui devaient conduire l'espèce à sa perte” (*Possibilité* 431, 429). However, to determine whether the hero’s misogyny contributes to the critical portrait of contemporary France in the novel, the female characters must be examined more closely.

The primary narrator’s systematic objectification of women admittedly complicates our task. Daniel1’s revealing confession regarding “une nègresse super bien roulée” can be generalized to his broader treatment of women--“il était difficile de dépasser à son propos le plan du strict jugement érotique” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 110). Yet, even when the narrator’s eroticizing gaze is carefully distinguished from Houellebecq’s plot choices, the male and female characters in *La Possibilité d’une île* conform to the hero’s essentialist gender politics.
“Plus intelligente que [Daniel1],” Isabelle shapes his early PR strategy and commercial breakthroughs (Houellebecq Possibilité 153). An accomplished professional earning “cinquante mille euros par mois” as the “rédactrice en chef de Lolita,” Isabelle “gagne [sa] vie avec” “[les] mécanismes primitifs [sociaux et sexuels]”--her magazine is predicated on “une fascination pure pour une jeunesse sans limites” and “[la] peur de vieillir, surtout [chez] les femmes […qui en deviennent] complètement folles” (Houellebecq Possibilité 35, 31, 36, 42-43). Nevertheless, she succumbs to the very mechanisms exploited in her work, enduring “une somme de frustrations et de souffrances d’abord minimes, puis très vite insoutenables” after her fortieth birthday (Houellebecq Possibilité 25). Previously described as “plus belle [que Naomi Campbell],” Isabelle loses her confidence and begins to manifest visible signs of a crippling insecurity: she displays “[un] regard […] humble et triste” in her bathing suit, finds her work in women’s magazines unbearable, obliges her husband to “éteindre la lumière” in the bedroom, and erupts in tears “avec un mélange de peur et de honte” after gaining weight (Houellebecq Possibilité 42, 55, 73-74, 95). Her personal narrative conforms to hackneyed romantic stereotypes. Isabelle predicts that Daniel1 “[va la] laisser tomber pour une plus jeune” and that she would “rentrer chez [sa] mère […] comme le font] les femmes dans [sa] situation”; sure enough, when Houellebecq’s hero enters a midlife crisis “d’une banalité extrême,” she retires with her mother in Biarritz (Possibilité 84, 99, 174). So, while the aging process does not render her “complètement [folle],” her mental health deteriorates dramatically as she self-medicates with morphine--“une piqûre le matin, une piqûre le soir” (Houellebecq Possibilité 139, 43).
The personal narrative of the novel’s second most significant figure of women’s liberation, Esther, similarly conforms to the narrator’s misogynistic ideals. Although Daniel1 describes his mid-life crisis girlfriend as “intelligente et fine,” her professional career as an actress merely confirms that she is “incroyablement, délicieusement érotique” (Houellebecq Particules 122, 193). After trivial roles “dans des sitcoms, des feuilletons policiers - où en général elle se faisait violer et étrangler par des psychopathes” and “dans une grosse production hollywoodienne […] où elle [incarnerait] une servante d'Aphrodite,” Esther plays the lead in a film that coincides with her part in La Possibilité d’une île--“dans […] Una mujer desnuda […] elle multipliait les expériences sexuelles sans jamais éprouver le moindre sentiment” (Houellebecq 179, 334, 432). So while hardly justifying Daniel1’s assertion that Esther “comme toutes les très jolies jeunes filles […] n'était au fond bonne qu'à baiser,” Houellebecq’s plot choices fail to endow her with any personal or professional substance beyond her eroticism (Possibilité 219).

The author’s plot choices prove increasingly problematic as La Possibilité d’une île moves beyond Daniel1’s misogynist perspective. The dystopian future delineated by the novel’s neohuman narrators features familiar female stereotypes. After illegally escaping from the confines of his apartment, the protagonist’s distant descendant encounters one of the rare remaining nomadic tribes of humans. While carefully observing “les sauvages” from a distance, Daniel25 describes a patriarchal society that sexually subordinates women: “la copulation avec les femelles” is a prerogative of the most powerful tribe members (Houellebecq Possibilité 457, 458-459). In the presence of “un des trois mâles dominants,” these women adopt a submissive position, copulating
like animals *en levrette*: “elles se mettaient à quatre pattes et présentaient leur vulve” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 457, 458-459). The tribesmen later establish diplomatic relations with Daniel25 through a sexually submissive female—“un nouveau type d’offrande” following “[un] quartier de viande rôtie” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 460, 458). Houellebecq’s dystopian future, therefore, corresponds to his hero’s problematic conception of women “comme un animal de luxe […voué] à son service exclusivement sexuel” (*Possibilité* 219).

The neohuman chapters of *La Possibilité d’une île* also illustrate the positive pole of the “pedestal-gutter syndrome […] in which women are regarded as love goddesses and wholesome mother figures” (Ruble 190). Marie23 “[a] décidé d’abandonner son poste pour rejoindre une communauté de sauvages” for whom she manifests “une certaine commisération” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 384). 160 By deserting, Marie23 sacrifices her pseudo-immortality, guaranteeing that government will declare her line of descendants officially “éteinte” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 284). When Daniel25 follows suit, finding his “routine solitaire […] insoutenable” and seeking an “anéantissement intégral,” he discovers a bottle containing “une page arrachée d'un livre de poche humain […] le dialogue du *Banquet* dans lequel Aristophane expose sa conception de l’amour [platonicien]” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 439, 468, 477). Marie23’s suicidal bid to find her other half bolsters Vincent’s claims about women’s relative proximity to love.

More generally, Houellebecq’s female characters contrast greatly with their male counterparts. The male founders of Elohimism employ ruthless methods to decimate their

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160 Marie23 is a neohuman clone whose ancestor is not featured in Daniel1’s narrative. Her name evidently evokes one of the quintessential mother figures—the Virgin Mary.
competition and achieve a spiritual monopoly--murdering a female witness to protect their secrets and advocating the genocide of the human race to champion their ideology imposing “aucune contrainte morale, réduisant l’existence humaine aux catégories de l’intérêt et du plaisir” and realizing “le projet millénaire masculin […] consistant à ôter à la sexualité toute connotation affective” (Houellebecq Possibilité 360, 241). Their church is bankrolled by wealthy businessmen: “Steve Jobs […] Bill Gates, Richard Branson” (Houellebecq Possibilité 360). In the neohuman era they inaugurate, male savages preside over a patriarchal “système hiérarchique strict” and engage in ritualistic “combat[s] à mort” (Houellebecq Possibilité 458,463). Finally, Daniel25 fails to grasp “ce que les hommes entendaient par l’amour,” arguing that this notion “avait intoxiqué […] l’humanité dans son ensemble” (Houellebecq Possibilité 449, 478). The male characters in La Possibilité d’une île therefore broadly conform to the Daniel1’s vision of men, who are only united by ambitiously constructive or destructive endeavors--“renverser un gouvernement, construire une autoroute, écrire un scénario de bande dessinée, exterminer les Juifs”--reinforcing the narrator’s self-proclaimed status as “une espèce de Zarathoustra des classes moyennes” (Houellebecq Possibilité 89-90, 412).

So, although doubts are consistently cast over the misogynistic discourse in La Possibilité d’une île, Houellebecq’s plot choices corroborate, rather than contest, the gender essentialism of his sexist speakers.

LA CARTE ET LE TERRITOIRE : In La Carte et le territoire, Michel Houellebecq continues to explore the metaliterary terrain of the artist’s novel. Distinguishing himself from the artists featured in La Possibilité d’une île who sought to “grassemment rentabiliser [leur]
abjection” and “créer [leur] propre monde,” Jed Martin endeavors simply to “rendre compte du monde” through his art (Houellebecq Possibilité 23, 158; Carte 420). In his Goncourt prize winning sixth novel, the author likewise departs from his past prose fiction to pursue another artistic path, tabling the religious polemics and reactionary politics that had largely defined his controversial career.

Accordingly, the rare examples of potentially misogynistic discourse in La Carte et le territoire prove not only relatively tame, but also ambiguous. When taken out of context, narratorial commentary appears to betray the author’s essentialist ideas about women and their place in society. Beyond highlighting their “spécialité” in family matters, Houellebecq’s narrator sexually objectifies and subordinates women, approving of their sexual freedom “dans le cadre d’une activité de prostitution,” holding them to traditional standards of beauty (“un type simple, éprouvé: beauté exprimée dans la plénitude”) and distilling their character into their contributions to the hero’s “vie érotique” as disembodied “seins souples, […] langues agiles […] et vagins étroits” (Carte 22, 57, 73, 426-427).

Details from the scenes of enunciation, however, attenuate the misogynistic narratorial commentary in La Carte et le territoire. Women’s specialty “dans ces histoires de famille” is invoked to explain Jed’s audacious plan to ease tensions during his laborious “repas annuel” with his aging father by hiring a prostitute to pose as his girlfriend (Houellebecq Carte 20). Making no claims about women’s place in the domestic sphere, the narrator merely emphasizes how older men might naturally associate “dans leur vieille tête” a partner’s presence at Christmas dinner with the compelling prospect of children, who exist “à l’horizon de la conversation” (Houellebecq Carte 22).
The narrator also refrains from passing judgment on women’s sexual freedom, speaking exclusively to the paranoid perception of a specific subset of men--“autant les hommes [...] horriblement jaloux […] des ex de leurs amantes […] se demandent avec angoisse […] parfois jusqu’à leur mort […] si l’autre ne les faisait pas mieux jouir, autant ils acceptent facilement […] toute activité sexuelle [qui se conclut par une transaction financière]” (Houellebecq Carte 57). When postulating a return to traditional standards of beauty “[qui] n’avantageait pas réellement Jed,” Houellebecq’s narrator cites an example that does not help his case--Jed’s unlikely success with “une des cinq plus belles femmes de Paris” (Carte 73, 75). Finally, the narrator effectively reduces women to their sexual organs as Jed’s (sex) life flashes before his eyes--a death scene that emphasizes his exceptionally solitary existence--beyond his lovers, “il ne connaissait que son père, et encore pas beaucoup” (Houellebecq Carte 104). The scenes of enunciation, therefore, qualify and even occasionally contradict the narrator’s suggestive statements about women in La Carte et le territoire.

These ambiguous remarks reflect the heterodiegetic narrator’s incorrigible penchant for generalization. Houellebecq’s narrator confidently makes sweeping claims about a myriad of subjects--the psychology of grandparents, the interpersonal curiosity of “les hommes en general,” the “besoins de conversation des mâles d’âge moyen ou élevé [dans les pays latins],” the preferred artistic subjects of “les petits garçons,” “la vie des avocats d’affaires,” the sartorial savvy of “un polytechnicien de modèle courant,” “[la] symbiose qui s’établit, tout naturellement, entre les restaurants et les people,” the domestic behavior of “la quasi-totalité des policiers,” the shifting economic ideology of “tout un chacun en Europe occidentale,” the typical “égocentrisme d’artiste,” and the
means by which “on prend conscience de son propre vieillissement” (Carte 22, 35, 57, 81, 85, 305, 396-397, 414, 411). So, the narrator’s unsubstantiated generalizations and banalities should cast his claims about women under suspicion.

The author’s plot choices, therefore, will provide the most meaningful picture of his potential misogyny. La Carte et le territoire features several highly competent and successful female professionals, whose social and sexual liberation— in contrast with many of Michel Houellebecq’s previous novels—bears no predictable or adverse effects on their private lives.¹⁶¹

Despite her modesty, Geneviève evidently possesses considerable artistic talent as a student in the prestigious École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts—Jed even suggests that her distinctive style anticipates a significant artistic tendency: “L’art devrait peut-être ressembler à cela, se disait-il parfois […] peut-être l’art deviendrait-il comme ça une fois que l’homme aurait dépassé la question de la mort” (Houellebecq Carte 58). Geneviève funds her studies through prostitution—where she also finds great professional success, earning “entre cinq et dix milles euros [par mois] sans y consacrer davantage que quelques heures par semaine” (Houellebecq Carte 57). Her professional and sexual liberation, however, does not hinder her private life, where she freely moves between several seemingly incompatible gender roles—a compassionate, nurturing and even stereotypically maternal partner (“douce et paisible […] elle pouvait sans s’ennuyer rester des heures à son chevet, lui préparant à manger, lui apportant de l’eau et des médicaments”), an emotionally and financially liberated sex worker (“[elle] faisait

¹⁶¹ Salient examples in Houellebecq’s œuvre of liberated women who suffer in their private lives include Catherine Lechardoy (Extension du domaine de la lutte); Janine Ceccaldi, Christiane, Annabelle (Les Particules élémentaires); Valérie, Audrey (Plateforme); and Isabelle (La Possibilité d’une île).
commerce de ses charmes”), a breadwinner (“Elle l’en faisait profiter en l’incitant à ‘ne pas faire d’histoires’”) ; a cold, rational heartbreaker (“[un jour] elle lui annonça qu’elle allait s’installer avec un de ses clients réguliers”) ; and, finally, a faithful housewife and “mère de famille heureuse [dont les] enfants étaient […] polis et bien éduqués, et obtenaient d’excellents résultats scolaires” (Houellebecq Carte 56, 57, 58). In other words, Geneviève refuses to be constrained by gender essentialism, alternatively exhibiting promiscuity and fidelity, empathy and indifference, commitment and infidelity, financial independence and dependence.

La Carte et le territoire also presents several successful professional women operating in more mainstream industries—Olga, Marylin and Hélène. Hired by Michelin “[pour adapter la communication] aux attentes de cette nouvelle clientèle [chinoise, indienne et russe],” Olga Sheremoyova quickly climbs the corporate ladder as “une collaboratrice intelligente, dévouée, polyglotte,” returning to Russia where “son salaire allait être carrément multiplié par trois [et] elle aurait sous ses ordres une cinquantaine de personnes” and ultimately becoming the programming director of Michelin TV (Houellebecq Carte 68, 102, 106, 232). Leveraging her “réseau de relations sociales très dense,” Olga sets Jed up with another accomplished working woman, Marylin Prigent, who lives up to her reputation as “une excellente attachée de presse, la meilleure sans doute dans le domaine de l’art contemporain […] sur le marché français,” calmly and adeptly orchestrating the expositions that bring Houellebecq’s hero fame and fortune (Carte 72, 79). Finally, even if her interest in economics “avait beaucoup décru au fil des ans,” Hélène enjoys an accomplished teaching career at her field’s foremost institution in France, “l’université de Paris-Dauphine” (Houellebecq, Carte 327, 295).
The considerable successes and sacrifices of these female characters in the professional sphere, however, hardly determine their private lives. After leaving Jed, Geneviève is presumed to start a family with a corporate lawyer; Olga leads much of her adult life as an independent, single woman without finding a husband, “l’amour, ou du moins une vie de famille”; Hélène is in a committed relationship with “[une] vie sexuelle […] tout à fait satisfaisante” and without children (“elle n’aimait pas vraiment les enfants”); and although Marylin is initially presumed to be an involuntary celibate (“ce pauvre petit bout de femme, au vagin inexploré”), she later reports having “super bien baisé” with Jamaican men while on vacation (Houellebecq *Carte* 232, 296, 298, 79, 156). These disparate romantic outcomes do not correlate to their relative beauty, either. The exceptionally beautiful Olga has no “amant attitré” despite “son habituel nuage d’adorateurs masculins”; Hélène—“une très belle femme,” though not quite “une des cinq plus belles femmes de Paris” like Olga—finds a satisfying long term relationship and the “souffreteuse, maigre et presque bossue” Marylin enjoys an adventurous sex life (Houellebecq *Carte* 72, 75, 329-330, 75, 78). Each of these female characters exercises agency in both her private and professional lives, defining her personal fulfillment with both impunity and the author’s implicit approval.

Our narratological analysis, therefore, suggests that *La Carte et le territoire* marks a noticeable and possibly pivotal departure from the polemical, often reactionary gender politics featured in Houellebecq’s work. When recontextualized, the novel’s relatively subdued examples of misogynistic discourse are attenuated by their respective scenes of enunciation and qualified by their speaker’s predilection for generalization. While the narrative is not entirely devoid of gender essentialism--male characters, for example,
perpetrate the most brutal and perverse acts of violence—Houellebecq charts relatively new territory in *La Carte et le territoire* through a more nuanced and positive portrait of liberated women.\textsuperscript{162} Unlike many of their predecessors in Houellebecq’s previous novels, the most prominent female characters in *La Carte et le territoire*—Olga, Geneviève, Marylin and Hélène—are not punished in the course of the narrative.\textsuperscript{163} In fact, the fulfillment of their lives does not appear to hinge on their personal and professional choices. From this perspective, the comparatively favorable treatment of female characters in Houellebecq’s sixth novel could lead us to question the author’s reputation as a “misogyne honteux” (*Ennemis* 7).

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**SOUMISSION:** *La Carte et le territoire* could have signaled Houellebecq’s reorientation away from scandal. After a peak of provocation in *Les Particules élémentaires* and *Plateforme*, the author performs a thinly veiled autocriticism in *La Possibilité d’une île* before articulating and adopting a less polemical artistic model in *La Carte et le territoire*. Michel Houellebecq’s seventh novel would consequently establish his most mainstream success as either an outlier in his literary career or a harbinger of a new direction. *Soumission*, however, returns to the terrain of Houellebecq’s greatest scandal, painting an ambiguous portrait of a democratically elected Muslim president who establishes a widely heralded patriarchy in France. *Soumission*, moreover, delivers upon

\textsuperscript{162} Adolphe Petissaud—“un pervers grave” who murdered and mutilated the fictional Houellebecq—is discovered “le crâne fracassé dans une mare de sang,” when a business transaction with a fellow criminal, Patrick Le Braouzec degenerates (*Carte* 388). In another scene, Jed, viciously attacks the cold and curt director of a Swiss assisted suicide clinic that offered their exorbitantly expensive services to his father.

\textsuperscript{163} Janine, Christiane, Annabelle (*Les Particules élémentaires*), Valérie (*Plateforme*), and Isabelle (*La Possibilité d’une île*) all suffer tragic fates, some of which are directly tied to their liberation (Annabelle’s uterine cancer, Christiane’s accident in the swinger club).
its provocative premise—the narrator-protagonist François and his Muslim proselytizer Robert Rediger offer perhaps the clearest expressions of misogyny and patriarchy in all of Michel Houellebecq’s oeuvre. A narratological analysis of the novel’s misogynistic discourse will unpack this provocative political satire and situate the elusive implied author.

Rediger elaborates a misogynistic vision of Islam, drawing an analogy between “l’absolue soumission de la femme à l’homme, telle que la décrit Histoire d’O, et la soumission de l’homme à Dieu, telle que l’envisage l’islam” (Houellebecq Soumission 260). He elevates polygamy to the center of the faith, qualifying questions like “quel va être mon traitement ? à combien de femmes vais-je avoir droit ?” as “les vrais sujets” (Houellebecq Soumission 292-293). Rediger’s personal misogyny naturally influences his politics; he calls for “la nécessaire soumission de la femme […] le retour au patriarcat” and affirms a moral imperative to “s’opposer à la décadence des mœurs […] rejeter nettement, vigoureusement […] le droit à l’avortement et le travail des femmes” (Houellebecq Soumission 275-276).

The scenes of enunciation, however, reveal carefully crafted rhetoric designed to dissimulate his questionable arguments and ulterior motives. The above-cited misogynistic discourse predominantly must be situated in his efforts to proselytize the protagonist and the French public. While meeting with François, Rediger draws heavily from his best-selling religious primer Dix questions sur l’islam. When Houellebecq’s hero cracks open “ce petit exercice de vulgarisation,” he quickly realizes that the first chapter “était en gros ce que Rediger m’avait dit la veille” (Soumission 290, 268). This evangelical text deploys arguments that are either dubious (“la nourriture halal […] était]
une sorte de bio amélioré”), hackneyed (“tous ces arguments, je les avais mille fois entendus”) or both (“l’Univers porte à l’évidence la marque d’un dessein intelligent”) (Houellebecq *Soumission* 269, 270, 253). Rediger compensates for his questionable claims with good rhetoric—clear development (“un livre simple, structuré avec une grande efficacité”) and “discours bien rodé” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 268, 270).

Nevertheless, many of Rediger’s claims fall apart when examined more closely. So while Houellebecq’s hero finds *Dix questions sur l’islam* “très agréable à lire […] parfois la démonstration [lui] paraissait fausse” (*Soumission* 274). Moreover, Rediger most vehemently defends patriarchy in another rhetorical exercise—an article “[où] il s’était montré nettement moins prudent,” audaciously attempting to reconcile Islamic fundamentalism with Identitarianism, arguing that “leur combat, à tous points de vue, était exactement le même” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 270, 275).

In each case, Rediger adeptly shifts ideological emphases, adapting to his audience with alacrity like a truly skilled rhetorician. When speaking with a lecherous professor of French literature who skipped “les chapitres consacrés aux devoirs religieux, aux piliers de l’islam et au jeûne, pour en arriver directement au chapitre VII : ‘Pourquoi la polygamie ?’,” Rediger employs a literary analogy to explain Islam and abandons his metaphysical and cosmogonic arguments, “bien conscient que ce n’est pas ça qui intéresse vraiment, en général, les hommes” and discusses submissive wives (Houellebecq *Soumission* 268, 292). Writing for “la Revue européenne,” Rediger foregrounds issues beloved by the Far-Right, proposing to “rejeter nettement, vigoureusement, le mariage homosexuel, [et] le droit à l’avortement […] pour] le
réarmement moral et familial de l’Europe” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 275-276).\(^{164}\) His shifting portrait of Islam underscores his ulterior motives--recruiting a male chauvinist to the Sorbonne or forging a strategic alliance between political enemies--and casts doubt over the strength of his convictions. Rediger’s misogynistic discourse appears to be another tool of manipulation, alongside heavy-handed flattery and “une espèce d’assaut de politesses” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 262).

Robert Rediger’s broader characterization further undermines the authority of his gender politics. A man’s man, Rediger becomes a central figure of Ben Abbes’ patriarchal France. Supplanting the female president, “[cet] homme d’allure si virile” “[doué d’un] physique de pilier de rugby” “[et d’un] sourire charmant” is welcomed like “le Messie” by the Sorbonne faculty, who readily overlook his unremarkable scholarship in “des revues plus confidentielles” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 240, 238, 270). Rediger’s hypermasculine persona also permeates his private life, where he treats his wives like prisoners and servants, forbidding them from appearing before guests--even with “un nouveau plateau [de nourriture]”--without his explicit permission (“c’est de sa faute; elle aurait dû demander s’il y avait un invité”) (Houellebecq *Soumission* 254, 243). Critically, however, Rediger’s private indulgence in “boukha” and “Meursault” arouses even François’ suspicion as an ignorant atheist--“il me semblait que l’islam condamnait la consommation d’alcool” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 254, 244). This nonchalant violation of Koranic laws and piecemeal approach to Islam renders Rediger a sort of Muslim

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Tartuffe, whose self-righteous criticism of “la décadence des moeurs” and defense of patriarchy must be questioned by the reader (Houellebecq *Soumission* 275).

Defending “[le mérite du] patriarcat” and questioning “[l’idée] que les femmes puissent voter, suivre les mêmes études que les hommes, accéder aux mêmes professions, etc,” Houellebecq’s protagonist becomes an ideal candidate for Rediger’s interpretation of Islam (*Soumission* 41). François suggests that professional women place undue strain on their families and partners—“son seigneur et maître […] devait nécessairement avoir la sensation de s’être fait baiser quelque part” (Houellebecq, *Soumission* 94). Houellebecq’s protagonist prefers “les ‘filles’ […] qui peuvent] parfaitement, avec les années, se transformer en femme pot-au-feu,” contending that women will happily return to the domestic sphere to serve as lovers and mothers, following “[leur] pente naturelle” “[et renonçant] avec facilité, et même avec un vrai soulagement, à toute responsabilité d’ordre professionnel ou intellectuel” (*Soumission* 95, 227).

Upon closer examination, the scenes of enunciation qualify François’ misogynist discourse. Houellebecq’s protagonist tentatively labels himself a macho (“Je ne sais pas, c’est peut-être vrai, je dois être une sorte de macho approximatif”) before providing a half-hearted defense of patriarchy: “Je n’avais pas de réponse à cette question […] Je ne suis pour rien du tout […] mais le patriarcat avait le mérite minimum d’exister […] en tant que système social il persévérait dans son être, il y avait des familles avec des enfants, qui reproduisaient en gros le même schéma” (*Soumission* 41 : emphasis added). When generalizing about “la vie […] de toutes les femmes occidentales,” François

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165 The *Littré* includes the following definition of *fille*: “Fille de joie, fille publique, ou simplement *fille*, femme prostituée.”
expresses “une espèce de solidarité” with an acquaintance, highlighting the unreasonable standards of beauty thrust upon her by society (“elle s’habillait avec soin, conformément à son statut professionnel […] elle devait y passer pas mal de temps”) and her husband’s utter uselessness (“Bruno, qui avait commencé à se péter la gueule dès l’arrivée des premiers invités, ne pouvait lui être d’aucun secours”) (Houellebecq Soumission 93-94). When contemplating Huysmans’ En ménage, François suggests that the femme pot-au-feu could be a fantasy:\textsuperscript{166} “C’était beau, mais était-ce vraisemblable ? Était-ce un horizon envisageable aujourd’hui ?” (Houellebecq Soumission 95). Finally, after declaring women lucky to be liberated of the burden of autonomy (“elles perdaient l’autonomie, mais fuck autonomy”), François engages in conversations with the director of the Pléiade and the Sorbonne, who persuade him to return to his odious “[responsabilités] d’ordre professionnel ou intellectuel” (Houellebecq Soumission 227). So, while Houellebecq’s hero’s certainly harbors misogynistic ideas, he rarely can justify them persuasively to the reader or even to himself.

The broader characterization of Houellebecq’s hero further undermines his authority as a speaker. François is an arrogant academic who boasts of his “rapport de thèse […] dithyrambique” “[et ses] articles nets, incisifs, brillants,” but only endeavors to “bouquiner un peu en [se] couchant vers quatre heures de l’après-midi […] avec] une bouteille d’alcool fort” (Houellebecq Soumission 18, 47, 249). “Après une enfance et une adolescence passées à Maisons-Laffitte, banlieue bourgeoise par excellence” and a career in the Latin Quarter, his ignorance and Islamophobia emerge in France’s tumultuous

\textsuperscript{166} The fact that two nineteenth authors reputed for their misogyny (Huysmans and Baudelaire) inform François’ ideas about women and their roles is telling.
political climate; François objects to Ben Abbes’ candidacy (“C’est tout de même un musulman”) and celebrates “[le manque] de Noirs ou d’Arabes” in his quarter (Houellebecq Soumission 126, 154, 73). His manifest misogyny exacerbates this unflattering portrait. An incorrigible coureur de jupons “[qui couchait] année après année[…] avec des étudiantes de la fac,” Houellebecq’s hero contends that “[le vieillissement chez […] la femme] se produit avec une brutalité stupéfiante” “[et que ses] érections plus rares et plus hasardeuses demandaient des corps fermes, souples et sans défaut” (Soumission 23, 24). Forced into an early retirement by the new regime and temporarily without “maîtresses,” he leads “une vie sans joie […] peuplée d’agressions légères” (Houellebecq, Soumission 19, 173). But given an admitted “absence de vocation [pour l’enseignement],” his prospective conversion to Islam and return to the Sorbonne appear inspired by Rediger’s polygamous lifestyle (“je ne pouvais pas m’empêcher de songer à son mode de vie”), rather than the promise of stimulating intellectual exchange (Houellebecq Soumission 18, 262). In the final chapter envisioning life after his conversion, the protagonist fetishizes “les femmes musulmanes […] dévouées et soumises” “[et] les étudiantes - jolies, voilées, timides […] Chacune […] se sentirait heureuse et fière d’être choisie par moi, et honorée de partager ma couche” (Houellebecq Soumission 297, 299).

To recapitulate, misogynistic discourse in the novel is often qualified by the scenes of enunciation and the negative characterization of the speakers, indicating the author’s critical distance from his misogynistic speakers. Conceivably, the president’s radical patriarchal reforms could play an integral role in Houellebecq’s critique of France’s “acte un peu honteux […] de collaboration” in Soumission (Houellebecq 287).
The representation and arcs of female characters in this political *roman d’anticipation* will enable us to evaluate the implied author’s possible misogyny and admittedly problematic and Islamophobic critique of patriarchy.

*Soumission* hardly lacks female professionals. Though François fixates on their sexual behavior (their “fantasmes dominateurs” or “indiscrétions sexuelles”) and physical appearance (“Elle était […] élégante, jolie,” “[elle était] ramassée et courtaude, presque batracienne,” “[le soir elle] passait un sweatshirt et un bas de jogging […et son mari] devait nécessairement avoir la sensation de s’être fait baiser”), the author undeniably features successful working women in his narrative: Alice, an “intelligente” “maître de conférences à l’université de Lyon III, spécialiste de Nerval”; Marie Françoise, “une spécialiste reconnue de Balzac”; Chantal Delouze, “la présidente de l’université de Paris III-Sorbonne”; and Annelise “[qui] travaillait au service marketing d’un opérateur de téléphonie mobile […et] gagnait beaucoup plus que [son mari]” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 29, 62, 79, 94 62, 28, 29, 92). Similarly, while the narrator wistfully recalls “l’image de [leurs] petites fesses rondes” or their “assez mécanique” performance in bed, Houellebecq portrays these characters as part of a rising generation of ambitious female professionals: Nadia “en mastère 2 de lettres modernes” “envisageait plutôt une carrière dans l’audiovisuel” and Myriam plans to pursue “un mastère d’édition” to work in one of the rare profitable sectors of the French economy (*Soumission* 156, 185-187, 43).

Tellingly, however, *Soumission* lacks female characters who resist or rebuke the patriarchy established by Ben Abbes. Their professional narratives are typically truncated by the new administration’s legislation: Alice, Chantal Delouze, and Marie-Françoise are summarily fired from their university positions, while Nadia and Myriam are forbidden
from pursuing their degrees. When the author provides rare insights into the work-life balance of Annelise and Marie-Françoise, their experiences problematically validate critics of women’s liberation. Annelise’s demanding career dooms her to failure as a housewife. She is humiliated during her overly ambitious and disastrously executed barbecue: “elle avait travaillé toute la journée et rentrait chez elle crevée […] elle avait prévu des choses beaucoup trop sophistiquées […] mais au moment où […] même le guacamole allait être raté j’ai cru qu’elle allait éclater en sanglots” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 92-93). Houellebecq’s narrator speculates that her strained marriage did not survive “les responsabilités professionnelles qui allaient comme mécaniquement augmenter” (*Soumission* 94). Meanwhile, although “ça l’ennuie beaucoup de quitter son poste à l’université,” Marie-Françoise quickly adapts to her new domestic role: “elle avait l’air […] en pleine forme. À la voir s’affairer devant son plan de travail […] on avait du mal à imaginer qu’elle assurait quelques jours plus tôt des cours de doctorat sur les circonstances tout à fait particulières dans lesquelles Balzac avait corrigé les épreuves de Béatrix” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 151). Her successful transition from the professional sphere to the domestic sphere is mirrored by the French public, who endorses the government mandated “sortie massive des femmes du marché du travail […] qui avait un peu fait grincer des dents, au début […] mais au vu des chiffres du chômage, les grincements de dents avaient rapidement cessé” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 199).

So, although details of the scenes of enunciation and the portrayal of misogynistic speakers in *Soumission* accentuate the ambiguity of the implied author’s ideological position, the female characters problematically reinforce misogynistic narratives about
women’s rightful place in the domestic sphere. Our understanding of the implied author is complicated by the novel’s status as a roman d’anticipation. The narrative lends credence to the perceived threat of Islam; the moderate Muslim president uses political savvy to impose fundamentalist values—including patriarchy—on France. Hypothetically, the implied author could have criticized Islam by illustrating the damaging effects of its alleged patriarchy. But instead, the author paints vivid portraits of an unhappy working woman struggling to balance her professional and personal obligations and a happy housewife “contente” “[et] en pleine forme […] devant son plan de travail, vêtue d’un tablier de cuisine” after her forced retirement from the Sorbonne (Houellebecq Soumission 151). Most critically, the author fails to provide even one female character who objects to the Muslim administration’s legislation banning women from the professional sphere. Based on these telling examples, the implied author of Soumission endorses patriarchal values by implying that women would be happier and more fulfilled if they abandoned the workplace.

CHAPTER CONCLUSION: Trends emerging from our narratological analysis of the misogynistic discourse in Michel Houellebecq’s novels will allow us to confidently determine if the implied author lives up to his public reputation as a “misogyne honteux” (Ennemis, 7).

Houellebecq’s novels feature a broad spectrum of misogynistic discourse, running the gamut from ostensibly flattering gender essentialism (“décidément, les femmes étaient meilleures que les hommes […] plus aimantes […] plus intelligentes et plus travailleuses”) to cringe worthy sexual objectification (“comme toutes les très jolies
jeunes filles, elle n'était au fond bonne qu'à baiser”) and militant anti-feminism (calls for “la nécessaire soumission de la femme […et] le retour au patriarcat”) (Houellebecq *Particules*, 205; *Possibilité* 219; *Soumission* 275). However, the specific scenes of enunciation and broader characterization of these misogynistic speakers frequently cast doubts over the lucidity, sincerity or objectivity of their claims.

Houellebecq’s characters make sexist statements while passing out in their own vomit behind a couch at a party, rambling “au milieu de l’imprégnation alcoolique,” conspiring to murder an innocent couple out of sexual jealousy, wresting capital from the followers of their sex cult, complaining about an *ex-feminist* frenemy or unsympathetic ex-girlfriend, being roped unwittingly into conversation with a female travel agent, producing provocative art, suffering from crippling depression or agoraphobia, unabashedly detailing their pattern of sexual predation and presenting a perverse vision of their religion (*Plateforme* 250).

The broader characterizations of these speakers further undermines the authority of their interventions: Houellebecq’s misogynistic characters and narrators include socially inept philistines traveling abroad, middle-aged sex tourists, zealous hypocrites, post-gender post-humans, a gynophobic mental patient, a woman who venerates the image of her ex-husband’s erection, a comedian reputed for “dérapages machistes,” a male-dominant leader of a sex cult, “une sorte de macho approximatif,” a sexually obsessed man and his asexual brother--in other words, they hardly represent objective voices on a subject as sensitive as gender politics (*Possibilité* 23; *Soumission* 41).

While these multifarious attenuating factors complicate our readings of the misogynistic discourse in Michel Houellebecq’s novels, transversal trends in his
representation of female characters elucidate the author’s elusive ideological position. In many of Houellebecq’s novels, professionally and sexually liberated women suffer cruel and unusual punishments. In *Les Particules élémentaires*, Janine—a sexually uninhibited and negligent mother who finds the responsibilities of raising her children “peu compatibles avec [son] idéal de liberté”—endures the verbal abuse of her mentally disturbed son, the indifference of her saner son and a thorough grifting by “une bande de babas” “[en respirant] difficilement […] visiblement à la dernière extrémité” (Houellebecq 37, 315, 318). The partners of this fraternal duo, Annabelle and Christiane, suffer painful, untimely deaths that are conspicuously tied to their liberated sexuality: the former’s miscarriage reveals an aggressive terminal uterine cancer “et le fait de ne pas avoir eu d’enfants constituait un facteur d’aggravation du risque,” while the latter becomes paralyzed when her necrotic back finally gives out during a marathon gang bang (*Particules* 343). Both women ultimately end their suffering by suicide. In *Plateforme*, the protagonist’s business savvy, financially successful and sexually fluid partner, Valérie perishes in “l’attentat le plus meurtrier qui ait jamais eu lieu en Asie” after a final act of liberation—she decides to leave her high-paying and highly demanding job to reclaim her personal life (Houellebecq 345). In *La Possibilité d’une île*, Isabelle, who pretexts an interview with the first-person narrator to dissimulate “une approche sexuelle directe,” later struggles to cope with her aging body and solitude after their divorce, developing a major morphine addiction and committing suicide (Houellebecq 34). The hero’s other love interest dubiously triumphs as “le plus égoïste et le plus rationnel des deux”—the embodiment of a generation “[qui a] réussi à extirper de leur cœur un des plus vieux sentiments humains”—“l’amour […] une fiction inventée par les faibles pour culpabiliser
les forts, pour introduire des limites à leur liberté” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 483, 241, 341). Finally, Marie23—one of the few computer-mediated social relations of the hero’s distant neohuman descendent—ventures into an inhospitable world ravaged by global warming and nuclear wars in a vain pursuit of human contact and love, marching to her inevitable disappointment and death.

Together with the misleading representations of patriarchy *Soumission*, the social impact of birth control in *Les Particules élémentaires* and sexual tourism in *Plateforme*, the cruel fates reserved for liberated women by the author encourage us to reexamine our generous readings of the equivocal gender politics in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, *Lanzarote*, and *La Carte et le territoire*. In light of an abundance of damning evidence from Houellebecq’s other works, less generous readings of the misogynistic discourse in the latter novels prove not only viable, but increasingly probable. Perhaps his “paupérisation absolue” in the liberal sexual economy and traumatic romantic rejections drove the unnamed hero of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* to disability, clinical insanity and the brink of suicide (Houellebecq 114). Perhaps the consensuality of the sexual relations in *Lanzarote* only mask the objectification of Pam and Barbara, whose characters and contributions to the plot are defined, above-all, by their eroticism. Perhaps, their casual sex serves not only as a prelude, but as a critical step towards increasingly dangerous permutations of sexual liberty. Perhaps, the private lives of the successful professional women in *La Carte et le territoire* remain unfulfilled: maybe Olga is indeed alone and “malheureuse” as the narrator suggests, maybe Hélène is not truly happy to substitute a dog for the child that her oligospermic partner fails to give her, and maybe
vacation trysts only provide Marilyn with intermittent reprieves from her sexual frustration (Houellebecq 426).

Ultimately, the gratuitous and disastrous outcomes for many figures of female liberation in Houellebecq’s fictions triumph over the rare, equivocal exceptions, aligning the implied author with his most misogynistic speakers.
CHAPTER 4: HOUELLEBECQ’S RACIST CHARACTER(S)

INTRODUCTION: Before exploring the racist discourse in Michel Houellebecq’s novels and considering its implications for the implied author, we will first touch upon the historical phenomena that shaped contemporary discourse on race in France.167

After World War II, “The term “race” [....developed] a negative connotation due to the racial ideology of the Nazi regime”; consequently, “although widely used by scholars in the US [“race”] can rarely be found in a European context” (Schemer 259-260). The policies of the French government mirrored this semantic shift, proclaiming all citizens “equal and indistinguishable before the law” and adopting a position of “official racial invisibility [...that] complicated discussions on difference” (Thomas 60). Displaced from the realm of race, these discussions became couched in a new conceptual framework--immigration--“a powerful and persistent issue in French public debates” encompassing “external factors (migration, border control, security) and the internal dynamic of ethnic and race relations, integration, and multiculturalism” (Brouard xiii; Thomas 7).

After “a mild flirtation with notions of cultural diversity during the late 1970s and early 1980s”--including, for example, “le droit à la différence” campaign--France reverted to a colonial era strategy--“acculturating as fully as possible second-generation members of minority groups through the public educational system” (Hargreaves “Immigration” 25; “Post-colonial Cultures” 21). While allegations of “state-sanctioned

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167 In the introduction to L’autre Enquête : médiations littéraires et culturelles de l’altérité, Arambasin underscores “une nécessité de reformuler le couple identité/altérité […] à partir d’un patrimoine culturel européen tiraillé entre religions et idéologies, exclusion, exotisme, et métissage qui le façonnent jusqu’à aujourd’hui” (12).
xenophobia […] and a politics of fear” initially seem sensationalist, prominent French politicians employed strong anti-immigrant rhetoric in the decades following these short-lived diversity initiatives: Jacques Chirac decried “[une] overdose d’immigrés”; François Mitterrand declared that “le seuil de tolérance est dépassé”; Michel Rocard argued that “la France ne peut pas accueillir toute la misère du monde”; and Giscard d’Estaing announced an immigrant “invasion” (Thomas 77, 67). More recently, Nicolas Sarkozy’s provocative references to “‘délinquance,’ ‘insécurité,’ ‘incivilité’ […] ‘préférence nationale’ […] ‘problème de l’immigration’” and “[l’échec du] multiculturalisme” measurably influenced public opinion (Thomas 63; Fréour ▪ 9).168

A closer look at the demographics of immigration in France reveals the racial underpinnings of this anti-immigrant discourse. In the latter half of the twentieth century, increasing numbers of immigrants arrived from Africa and Southeast Asia (Brouard 1). Their reception, however, differed dramatically from that of their counterparts “from eastern Europe, Italy, and the Iberian Peninsula”: “the relatively high level of social acceptance enjoyed by most second-or third-generation whites […] contrasts] with the stigmatization experienced by many of the children and grandchildren of African or Asian immigrants,” whose “high rates of unemployment, […] low levels of social mobility and […] poor-quality housing […] cannot be convincingly attributed to ‘the inability of their unassimilated parents to provide role-models for cultural adaptation’ (Safran 1985: 55)” (Brouard 1; Hargreaves, “Immigration” 29 25). In their survey of

168 Surveys over just one year of Sarkozy’s presidency (2009-2010) reveal double-digit shifts in the “association between illegal immigration and crime” and the belief “that immigration enriches French culture” (Thomas 64).
French citizens of Maghrebin, African and Turkish origin, Brouard and Tiberi challenge popular stigmas afflicting these immigrants:

French citizens with immigrant backgrounds are less religious and more receptive to religious pluralism than some have thought; they are not political dissidents; they have not fallen into a “welfare culture,” having forgotten the values of hard work and ambition; their morals and their behavior suggest a degree of open-mindedness; and they are aware of the difficulties of integration even though they maintain close relations with other French people. In these respects, we can consider this population “as French as everyone else. (xiv)

Given that the “‘New Frenchman’ is not a practicing Muslim ferociously opposed to laïcité, an anti-Semite, a misogynist, and a welfare recipient making communal rights claims,” his struggle to assimilate testifies to the majority’s prejudices, rather than his supposed hostility towards and incompatibility with established French culture (Brouard 115-116).169

Acknowledging the evolution of discourse on difference over Michel Houellebecq’s lifetime, we will approach the questions of race and racism in his novels through the prism of post-colonial immigration, focusing our analysis on minorities.

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169 For refutations of the “militant Francophobia” (Alain Finkielkraut) and cultural conquest attributed to the New French, see Sylvain Brouard and Vincent Tiberi’s aforementioned study and Raphael Liogier’s “Le mythe de l’islamisation” (Thomas, 60; Niane, 189-190). In addition to the (racial) stereotypes that have historically “enabled the dominant group to view members of the subordinate group as inferior beings and to treat them accordingly,” these myths exemplify “the easiest way to justify their antipathy toward the outgroup […the imagined] hatred the outgroup bears toward the ingroup” (Stephan, 98, 106).
hailing from France’s former colonies and spheres of influence--the Maghreb, Sub-Saharan Africa and South-East Asia.  

A survey of Michel Houellebecq’s novels yields examples of both explicit and implicit racism. Houellebecq’s characters employ a range of racial epithets from the largely disarmed and reclaimed “beurs” (Plateforme 209-210; Possibilité 22) to more pejorative and indefensible labels: “beurrettes” (Particules 237, 246, 248; Plateforme 90; Possibilité 22, 47, 49; Soumission, 185); “vermine d’allah” (Possibilité 59); “nègres” (Extension 94, 136, 143; Particules 228, 238, 242; Plateforme 119, 244; Possibilité, 23, 145); “esclaves” (Plateforme 264); “singe” (Particules 239, 119); “babouin” (Particules 238) “ouistiti” (Possibilité 262). Houellebecq’s characters also make sweeping racial generalizations: “les Arabes [...] désagréables et agressifs” “[sont] maintenus dans leur foi primitive [...] par l'ignorance et la contrainte”; “[en découvrant] un mode de vie basé sur la consommation de masse, la liberté sexuelle et les loisirs,” “les jeunes Arabes ne rêvaient que de consommation et de sexe” “[et refusaient] de limiter leur existence à la procréation répétée de futurs djihadistes” (Particules 232; Possibilité 358-359). Houellebecq’s characters qualify white people as “des Nègres inhibés, qui cherchaient à retrouver une innocence sexuelle perdue” “[et] les Noirs sont décontractés, virils [...] savent s’amuser” “[et] baisent même gratuitement,” “en Afrique de l’Ouest

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170 As Alec Hargreaves observes, “the generally unstated and often unconscious, but nonetheless potent legacy of the colonial era [...] continues to color majority perceptions of minority groups [...] frequently [eliding] national and ethnic differences and [constructing] other, racialized barriers” (“Postcolonial,” 18).

171 While technically just the female equivalent of beur, beurette bears a significant and degrading sexual connotation—a Google search for “beurette” primarily yields pornographic sites.

172 Admittedly, this portrait of young Arabs obsessed with consumption and sex is consistent with the author’s portrait of modern youth in La Possibilité d’une île—in this sense, we could consider them as French as everyone else. But negative discourse targeting historically subordinated minorities arguably has a different significance and more serious consequences than generalizations about the majority.

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Most often, Houellebecq’s novels feature oblique commentary on race--implicit associations and insinuations “à la limite du racisme,” to borrow a phrase from one of his most deeply flawed and politically incorrect speakers (Particules 165). In the author’s fictional world, African and South-East Asian minorities issued from immigration present threats to French culture and society. “Une immigration massive et incessante [...] du Maghreb et d’Afrique noire” facilitates the Islamization of Europe and the end of “l’humanisme athée [...] et le ‘vivre ensemble’ laïc,” setting the stage for “une guerre civile entre les immigrés musulmans et les populations autochtones d’Europe occidentale” (Houellebecq Plateforme 356-357, 446 ; Soumission 70, 55) The resulting “guerres ethniques et religieuses” reflect irreconciliable values--militant monotheism and laïcité ; “la soumission de la femme” and women’s liberation ; “le respect dû aux anciens” and “[un] mépris des ancêtres” (Houellebecq, Possibilité, 446 ; Soumission 276, 276 ; Possibilité 92, 276). Immigrants in Houellebecq’s novels are also linked with urban violence, “[une] délinquance [...] envahissante” and seedy sex work, importing “tourisme sexuel” and “salons de massage thaï” (Particules 186, 234; Lanzarote 38; Carte 415).

Unskilled and uneducated laborers, they entrench themselves in welfare culture, profiting from free “séances d’alphabétisation” and “des mesures de protection sociale,” but failing to join the ranks of the “membres, actifs, productifs de la société” (Houellebecq
Particules 228; Carte 417, 160). This clash of cultures delineated in Houellebecq’s novels resonates with colonial paradigms of modernity and tradition, civility and incivility, as well as the xenophobic political discourse in contemporary Europe.

The provocative discourse on race in Michel Houellebecq’s novels did not go unnoticed by critics. Early in his career, the novelist’s status as “a pornographer, a Stalinist, a racist, a sexist, a nihilist, a reactionary, a eugenicist and a homophobe” inspired fierce debate (Eakin 4). Despite acknowledging that Bruno’s racism derives from “[his] disordered mind,” Seth Armus suspects “that the author is not exactly an impartial observer” (38). Katherine Gantz argues that Houellebecq’s novels fail to reproach their prejudiced narrators and “[champion] their sensibilities—a bland mix of racism, egotism, and ill-informed apathy” (158). Denis Demonpion asserts that “[si Houellebecq n’est] pas [raciste], il n’en est pas loin,” referencing “sa biographie de Lovecraft [où l’on] sent une extraordinaire sympathie pour cet auteur américain qui, lui, pour le coup, était un authentique raciste” (⁋6). Pierre Jourde provides the most personal indictment of the author; refusing “l’hypothèse idéale […] où il nous montrerait […] comment ce racisme peut prendre naissance dans ses problèmes sexuels, son malheur, sa frustration afin de mieux condamner ce processus,” he claims that “Houellebecq met en jeu le raciste en lui,” citing “les convergences entre fiction et propos privés” (273-274).

Yet, as we noted in Chapter 1: Reading Houellebecq and his Fictions, the author’s personal propos prove incoherent and inconclusive. In an early work of literary criticism, the virtually unknown Houellebecq qualifies H.P. Lovecraft’s racist and reactionary “système de valeurs” as “entièrement opposé au nôtre” (H.P. 22). Seventeen years later, the now infamous author describes himself as a “Nihiliste, réactionnaire, cynique, raciste
et misogyny […] beauf” in the palpably ironic and self-deprecatory introduction to his correspondence with Bernard-Henri Lévy (Houellebecq *Ennemis* 7). The public author’s schizophrenia invites a pressing question—which Houellebecq’s values are endorsed in *his novels*? Does the author critique “negative attitudes towards ethnic minorities” in Europe or merely contribute to mainstream media portraying them “as free-loaders, drug dealers, terrorists […] threats to the economy, security, and [European] cultural values” (Schemer 259, 261-262)?

To answer this question, we will pursue our narratological analysis, carefully contextualizing racist discourse in Houellebecq’s novels and measuring it against the portraits of his rare minority characters. After exploring Michel Houellebecq’s alleged racism—the third most salient feature of his public figure—we will finally be in a position to assess the significance of his authorial persona and polarizing success in Europe’s current political climate.

**EXTENSION DU DOMAINE DE LA LUTTE:** In his debut novel, Michel Houellebecq already tread in dangerous waters. A self-styled victim of the liberalized sexual economy, the narrator-protagonist of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* encourages a fellow member of “[le camp] des vaincus” to kill a happy couple in a nightclub (Houellebecq 115). To inflame his co-conspirator’s sexual jealousy, the protagonist employs racial epithets that transform his homicidal plot into a hate crime. While not necessarily complicit in this fictional episode of *incitement to racial hatred*, the author paints an ambiguous portrait of his hero as both a victim of society and a sociopathic mental patient that requires closer examination.
On two occasions in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, the narrator-protagonist voices explicit racism, first qualifying a black man on the train as “un nègre,” “un animal, probablement dangereux” and then inciting his dejected night-club companion to commit racially motivated murder—“Mais oui ! fais-toi donc la main sur un jeune nègre!” (Houellebecq 94, 136). Although these racist outbursts remain indefensible, their scenes of enunciation provide insight into the speaker’s dubious mental state and character, indicating the author’s potential criticism of and divergence from his protagonist.

In the first scene of explicit racism, the narrator’s reading of the situation proves questionable. While on the train to Paris, Houellebecq’s protagonist portrays a black man as a menace and a nuisance to his fellow passengers—“un animal, probablement dangereux” (*Extension* 94). But the perceived threat of “un Noir [qui] écoute son Walkman en descendant une bouteille de J and B […] et se dandinant] dans le couloir,” contrasts with “son regard, pourtant relativement amical” (Houellebecq *Extension* 94). Moreover, the businessman “sans doute gêné par le nègre” is so engrossed in his reading that he appears oblivious to his fellow passengers: “il lit *Les Échos*. Non seulement il les lit mais il les dévore, comme si de cette lecture pouvait, soudain, dépendre le sens de sa vie” (Houellebecq *Extension* 94).

The protagonist’s questionable perceptions attest to his warped view of reality and pathological pessimism. This racist reaction is preceded by an ultimately benign medical crisis that nevertheless reinforces his misanthropy and alienation: “à peine capable de parler, à peine capable de [se] tenir debout [et] hors d’état de [se] rendre tout seul [à l'hôpital],” he is abandoned on the side of the road by passing strangers whom he implores “muette” for help (Houellebecq *Extension* 86). Returning to Paris after his
discharge from the hospital, he experiences “difficultés à reprendre possession de [lui]-
même,” routinely finding fault with everyone and everything around him (Houellebecq
Extension 90). While gazing at an idyllic pastoral scene—“la vallée, comme une promesse
de bonheur paisible. L’herbe est verte. Il y a du soleil, de petits nuages formant contraste
[...] une lumière de printemps”—Houellebecq’s hero fixates on invisible, imagined perils
looming in the distance: “Mais un peu plus loin les terres sont inondées ; on perçoit le
lent frémissement de l’eau entre les saules ; on imagine une boue gluante, noirâtre, où le
pied s’enfonce brusquement” (Extension 94 : emphasis added). The narrator even
becomes outraged by the presence of a well-dressed and “plutôt sympathique” financier,
instead of finding comfort in a potential ally against a menacing minority: “Qu’est-ce
qu’il fout là, lui ! il devrait être en première. On n’est jamais tranquille” (Houellebecq
Extension 94). His racism towards the black passenger on the train, therefore, constitutes
another example of the misanthropy and intolerance that he professes in the chapter’s
conclusion173: “Je n’aime pas ce monde. Décidément, je ne l’aime pas. La société dans
laquelle je vis me dégoûte […] L’arrivée à Paris, toujours aussi sinistre […] Foutaise.
Foutaise merdique” (Houellebecq Extension 95).

The narrator’s second outburst against a “nègre” also entails significant
circumstantial factors that qualify his racist discourse (Houellebecq Extension 136). This
second scene of racism effectively compromises the protagonist’s status as a sympathetic
hero and an innocent victim of society. For the first time in Extension du domaine de la

173 This instance of quotidian racism evokes well-known scenes in Frantz Fanon’s Peau noire, masques
blancs (a young girl in a train who states “Maman, regarde le nègre, j’ai peur!”) and Aimé Césaire’s Cahier
d’un retour au pays natal (upon returning from to Martinique, the poet observes “un nègre COMIQUE ET
LAID” in the tramway).
On a day trip to the Sables d’Olonne, a combination pizzeria, supermarket, night-club--the literal intersection of the liberalized capitalist and libidinal economies--inspires “un sentiment déplaisant […] qui devenait un peu agaçant ; mais je n’y pouvais rien” (Houellebecq *Extension* 123). Quickly, his feelings of impotence engender “l’ébauche d’un plan”; the protagonist purchases a steak knife, places it in his glove compartment and persuades his friend to accompany him on a doomed venture to profit from “les filles [qui] aiment bien *coucher le 31*” (Houellebecq *Extension* 125-126). After a miserable evening drinking himself sick while observing his companion Raphaël Tisserand rejected and ridiculed by woman after woman (“[elle] lui jeta un regard méprisant,” “elles pouffaient de rire en le regardant”), Houellebecq’s narrator seizes the opportunity to push his companion to the breaking point--“Tu ne représenteras jamais, Raphaël, un rêve érotique de jeune fille […] ces femmes que tu désires tant tu peux, toi aussi, les posséder. […] lance-toi dès ce soir dans la carrière du meurtre […] là tu les posséderas, corps et âme. Peut-être même pourras-tu, avant leur sacrifice, obtenir d’elles quelques savoureuses gâteries” (*Extension* 129, 133, 134-135). Recontextualized in this disturbing plot to murder and rape an innocent “couple magnifique,” the protagonist’s racist remarks only contribute to his pivotal transformation from a victim of society into a threat to society, from a pathetic loser into

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174 Houellebecq’s hero increasingly experiences violent fantasies of amputation (“les jambes des danseurs […] j’avais envie de les trancher à la hache”), self-castration (“l’idée s’impose : trancher mon sexe”) and suicide (“Seul le suicide miroite au-dessus”) and even acts on them--finding relief in self-harm ("[je] balance [une boîte de petits pois] dans la glace de la salle de bains […] Je me coupe en les ramassant, et je commence à saigner. Ça me fait bien plaisir. C’est exactement ce que je voulais") and storming out of the workplace after slapping a female coworker who reproaches him for smoking (*Extension* 132, 165, 153 149).
a sadistic sociopath no longer meriting the reader’s sympathy (Houellebecq *Extension* 133).

The narrator-protagonist’s overt racism also resonates with his broader, negative characterization in the novel. *Extension du domaine de la lutte* documents his descent into clinical depression and insanity, punctuated by increasingly frequent and alarming violent impulses. Before ultimately conceding that “il y a déjà longtemps que le sens de mes actes a cessé de m’apparaître clairement […] je suis en train de déjanter,” Houellebecq’s protagonist consistently evades responsibility for his profound unhappiness (*Extension* 177). By blaming others and society at large, he resigns himself to “une succession d’internements de plus en plus longs, dans des établissements psychiatriques de plus en plus fermés et durs,” reasoning that “rien en vérité ne peut empêcher le retour de plus en plus fréquent de ces moments où votre absolue solitude, la sensation de l’universelle vacuité, le pressentiment que votre existence se rapproche d’un désastre douloureux et définitif […] vous plongent dans un état de réelle souffrance” (Houellebecq *Extension*, 174, 17). A psychologist calls him out on this defense mechanism in therapy: “en dissertant sur la société vous établissez une barrière derrière laquelle vous vous protégez,” “encore une fois vous êtes trop dans l’abstrait” (Houellebecq *Extension* 168-169, 170). But rather than confronting his depression, acute social anxiety, gynophobia, repressed homosexuality or alcoholism, Houellebecq’s protagonist invents reductive and fabulous social theories: “une génération sacrifiée […] où l’amour n’était plus possible,” “[un] système sexuel parfaitement libéral [où]

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175 The psychologist’s criticism could be applied equally well to the author, who hides behind his homodiegetic narrator.
certaines ont une vie érotique variée et excitante ; d’autres sont réduits à la masturbation et la solitude,” “un monde tellement simple. Il y a un système basé sur la domination, l’argent et la peur—un système plutôt masculin, appelons-le Mars ; il y a un système féminin basé sur la séduction et le sexe, appelons-le Vénus. Et c’est tout” (Extension 133, 115 170). So given his broader portrait, the main character’s racism reflects a characteristic evasion of responsibility for his psychological problems. Historically popular scapegoats, minorities are easily blamed for the hero’s crippling social anxiety and inability “d’entamer des procédures de séduction […] et des relations normales avec des jeunes femmes” (Houellebecq Extension 172).

Given the sociopathy and mental illness showcased in the above-cited scenes and the narrator’s broader characterization, the author does not necessarily endorse the racist discourse in Extension du domaine de la lutte. The novel’s minority characters, therefore, will elucidate the implied author’s ambiguous position.

The global representation of minorities in Michel Houellebecq’s first novel, however, proves generally unflattering, often flirting with racial stereotypes. A porn theater in Rouen is predominantly occupied by “des immigrés, bien sûr […] qui s’installent à quelques sièges de distance [des couples] et commencent aussitôt à se masturber […] dans l’espoir que la femme du couple jette un regard sur leur sexe” (Houellebecq Extension 83). The formerly colonized South-East Asians are evoked by “un ancien adjudant […] de l’ Indochine” and continue to serve subservient roles in

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176 Booth qualifies the narrator whose values diverge from those of the implied author as an unreliable narrator.
177 To clarify, by the global representation of minorities, I am referring to all of the appearances of minorities in the narrative. Of course, these examples are filtered through the racist first-person narrator. But the author could nevertheless introduce minority characters who challenge the narrator’s racism.
France: “à part quelques Cambodgiens, tous les taxis refusent de […] prendre en charge [les femmes enceintes et les malades]” (Houellebecq *Extension* 64, 86). After evoking the victims of serial bombings in Paris perpetrated “par des terroristes arabes, qui réclamaient la libération d’autres terroristes arabes, détenus en France pour différents assassinats,” the hero encounters two Arabs who, though neither violent nor extremist, openly express their hostility towards him: “[à l’] HLM […] Deux jeunes Arabes m’ont suivi du regard, l’un d’eux a craché par terre à mon passage” (Houellebecq *Extension* 27). Finally, the black characters in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* threaten some aspect of French society--be it progressive mores, public order or racial purity. They harbor traditional values (a banlieue parish is comprised of “quatre africaines et une vieille bretonne”), engage in public inebriation (“un noir […dans le train qui descendait] une bouteille de *J and B*”), and seduce desirable young white women (“[le] jeune noir, ou plutôt un métis” in the nightclub) (Houellebecq *Extension* 160, 94, 133). In other words, the rare minority figures represented in the novel only reinforce stigmas attached to immigrants: debauchery, religiosity, reactionary politics, welfare culture, miscegenation, subservience and hostility.

So, although the narrator’s racist outbursts in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* clearly reflect the speaker’s mental illness and sociopathy, the overwhelmingly cliché and unflattering portrait of minorities fails to provide a compelling criticism of his views. The implied author’s position relative to his racist speakers, therefore, remains ambiguous in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, requiring us to pursue our analysis in Houellebecq’s subsequent novels.
LES PARTICULES ÉLÉMENTAIRES: Michel Houellebecq upped the ante in *Les Particules élémentaires* with his protagonist Bruno, who employs a greater variety of racial epithets than his predecessor (“nègre,” “babouin,” “grand singe”) and even pens a defense of his racism (238-239). For J.D. de Almeida, the author exploits his fictional character to “signer [l’article raciste de Bruno] sans signature explicite” (188). Although this conclusion may be tempting, ascertaining the implied author’s position requires a more detailed analysis of the scenes of enunciation, characterization of racist speakers and representation of minorities in his novel.

The preponderance of the racist discourse in Michel Houellebecq’s second novel may be attributed to Bruno and Christiane—a couple of divorced public high school teachers who, against all odds, finds true love and a committed relationship at “un centre *New Age* […] hédoniste et libertaire” (*Particules* 135).

While describing her troubled homelife as a single mother, Christiane implicitly attributes urban violence and delinquency to her city’s significant minority population: “Noyon est une ville violente. Il y a beaucoup de Noirs et d’Arabes, le Front national a fait 40 % aux dernières élections […] la porte de ma boîte aux lettres a été arrachée, je ne peux rien laisser dans la cave. J’ai souvent peur, parfois il y a eu des coups de feu. […] En rentrant du lycée je me barricade chez moi, je ne sors jamais le soir” (Houellebecq *Particules* 186).

The scene of enunciation may gesture towards the dubious foundation of her racism. Christiane’s comments could possibly provide a portrait of paranoia rather than urban violence. As noted in Chapter 2: Houellebecq’s Islamophobic Character(s), Noyon was the historic target of an intense far-right propaganda campaign that spun the
commune’s “petite délinquance” and significant “présence étrangère” into a crisis of urban violence and criminality, helping the FN to garner 40% of the votes in the local elections (Jelen ¶ 1, 10). However, while a vandalized mailbox is consistent with petty delinquency, Christiane’s reports of gunshots prove more difficult to explain away.

Her implicitly racist remarks are further qualified by certain negative features of her broader characterization. Christiane comes together with Bruno to mutually validate their narcissism; she suggests that he is “égoïste et gentil,” questions if “les enfants ont réellement besoin d’un père” and fantasizes about her son’s death--“s’il se tuait en moto [...] je me sentirais plus libre” (Houellebecq *Particules* 176, 185, 266). Christiane shares Bruno’s close-mindedness and contempt for “ce milieu libertaire, vaguement beatnik dans les années cinquante,” “féministes […] ces salopes,” “[et] soixante-huitardes” (Houellebecq *Particules* 251, 182, 183). The couple’s compatibility evidently extends to their views on race, which arguably contribute to their framing as incarnations of individualism in the novel.

Bruno’s expressions of racism and negative characterization prove far less ambiguous, presenting clear attenuating factors. His racist references to “arabes […] désagréables et agressifs” and “nègres [analphabètes]” (“animaux dotés d’une grosse bite et d’un tout petit cerveau reptilien”) in *Les Particules élémentaires* must be recontextualized in alcohol-fueled confessions that illustrate his character flaws and psychological problems (Houellebecq 232, 228, 242).

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178 As Christian Jelen reports: “dans l'absolu, la question de l'insécurité ne se pose pas avec acuité à Noyon. [...] on trouve encore des Noyonnais qui ne ferment pas leur voiture à clé. Il n'y a pas de hold-up ni d'agressions” (¶10).
His “besoin de revenir sur l’échec de sa vie” lacks legitimate intent to right wrongs or become a better person (Houellebecq Particules 212). Bruno systematically avoids responsibility for his failures as a father and husband, generalizing about children’s “égoïsme [illimité],” qualifying fatherhood as “une entière et complète saloperie,” normalizing his negligence (“en réalité jamais les hommes ne se sont intéressés à leurs enfants)” and cruelly critiquing his wife’s aging body—“J’étais maudit […] j’avais envie de toutes les femmes, sauf la mienne,” “ses seins sont tombés, et notre mariage s’est cassé la gueule lui aussi,” “il aurait fallu une liposuccion, des injections de silicone, tout un chantier” (Houellebecq Particules 209, 228, 216-217, 212, 226).  

Couched in these self-serving confessions “[qui avaient] depuis longtemps dépassé les limites de la décence implicitement requises dans le cadre d’une conversation humaine,” Bruno’s racism embellishes anecdotes that illustrate his sociopathy, egocentrism, chronic dissatisfaction and dangerous sexual obsession (Houellebecq Particules 224).

After disparaging his wife’s admirable volunteer work—“Qu’est-ce que foutait Anne ? Ça se terminait de plus en plus tard, ces séances d’alphabétisation des nègres”--Bruno engages in child abuse, drugging his child with a blend of jam and Lexomil and abandoning him to visit a prostitute: “il attrapa la couche souillée, la balança sur le parquet […] L’enfant avala sans difficultés la mixture et se raidit, comme assommé par un coup. Bruno enfila son blouson et se dirigea vers le Madison” (Houellebecq Particules 228).  

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179 Some of Bruno’s remarks may be construed as misguided attempts at humor. The speaker’s jokes constitute yet another barrier that insulates the implied author.

180 Surveys in the American context reveal that the perception of blacks as “ignorant” and “stupid” reflect the “historical relationships between the groups”; during the era of slavery, “the education of slaves was
His generalization about “Arabes […] désagréables et agressifs” is featured in a litany of complaints about his final family vacation—including “le soleil beaucoup trop chaud” on the beach (Houellebecq *Particules* 231, 232). While his wife and son thoroughly enjoy their time in Morocco—“Anne parlait aux autres mères de famille […] Victor s’amusait beaucoup au Mini Club”—Bruno fixates on her “cellulite […] ses vergetures” and “l’idée [insupportable] que mon fils allait […] peut-être réussir sa vie alors que j’avais raté la mienne” (Houellebecq *Particules* 231-232). Chronically dissatisfied and hopelessly egocentric, he declares the vacation a failure—“Ça ne valait pas le coup d’attraper un cancer de la peau pour passer toutes mes soirées à me branler dans la case” (Houellebecq *Particules* 232).

Bruno’s most intense expression of racism explicitly stems from his sexual frustration. Assigned to predominantly female high school classes in Meaux—“toutes délicieuses, toutes désirables”—he cultivates a new look to seduce “[une fille] de divorcés […] à la recherche d’une image paternelle” (Houellebecq *Particules* 237). But when he feels hopelessly hindered by his anatomy, his frustration is funneled towards a familiar scapegoat: “Le problème, le problème nouveau, c’était mon sexe […] 12 centimètres […] c’était un handicap radical, définitif. C’est à partir de ce moment que j’ai commencé à hâir les nègres” (Houellebecq *Particules* 237-238). Accordingly, he sets his sights on his only black student, “un grand costaud qui se faisait appeler Ben,” quickly becoming jealous of his imagined endowment (“je suis sûr qu’il avait une bite énorme”) and his girlfriend (“Le nègre sortait exactement avec celle que j’aurais choisie pour moi-même”)

__actually illegal in nearly every state in the south__ (Miller 98-99). Bruno’s racism could similarly reflect France’s colonial history. 231
(Houellebecq *Particules* 238). After unjustly expelling Ben from the classroom for speaking out of turn (“il avait parlé fort mais ce n’était pas vraiment une insolence”), Bruno returns home to pen “un pamphlet raciste […] dans un état d’érection quasi constante”: “Nous envions et nous admirons les nègres parce que nous souhaitons à leur exemple redevenir des animaux, des animaux dotés d’une grosse bite et d’un tout petit cerveau reptilien, annexe de leur bite” (Houellebecq *Particules* 242). His grotesque racism attains a parodic level in this essay tellingly subtitled “on ne naît pas raciste, on le devient,” supporting the author’s possible critique of his protagonist’s beliefs (Houellebecq *Particules* 242).

The narrator’s framing of the story in *Les Particules élémentaires* could provide further evidence of the author’s possible divergence from his protagonists. As the product of Michel Djerzinski’s breakthrough research in genetic engineering, the posthuman narrator offers “[un] dernier hommage […] à l’homme” from “un monde différent, un monde parfait” (Houellebecq *Particules* 394, 30). In the prologue, the narrator contextualizes the narrative:

Ce livre est avant tout l’histoire d’un homme; qui vécut la plus grande partie de sa vie en Europe occidentale, durant la seconde moitié du xxe siècle […].

fréquemment, guettés par la misère, les, hommes de sa génération passèrent en outre leur vie, dans la solitude, et l’amertume. Les sentiments d’amour, de

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181 This interpretation is perhaps bolstered by the rejection of the pamphlet by the only intradiegetic reader, Philippe Sollers, who refuses the article’s publication: “Vous êtes authentiquement raciste, ça se sent, ça vous porte […Mais] Nous ne sommes plus au temps de Céline, vous savez” (Houellebecq *Particules* 242-243). However, the joke is also on Sollers in *Les Particules élémentaires*, who proves excitable throughout his interactions with Bruno, telling Houellebecq’s protagonist “Vous êtes réactionnaire, c’est bien. Tous les grands écrivains sont réactionnaires” (229).

182 By alluding to Simone de Beauvoir’s “on ne naît pas femme, on le devient” in his subtitle, Bruno suggests that we become racist through our exposure to the other’s flaws.
Bruno and Christiane’s racism could therefore exemplify this troubled era of human history—“le XXe siècle, son immoralisme, son individualisme, son aspect libertaire et antisocial” “[et] cette espèce torturée, contradictoire, individualiste et querelleuse, d’un égoïsme illimité” (Houellebecq Particules 388, 394).

Our analysis of the most significant instances of racist character discourse in Les Particules élémentaires suggests that these scenes could contribute to the critical portrait of the speakers, as well as the posthuman narrator’s critique of humanity’s decadence. By examining the global representation of minority characters in the novel, it will be possible to test this hypothesis and more precisely determine the implied author’s ideas about race.

However, by presenting problematic portraits of immigrant, Arab, African and South-East Asian characters that conform to racial stereotypes, the author hardly provides a compelling counterpoint to Bruno and Christiane. Houellebecq’s genealogy of his protagonists Michel and Bruno, grounds the narrative in the colonial era; their Polytechnician grandfather spent his professional life engineering “sur l’ensemble du territoire algérien un réseau d’adduction d’eau efficace” (Particules 33). While their aging grandmother’s insistence that “L’Algérie, c’est la France” is symptomatic of her Alzheimer’s, minorities continue to occupy subordinate roles in the novel (Houellebecq, Particules 53).

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183 Apologists of colonialism may point to infrastructure projects as one of the positive effects of colonization, even if this development evidently served the exploitative interests of the colonizer.
In a clear inversion of the colonial order, Houellebecq’s minority characters exploit France’s economic and social resources. Public schools and public housing attest to the rise of the New French: Bruno notices “un vrai changement” in his high school's student body—“beaucoup de jeunes, d’immigrés—surtout des Noirs, beaucoup plus que lors de mon adolescence […des] beurettes, asiatiques [également]”—while Michel observes “la banlieue nord de Nice, avec ses HLM d’Arabes” (Houellebecq Particules 237, 314). This phenomenon even touches the protagonists directly after their estranged mother moves in with “une bande de babas qui vivent dans une maison abandonné à l’écart du village [de Saorge]”(Houellebecq Particules 315). Ducon, a Rastafarian “[avec] le teint mat” whom Bruno dubs “Hippie-le-Noir” takes advantage of their vulnerable mother on her deathbed, inveigling himself into her will and securing her entire inheritance (despite French laws stipulating “des droits inaliénable sur l’héritage”) (Houellebecq Particules 317, 318, 320).

The remaining minorities in *Les Particules élémentaires* are subordinated through their sexual objectification. They often constitute objects of sexual desire: Houellebecq’s characters fantasize about “beurettes, asiatiques—toutes délicieuses, toutes désirables,” “une Ghanéenne […] sa langue rosé et un peu râpeuse” and “un jeune brun de type nord-africain [qui] ôtait son short [sur le quai des Tuileries]” (Houellebecq Particules 237, 226, 26). Admittedly, the objectification of these minorities could speak more to the characters who fantasize about them. Bruno visualizes his Ghanaian high school student “[pour] se libérer dans la bouche de [sa] femme” before writing a questionable “texte sur la famille” in which he asserts that “le mariage et la fidélité nous coupent de toute possibilité d’existence” (Houellebecq Particules 226-227). Desplechin, following a failed
attempt to masturbate (“son propre sexe était retombé [...] il n’avait pas insisté”), vainly observes the young North-African from a telescope in office before “les homosexuels étaient partis,” leaving the voyeuristic CNRS department head listless and without any occupation as he awaits retirement (Houellebecq *Particules* 25, 27). However, other minorities in *Les Particules élémentaires* who display a lack of sexual inhibitions seem to justify their objectification: Bruno finds “les putes […] aux salons de massage thaï […] polies et souriantes” in Paris and encounters Karim at the *Lieu du changement*, “un petit brun trapu, vif, aux cheveux noirs et bouclés […] se massait doucement les couilles [en grande conversation avec une catholique]” (Houellebecq 234, 143-144).

Although the initial characterization of the novel’s two most important minority figures Ben and Adjila offers faint glimmers of hope, they too are ultimately reduced to sexual objects. Despite being written off by his teacher Bruno (“Qu’est-ce qu’il pouvait bien y comprendre, ce grand singe?”), Ben offers the only “commentaire de texte […] pas si mal” during their session on Baudelaire (Houellebecq *Particules* 239, 241). But after his unwarranted expulsion from class, Ben conforms with Bruno’s racist vision of black men as sexually dominant males: “Il semblait avoir compris quelque chose, saisi un de mes regards, parce qu’il s’est mis à peloter sa petite copine pendant les cours. Il retroussait sa jupe, posait sa main le plus haut possible, très haut sur les cuisses ; puis il me regardait en souriant, très cool” (Houellebecq *Particules* 241). Likewise, despite being “[une] bonne élève, sérieuse, un an d’avance […] qui avait très envie de réussir ses études,” Adjila primarily serves to inflame Bruno’s sexual desire in the novel: after masturbating privately “sur une de ses dissertations,” he grasps her thigh “[dans] un acte involontaire” and exposes himself before suffering a mental breakdown that requires six
months of in-patient treatment (Houellebecq *Particules* 243-244, 245). Reduced to this subordinate role, Adjila loses her voice and her agency: “La fille avait quinze ans, j’étais enseignant, j’avais abusé de mon autorité sur elle; en plus c’était une beurette. Bref, le dossier idéal pour une révocation suivie d’un lynchage. […] mais [on arrivait à la fin de l’année scolaire, et visiblement* Adjila n’avait pas parlé”* (Houellebecq *Particules* 246: emphasis added).184

So once again, the ambiguous presentation of racist discourse in Houellebecq’s novel gives readers reason to question the author’s complicity with the racist speakers. The scenes of enunciation gesture towards Christiane’s paranoia and showcase Bruno’s mental illness. More generally, the racism of these speakers can be considered illustrative of the bitterness, individualism and cruelty characterizing human relations during the dark era documented by the narrator. However, the overwhelmingly stereotypical and negative representation of minorities in *Les Particules élémentaires* invalidates, or at least seriously compromises, the implied author’s hypothetical critique of his racist speakers and their deeply flawed ideas.

LANZAROTE: The first installment in Michel Houellebecq’s *Au milieu du monde* series, *Lanzarote* explores contemporary tourism and religious cults—two themes that would be developed more fully in his subsequent novels, *Plateforme* and *La Possibilité d’une île*. As a work of travel fiction, Houellebecq’s first effort naturally features ample commentary on alterity and foreign cultures. But despite the novella’s contemporary

184 While Adjila could have hypothetically exercised agency when choosing not to speak, the only certainty is that she did not speak and has no voice in the narrative.
setting (spanning from December 1999 to January 2000), the narrator remains informed by archaic ideas.

The narrator-protagonist’s received ideas about race manifest themselves from the incipit of *Lanzarote*, at the planning stage of his journey. After whimsically wandering into a travel agency, he promptly dismisses proposed vacation packages in the Maghreb and West Africa, invoking archaic orientalist and colonial visions of these regions. Houellebecq’s hero qualifies his rejection of Tunisia and Morocco after abruptly interjecting “Je n’aime pas les pays arabes”:

> En y réfléchissant je me souvenais d’une Libanaise rencontrée dans une boîte à partouzes : ultra-chaude, bonne chatte, bien douce, avec de gros seins en plus. Par ailleurs, un collègue de travail m’avait parlé de l’hôtel Nouvelles Frontières d’Hamamet, où des groupes d’Algériennes venaient s’éclater entre femmes, sans la surveillance d’aucun homme […] Finalement les pays arabes ça pouvait valoir le coup.185 (*Lanzarote* 9)

Somewhat incoherently, he then shoots down Senegal for its potential for sex tourism:

> “J’avais entendu dire que le prestige des Blancs était encore très grand en Afrique de l’Ouest. Il suffisait de se pointer en discothèque pour ramener une nana dans son bungalow ; même pas une pute, en plus, elles faisaient ça pour le plaisir […] Je ne voyais pas pourquoi je pensais à tout ça ; de toute façon je n’avais pas envie de baiser”

(Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 10).

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185 Reinforcing the reading of *Lanzarote* as a ridiculous parody of travel fiction, the narrator’s orientalist fantasies are punctuated with a pun—“Finalement les pays arabes ça pouvait valoir le *coup*” (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 9). (According to the *Larousse*, *coup* can signify “un partenaire sexuel occasionnel” in familiar speech).
The protagonist’s shocking sexual objectification and subordination of Arab and West-African women, however, is qualified by details of the scene of enunciation. His racism arguably contributes to the unsavory portrait of his social ineptitude in the opening chapter. In his conversation with the travel agent, he proves curt, presumptuous, inappropriate and politically incorrect: interrupting her (“coupai-je”), questioning her expertise (“Je connaissais très bien le Sud marocain, et probablement mieux que cette conne”), blurt out details about his sex life (“Je ne voyais pas pourquoi je pensais à tout ça ; de toute façon je n’avais pas envie de baiser. ‘Je n’ai pas envie de baiser’ dis-je”), and overtly expressing his Islamophobia (“Finalement les pays arabes ça pouvait valoir le coup, dès qu’on arrivait à les sortir de leur religion ridicule ‘Ce qui me déplaît c’est pas les pays arabes, c’est les pays musulmans,’ repris-je”) (Houellebecq *Lanzarote* 9-10).

The remainder of *Lanzarote* suggests that the protagonist’s behavior in this scene is not anomalous. Throughout his narrative, Houellebecq’s hero frequently stereotypes situations (“Le dialogue du touriste et du voyagiste,” “le scénario classique”), places (“j’imaginais bien le genre d’endroit”), and people (identifying strangers’ nationalities on sight—“des Birmans,” “un Scandinaeve,” “une institutrice australienne”—and generalizing about “le Français […] vain,” “les Norvégiens […] translucides,” “[les amantes] Espagnoles […] sans vanité, à l’opposé des Italiennes,” “[les] Anglais […] les Allemands […] les Italiens […] les Français […] et] leur comportement d’estivage” and

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186 Though Houellebecq’s hero may appear to walk back on his initial racist dismissal of Arab countries, his qualification concerning les pays musulmans only reinforces the portrait of his racism; his Islamophobia and his orientalism respectively constitute the negative and positive poles of his reductive vision of the Arab world.
“[les pratiques] de la plupart des autochtones”) (Lanzarote 8, 39, 43, 20, 31, 46, 21, 18, 62, 18-19, 40).

The narrator’s incessant stereotyping borders on caricature and bears important implications for our reading of Michel Houellebecq’s novella. The protagonist explicitly rejects le Guide du Routard—“[ses] appels au voyage ‘intelligent’ et à la rencontre de l’autre (comprendre avant de juger), […et sa] recherche quasi frénétique d’une ‘authenticité’ en voie de disparition”—reassuring the reader that “Lanzarote […n’y est] pas mentionnée” (Houellebecq Lanzarote 18-19). While the palpable sarcasm in these remarks may lead the reader to question the sincerity of his criticism, Houellebecq’s hero proceeds to flout these values throughout his voyage. The narrator’s early disclaimer frames Lanzarote as a parody of the travel fiction genre, proposing instead the narrative of an ignorant voyage to a desolate island offering “pour le tourisme culturel, tintin,” whose hero habitually judges before understanding and only encounters other European tourists (Houellebecq 17).

The racist discourse in Lanzarote, therefore, is qualified by both the narrator’s dubious character and the narrative’s parody of travel literature—two significant factors establishing the author’s critical distance from his protagonist. But once again, the implied author’s hypothetical criticism of his racist speaker must be measured against his representation of minorities in the novella. The handful of minority characters featured in Lanzarote, however, coincide with the protagonist’s racist preconceptions about their sexual mores and “religion ridicule” (Houellebecq 9).

Like the “Libanaise […] ultra-chaude” and “Algériennes” who suggestively “[s’éclatent] entre femmes,” the two Moroccan women in the narrative are largely
defined by their sexuality (Houellebecq Lanzarote 9). “Une petite Marocaine de 11 ans prénommé Aïcha” becomes an unwitting protagonist in the greatest pedophilia scandal in Belgium “depuis l’affaire Dutroux” (Houellebecq Lanzarote 81, 79). Similarly, her abuser’s ex-wife—a Moroccan immigrant to Belgium—formerly frequented “les boîtes pour couples ‘non-conformistes’” (Houellebecq Lanzarote 68).

Rudi’s Maghrebine victim and ex-wife are not only sexualized, but also closely associated with Islam, justifying the hero’s initial assimilation between “les pays arabes […] et les pays musulmans” (Houellebecq Lanzarote 9). When the news of Rudi’s crime breaks in France-Soir, “la population musulmane était déchaînée contre lui […] il avait fallu lui assurer une protection rapprochée” (Houellebecq Lanzarote 81). Likewise when her sexual experimentation becomes unpalatable—“[se transformant peu à peu] en un exercice de dépravation sans joie”—Rudi’s wife returns to Morocco and Islam (Houellebecq Lanzarote 63).

While the novella’s last remaining minority figure, Aïcha’s father, offers a reprieve from this schema, he only reinforces the perceived hostility of the Maghrebin immigrants towards European citizens and institutions by proposing a barbaric form of vigilante justice: “Il déclara qu’il souhaitait voir ‘couper les couilles’ de celui qui avait profané l’honneur de sa fille, et qu’il était tout à fait prêt à s’en charger lui-même” (Houellebecq Lanzarote 84).187

187 Aïcha’s father’s statement is tricky. If the quotation marks serve merely to highlight the vulgarity of the expression, the Islamophobic narrator’s indirect discourse would give him considerable power over the father’s words. However, because Houellebecq’s narrator cites “un journaliste [qui] retrouva le père d’Aïcha,” “couper les couilles” could be a direct quotation lifted from their interview (Lanzarote 84). Either way, Aïcha’s father is exclusively defined in the novella by his desire for brutal vengeance.
Considerable doubts are cast over the author’s endorsement of the racist discourse in *Lanzarote* through the undeniably negative characterization of the narrator-protagonist and the palpable parody of his anti-“voyage intelligent” (Houellebecq 17). But, crucially, the minority characters featured in *Lanzarote* only give credence to the protagonist’s reductive vision of the Arab world, which vacillates between Orientalist eroticism and Islamic fundamentalism. Because the roles conceived by Houellebecq for his minority characters are consistently defined by their religious identity or their sexuality, the author only appears to uphold his protagonist’s racist beliefs in his novella.

PLATEFORME: In our previous analysis of Michel Houellebecq’s author figure and fictions, his fourth novel--a tale of sex tourism and Islamist terrorism in Thailand--consistently set high-water marks; the author’s promotional interview brought him court summons for alleged *injure raciale* and *incitation à la haine religieuse*, while his portraits of Muslim and female characters problematically resonate with his novel’s most Islamophobic and misogynous speakers. Carefully navigating the narrative’s exceptional intersectionality, we will now examine the representation of racist discourse and minority figures in *Plateforme* to determine if the implied author merits condemnation or acquittal from charges of racism.188

Predictably, *Plateforme* provides plenty of fodder for our inquiry: Houellebecq’s characters refuse “le meilleur [candidat…] parce qu’il est beur,” praise Thai women for their “innocence sensuelle” and willingness “to settle down FOREVER” with western

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188 While the Islamophobic and misogynistic discourse in *Plateforme* evidently concerns “Arabes” and “prostituées thaïes,” respectively, I will avoid unnecessary repetition and focus on passages centered on racism, races and racial differences (Houellebecq 260, 358, 215)
men, claim that “les Africains […] baisent gratuitement […] et souvent sans] préservatifs,”
develop theories to explain why “les femmes blanches préfèrent coucher avec des
Africains,” and announce their racism “gaiement” (209, 216, 133, 264, 243, 118). Yet, as
we have so often seen in Houellebecq’s oeuvre, this racist discourse is systematically
qualified by attenuating factors in both the scenes of enunciation and the characterization
of the speakers.

When Valérie accuses her superior of “discrimination raciale à l’embauche,” he
defends himself poorly by deploying additional racial stereotypes (Houellebecq
Plateforme 209). Jean-Yves offers a questionable explanation for his refusal of “le
meilleur candidat,” Nourredine (Houellebecq Plateforme 209). Claiming that their work
for a Tourism company requires “pas mal de clichés sur les pays arabes : l’hospitalité, le
thé à la menthe, les fantasias, les bédouins” and noting that “ce genre de trucs a du mal à
passer avec les beurs,” Jean-Yves suggests that Nourredine will be unable to fulfill his
duties (Houellebecq Plateforme 210). Digging himself deeper, he invokes the
stereotypical Arab merchant in his defense, claiming that he would happily hire “un
immigré tunisien ou marocain — même beaucoup plus récent que Noureddine—pour les
négociations avec les fournisseurs locaux” (Houellebecq Plateforme 210). This scene not
only illustrates his racism, but also his amorality and egocentrism. Valérie soon discovers
his grotesque ulterior motive and deems him “un homme malheureux, à la dérive” : Jean-
Yves plots to promote his mistress “très antiraciste […] un peu conne, [mais] très
enthousiaste à priori pour tout ce qui est exotique” by falsely accusing his current
communications director, who recently survived a brutal gang-rape, of “réactions
racistes” and decision paralysis (Houellebecq Plateforme 211, 209, 210).
Generalizations contrasting Thai and western women in *Plateforme* come from dubious sources. An article published in the *Phuket Weekly*, “Find your longlife companion,” suggests that Thai women are less demanding than their western counterparts, “happy to settle down FOREVER with a man who is willing to hold down a steady job and be a loving and understanding HUSBAND and FATHER” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 132, 133). But this “article” amounts to little more than an advertisement for its author’s matchmaking agency “*Heart to Heart,*” which he repeatedly references, urging readers to “go to my catalogue” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 132, 133).

Houellebecq’s protagonist, meanwhile, describes these conclusions as “non sans culot,” privately acknowledging that these purported ethnic differences amount to “rien” (*Plateforme*, 133, 132). Curiously, Michel contradicts himself later in his narrative when he asserts that “aucune fille [française n’arrive] à la cheville des prostituées thaïes […] elles ne s’intéressaient pas du tout au sexe, mais uniquement à la séduction […] n’ayant ] aucune véritable innocence sensuelle” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 215-216). But once again, the scene casts doubt on the source of the stereotype. Michel’s assertion reflects his limited sexual experience; crippled by social anxiety (“une angoisse légère mais constante […] qui l’empêchait] d’engager la conversation avec qui que ce soit”), he managed “rarement […] quatre ou cinq fois de […] convaincre une femme de partager [son] lit” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 215). Rendered impotent by “une dizaine de gin-tonics,” Houellebecq’s hero is to blame for “le résultat […] en général décevant” informing his prejudice (*Plateforme* 215).

Jean-Yves affirms Africans’ promiscuity and aversion to condoms (“de ce point de vue là, ils sont parfois un peu têtus”) in equally dubious circumstances while laying
the groundwork for the mainstream commercialization of sex tourism (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 264). In the course of just one work day, he collaborates with Michel and Valérie to establish “une plateforme programmatique pour le partage du monde,” moving hastily from one region to another: “Le cas des pays arabes fut le plus vite réglé”; after “le cas [difficile] du Kenya,” “les autres pays africains posèrent moins de problèmes”; “le cas de Ténérife nous retint encore moins longtemps”; for Cuba, “tout s’enchaînait naturellement, sans hésitations et sans doutes”; and in Thailand “[ils accéléraient] les travaux” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 259, 260, 263, 264, 265). Moving at this lightning pace, they are guided by racist stereotypes and erroneous historical references. “[Délirant] un peu toute l’après-midi,” Michel proposes an indefensible tagline for their African *Aphrodite* package: “Et des esclaves nus tout imprégnés d’odeurs.’ Baudelaire, c’est dans le domaine public” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 264). His interlocutors also exercise poor judgment in their neo-colonial enterprise, triaging Arab countries based on “leur religion déraisonnable,” citing baseless rumours about the sexual prowess of Africans, overlooking France’s colonial legacy in Senegal and the Ivory Coast by singling out Kenya as “une ancienne colonie,” and exploiting a human rights crisis to craft their tagline: “Eldorador Aphrodite : parce qu’on a le droit de se faire plaisir” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 259, 263, 266).189

The theories of race in *Plateforme* elicit the narrator’s explicit doubts. When Valérie brings up a German woman’s “banale” explanation for why “les femmes blanches préfèrent coucher avec des Africains” (“les Noirs sont décontractés, virils, ils...

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189 Jean-Yves explains that “Depuis l’intervention de l’OTAN au Kosovo […] Toutes les campagnes […] basées sur le thème du droit avaient été des réussites” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 266).
ont le sens de la fête ; ils savent s’amuser sans se prendre la tête”), Michel fails to formulate “une théorie adéquate” to explain racialized sexual preferences (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 243). Faced with the limitations of his first theory (“les Blancs […comme] des Nègres inhibés, qui cherchaient à retrouver une innocence sexuelle perdue”), Houellebecq’s narrator develops “une théorie plus compliquée et plus douteuse” (“les Blancs voulaient être bronzés et apprendre des danses de nègres; les Noirs voulaient s’éclaircir la peau et se décréper les cheveux. L’humanité entière tendait instinctivement vers le métissage, l’indifférenciation […] à travers] la sexualité”), but ultimately declares himself “[pas] véritablement convaincu” (*Plateforme* 243-244).

Michel likewise dismisses a fellow tourist’s apologetics of racism and sex tourism while holding court at “Pussy Paradise”: “[Le racisme] a pour corollaire une augmentation du désir sexuel pour les femelles de l’autre race. Le véritable enjeu de la lutte raciale […] est biologique et brutal : c’est la compétition pour le vagin des jeunes femmes” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 117, 121). After pledging allegiance “au principe de la preuve,” Robert ironically delivers an argument rife with generalities and dubious conclusions:

À partir du moment où les Blancs se sont mis à considérer les Noirs comme des égaux, il était clair qu’ils en viendraient […] à les considérer comme supérieurs. La notion d’égalité n’a nul fondement chez l’homme […] historiquement, c’est dans ces conditions qu’on en arrive […] à la guerre inter-raciale et au massacre. Tous les antisémites, par exemple, s’accordent à attribuer aux Juifs une supériorité d’un certain ordre […] Résultat: six millions de morts. (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 118, 120)
Expecting him to “embrayer sur le darwinisme” “[ou citer] La Rochefoucauld, ou je ne sais qui,” Michel dismisses Robert as “un homme battu, fini […] qui fait] le malin, [pour] donner l’impression d’avoir compris quelque chose à la vie” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 120, 123).

  The broader characterization of these racist speakers in *Plateforme* further undermines the authority of their discourse. Cham Sewanese, the author of “Find your longlife companion,” looks the part of a generic businessman “souriant, costume noir et cravate sombre” who peddles marital services predicated on racial stereotypes (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 132). Jean-Yves is a workaholic “diplômé d’HEC,” whose fourteen-hour work days take a toll on his personal life—“ça n’avait pas l’air d’aller,” “il avait de plus en plus l’air d’un homme malheureux, à la dérive” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 51, 205, 211). As his marriage implodes, he begins a predatory affair with his son’s fifteen-year-old babysitter, deluding himself regarding their “relation équilibrée” and making the monstrous confession that “il voyait difficilement comment et, surtout, pourquoi éviter l’inceste [avec sa fille]” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 302). Valérie, despite “sa capacité d’organisation surprenante, sa mémoire sans failles,” lacks a commensurate capacity for critical thought, quickly accepting the dubious claims of Cham Sewanese (“Ça se tient, ce qu’il raconte”) and repeating racial stereotypes as truths : “C’est vrai, c’est frappant,” “elles sont bonnes, les femmes […] en Afrique,” “[les Thaïes] sont jolies, gentilles, elles font bien l’amour” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 158, 133, 243, 263, 337).

Finally, Robert is a provocateur “[qui] fait son possible pour choquer les autres, pour se rendre antipathique”—“en pleine forme” when deploying “toutes ses capacités de nuisance” (Houellebecq *Plateforme* 133, 85).
The narrator’s broader characterization effectively rules him out as a potential voice of criticism for the novel’s racist discourse. Michel describes himself as “[un] Européen aisé […et] décadent” “[ayant] beaucoup d’égoïsme et sans doute un peu de vice,” “pas bon, dans l’ensemble […dégoûté par] l’humanitaire […et indiffèrent au] sort des autres” (Houellebecq Plateforme 307, 12, 310). Furthermore, he considers culture “un peu chiant” and history reducible to “des informations économiques et boursières” (Houellebecq Plateforme 87, 289). Consequently, Houellebecq’s narrator regularly fails to take the moral high ground in Plateforme, finding “aucune objection” to sex tourism and “ne [voyant] absolument pas où était le problème” with Jean-Yves’ adolescent lover (306, 304). Michel’s prejudice, therefore, contributes to the broader portrait of his grotesque egocentrism, ignorance and amorality: he feels “un tressaillement d’enthousiasme” “[chaque fois] qu’un […] un enfant palestinien, ou une femme enceinte palestinienne, avait été abattu par balles dans la bande de Gaza,” laughs at the prospect of French multiculturalism and primarily objects to Robert’s racism because “nous étions là pour baiser, et […] ces discussions faisaient perdre du temps” (Houellebecq Plateforme 357, 277, 121).

Because Plateforme systematically casts doubts over the implied author’s complicity with his racist speakers, his ambiguous position may only be resolved through the global representation of minorities. However, Houellebecq’s characters hailing from Africa, the Arab world and South-East Asia overwhelmingly serve as agents of violence or sexual gratification—a dichotomy exemplified by the hero’s revealing dreams during his first trip to Thailand, a nightmare about “un homme [barbu] armé d’un cimetière […]
vêtu d’un turban et d’un pantalon bouffant blancs” and an erotic fantasy about “une beurette qui dansait dans le métro” (*Plateforme* 44, 90).

Minorities perpetrate the most shocking acts of violence in *Plateforme*: the brother of “une fille […] de type nord-africain” brutally murders her lover, “excité par le choc du crâne sur le sol et la vue du premier sang” ; Islamists “de type arabe ou asiatique” mutilate the corpses of “un touriste allemand […] et la jeune fille thaïe qui l’accompagnait” and carry out “l’attentat le plus meurtrier qui ait jamais eu lieu en Asie” ; “[quatre hommes] de type antillais” viciously gang rape a woman on the metro (“ils la traitaient de salope et de vide-couilles […] et finirent par lui cracher et lui pisser dessus […] avant de descendre tranquillement gare de Lyon”) ; and “une mosaique de peuples et de races,” specifically “ces jeunes issus des classes dangereuses,” yields “les taux de délinquance les plus élevés de France,” countless “agressions et […] vols” and a weekend’s “bilan de sept morts” (Houellebecq 14, 28, 347, 317, 345, 260, 277, 279, 173, 275).

The vast majority of the novel’s unidimensional minority characters are defined by their sexuality or potential as housewives. After soliciting the services of Oôn, “[qui] savait se servir de sa chatte” and Sin, “une petite Thaïe” “[qui avait] l’air salope,” Houellebecq’s hero speaks from experience when he observes that “les ressortissants de pays arabes […] se jetaient sur la débauche avec encore plus d’enthousiasme […] les premiers à l’ouverture des salons de massage” (*Plateforme* 53, 118, 122, 318). In accordance with Cham Sewanese’s catalog of mail-order brides, the novel’s Thai women

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190 The narrator provocatively plays on a mainstream designation in France--jeunes issus de l’immigration--implicitly tying minorities to violent crime.
often strive to escape the massage parlor and marry Europeans. A fellow tourist Lionel begins a relationship with Kim, “une fille ravissante, originaire de Chiang Maï […] qu’il avait rencontré dans un bar topless,” who follows in the footsteps of her sister, “[qui] avait épousé un Français,” (Houellebecq Plateforme 324). Michel’s other acquaintance, Andreas, “avait épousé une Thaïe rencontrée dans un salon de massage, et maintenant ils avaient deux enfants” (Houellebecq Plateforme 331).

Even outside of Thailand’s sex industry, minorities are presented as perpetually sexually available. While evaluating Aurora’s current hotels in Cuba, Valérie easily persuades a cleaning lady “très brun, presque noir […] avec des fesses très cambrées” to join them in bed, compensating her with “quarante dollars” (Houellebecq Plateforme 221-222). After a similar arrangement, Jean-Yves emerges from his hotel room with “une Noire élancée”--a dancer by day, who describes her numerous “amis jineteros […] avec des clientes anglaises […] américaines et] allemandes” (Houellebecq Plateforme 256, 257). Sure enough, Cuba’s beaches feature “pas mal de couples mixtes,” including “deux Anglaises […] accompagnées de deux métis” “[et] une jeune Allemande […] accompagnée par un grand Noir” (Houellebecq Plateforme 235, 242). Back in France, Michel’s father engages in “rapports intimes” with his cleaning lady (“une fille […] de type nord-africain”) and Jean-Yves strikes up an affair with his son’s baby-sitter (“une fille originaire du Dahomey”) (Houellebecq Plateforme 26, 14, 299). In Parisian sex clubs, Michel and Valérie observe “une dominatrice noire aux fesses nues” and spend the evening with “un couple de Noirs sympa: elle était infirmière, lui batteur de jazz […] qui proposa] une double pénétration” (Houellebecq Plateforme 194, 266). In other words, the representation of minorities in Plateforme barely proves more inspired than “La firme, de
John Grisham […] un best-seller américain” ridiculed by Houellebecq’s hero, who masturbates to a sex-scene with “une splendide métisse” before ejaculating between the pages and reasoning that “ce n’était pas un livre à lire deux fois” (58, 95, 96).

The few characters spared of this schema in Plateforme perform menial jobs not terribly well: “Le grand black à l’accueil [du Gymnase] lui lança un ‘La forme, chef?’ pas très convaincant,” while their tour guide, Sôn, rails against Thailand’s indigenous tribes--“Akkhas mauvais […] savent rien faire ; enfants travaillent pas à l’école. Argent beaucoup dépensé pour eux, résultat aucun. Ils sont complètement nuls” (Houellebecq 158, 72).

So despite reasonable doubts sewn in the scenes of enunciation and the characterization of the novel’s racist speakers, the coherent negative portrait of minority characters emerging from Plateforme, predicated on stereotypes of sex and violence, fails to exculpate the implied author from charges of racism.

POSSIBILITÉ: In his final entry in the Au milieu du monde series, Michel Houellebecq audaciously pursues the provocative discourse that previously brought him controversies and court appearances. La Possibilité d’une île presents the life of Daniel--a grotesque narcissist with a correspondingly disastrous romantic life, who builds a lucrative career as a comedian and screenwriter on calculated risks and politically incorrect provocations. Having garnered a reputation as “un observateur acéré de la réalité contemporaine” “d’une honnêteté presque incroyable,” he is selected to write an autobiographical account

191 Echoing this scene, where Michel fantasizes about “des métisses vêtues de maillots de bain minuscules,” Valérie experiences “[des violentes bouffées] de désir pour sa belle-sœur” “très métissée, au corps superbe […] en vacances chez leurs parents, sur la plage de Saint-Quay-Portrieux” (Houellebecq 96, 129).
of the Elohimite Church that will later impose their transhumanist agenda on the world (Houellebecq *Possibilité*, 21, 400). In his fifth novel, therefore, Houellebecq not only revisits the defining themes of his oeuvre, but also reimagines his past--transposing his career-defining controversies and persona into the realm of fiction. The author’s self-parody could conceivably serve to confront and surpass his unsavory reputation as a polemicist, “nihiliste, réactionnaire, cynique, raciste et misogyne honteux” (Houellebecq *Ennemis* 7).

The racist discourse in *La Possibilité d’une île* covers a broad spectrum from vaguely positive stereotypes (“un tel mépris des ancêtres aurait été inconcevable en Afrique”) to incitement to racial hatred (“NIQUE LES BÉDOUINS,” “Défonçons l’anus des nègres”), requiring careful unpacking through narratological analysis (Houellebecq 96, 195).

The primary narrator and protagonist of *La Possibilité d’une île* is responsible for the novel’s clearest expressions of racism, employing racial stereotypes to forge his artistic persona and provocative body of work. Tying Arab culture to misogyny, Daniel 1 claims that “l’arrivée des comiques beurs avait validé les dérapages machistes” and exploits his “tête d’Arabe” to profit from “le racisme antiblancs,” weaving sexist humour into his routines “sans cesser d’avoir de bonnes critiques dans *Elle*” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 22, 23). 192 The scene of enunciation provides further insights into Daniel 1’s unscrupulous character and career strategy: “je devins de plus en plus méchant […] le

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192 Houellebecq repeatedly references Jamel Debbouze in *La Possibilité d’une île* (49, 51, 68, 145). The comedians on *Jamel Comedy Club* arguably represent “[les] dérives qui sont supposées caractériser médiatiquement l’individu non-blanc, de sexe masculin, d’origine extra-européenne, habitant la banlieue populaire et de culture non judéo-chrétienne […] y compris des] comportements sexistes ou machistes,” “pour mieux les détournner” (Béru 18).
succès, dans ces conditions, finit par arriver,” “le plus grand bénéfice du métier
d'humoriste […] c'est de pouvoir se comporter comme un salaud en toute impunité, et
[…] rentabiliser son abjection […] avec l'approbation générale (Houellebecq Possibilité
21, 23).

His ensuing career only supports his hypothesis. Daniell’s oeuvre features
element after example of racial provocations that would normally blacklist aspiring and
established celebrities alike: “ON PRÉFÈRE LES PARTOUZEUSES
PALESTINIENNES,” “PARACHUTONS DES MINIJUPES SUR LA PALESTINE !”,
“BROUTE-MOI LA BANDE DE GAZA” (“une parodie de film porno […] avec] des
beurrettes authentiques, garanties neuf-trois--salopes mais voilées”), “LE COMBAT DES
MINUSCULES (“[mettant] en scène des Arabes - rebaptisés ‘vermine d'Allah’”), “LES
PALESTINIENS SONT RIDICULES” (“[avec] une variété d'allusions burlesques et
salaces autour des bâtons de dynamite que les militant du Hamas s'enroulaient autour
de la taille”), and “NIQUE LES BÉDOUINS (“[un album avec] un titre original,
‘Défonçons l'anus des nègres’”) (Houellebecq Possibilité 47, 49, 59-60, 144-145).
Daniell’s titles testify to his pursuit of success through abjection and scandal—a strategy
announced on his posters that bear the banner “‘100 % dans la haine’ […] dans un
graphisme à la Eminem” (Houellebecq Possibilité 59). 193 After reaching “le sommet de
[sa] carrière” with “des plaintes d'associations musulmanes, des menaces d'attentat à la

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193 Eminem infamously included a brutal homicidal fantasy starring his ex-wife on *The Marshall Mathers LP [2000]*, an album that garnered commercial success (receiving a Diamond certification) and widespread critical acclaim.
bombe,” he laments “le scandale […] moins vif” of his later works (Houellebecq Possibilité 47, 144).\(^{194}\)

While Daniel1’s attempts to mitigate “ce ton de burlesque islamophobe léger qui devait […] contribuer à [sa] renommée” hardly attenuate the violence of his racist discourse, his remarkable critical reception piques the reader’s suspicion (Houellebecq Possibilité 47).\(^{195}\) Despite “le caractère globalement antiarabe [de son] spectacle,” Jamel Debbouze endorses him as “[un] mec super-cool” (Houellebecq Possibilité 49). A journalist from Le Monde declares his profoundly irreverent and ignorant portrait of the Middle East conflict “singulièrement décapante,” while others compare him to “Chamfort, voire à La Rochefoucauld” (Houellebecq, Possibilité 59, 60). Even his uninspired and vulgar rap album “[rimant] nègre […] tantôt avec pègre, tantôt avec intègre ; anus avec lapsus, ou bien cunnilingus” garners “[un] joli succès critique”--“le journaliste de Radikal Hip-Hop […] le compara même à Maurice Scève” (Houellebecq Possibilité 144-145).\(^{196}\) By underscoring the hero’s incredible success “d'unte ampleur, même, qui [le] surprit,” the implied author arguably indicts Daniel1, his racist oeuvre and the culture that celebrates them (Houellebecq Possibilité 21).

Houellebecq’s secondary narrators in La Possibilité d'une ile voice relatively tame racism that nevertheless demands our attention: Daniel24 contrasts France, “un

\(^{194}\) The reception of ON PRÉFÈRE LES PARTOUZEUSES PALESTINIENNES evidently plays on the controversies stirred by the author’s fourth novel, Plateforme.

\(^{195}\) Houellebecq’s hero introduces “un soupçon d'antisémitisme,” represents “des Juifs - qualifiés de 'poux circoncis’- et même des chrétiens libanais, affligés du plaisant sobriquet de 'morpions du con de Marie’” and expands the scope of his Islamist sketch “à une attaque […] contre l'action politique elle-même […] développant] une veine anarchiste de droite” (Possibilité 49, 59, 60).

\(^{196}\) Further reinforcing the self-parody in La Possibilité d'une ile, the protagonist’s album “[où il s’était] contenté de sampler [ses] sketches sur de la drum and bass” evokes Houellebecq’s own foray into music Présence humaine [2000], where he reads his poems over fairly generic musical tracks composed for him (144)
pays authentiquement moderne,” with “[l’]Afrique ou […] un pays d’Asie traditionnel,”
while Daniel25 asserts that “les pays arabes […] n’avaient été maintenus dans leur foi
primitive que par l’ignorance et la contrainte” (92, 359). Their racist remarks must be
recontextualized in their accounts of pivotal historical episodes: “la canicule de l’été
2003, particulièrement meurtrière en France […] où plus de dix mille personnes[…]
étaient mortes […] faute de soins” and a cultural revolution kick-started by “un refus
soudain des jeunes filles palestiniennes de limiter leur existence à la procréation répétée
de futurs djihadistes, et de leur désir de profiter de la liberté de moeurs […] qui] se
répandit à l’ensemble des pays arabes, qui eurent à faire face à une révolte massive de la
jeunesse” (Houellebecq Possibilité 92, 359). While Daniel24’s statistics are historically
accurate and Daniel25’s portrait even appears vaguely prescient of the Arab Spring, their
conclusions prove more dubious (Cadot ¶2). Daniel24 and Daniel25 live twenty-three
generations after these events, long after melting polar ice submerged “l’ensemble du
continent asiatique” and “les mouvements islamistes […] s’effondrèrent” (Houellebecq
Possibilité 447, 360). In their world, countries and competing faiths no longer exist. Their
perception of primitive Arab, African and Asian cultures reflects the modern era defined
by “l’élohîmisme […] un culte] parfaitement adapté à la civilisation des loisirs […]
n’imposant aucune contrainte morale, réduisant l’existence humaine aux catégories de
l’intérêt et du plaisir […] et offrant] la prolongation illimitée de la vie matérielle […] et] la
satisfaction illimitée des désirs physiques” (Houellebecq Possibilité 360). Given their
hedonistic faith, Houellebecq’s secondary narrators naturally associate modernity with
amorality, the cult of youth, and “un mode de vie basé sur la consommation de masse, la
liberté sexuelle et les loisirs” (Possibilité 359).
The broader, decidedly negative characterizations of Houellebecq’s racist speakers in *La Possibilité d’une île* reinforce the doubts raised by these scenes of enunciation.

In the course of his autobiography, Daniel1 elaborates further on his “vocation de bouffon” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 19). Lacking the talent of “un artiste authentique,” he becomes “une pute […] aux goûts du public” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 211). Persuaded that “la reconnaissance artistique […] allait en priorité […] à des productions faisant l'apologie du mal,” Houellebecq’s hero struggles to break boundaries and tabous “[dont] il restait si peu,” utilizing “racisme, pédophilie, cannibalisme, parricide, actes de torture et de barbarie […] la quasi-totalité des créneaux porteurs” (*Possibilité* 51, 21, 159).

Having built “l'ensemble de [sa] carrière et de [sa] fortune […] sur l'exploitation commerciale des mauvais instincts, sur cette attirance absurde de l'Occident pour le cynisme et pour le mal,” Daniel1 issues a harsh, but fair appraisal of his life’s work: “aucun de mes lamentables scénarios, mécaniquement ficelés […] pour divertir un public de salauds et de singes, ne méritait de me survivre” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 214, 211).

Daniel1’s lack of scrupules is not confined to his career. In his private life, he displays virtually no empathy. Houellebecq’s hero labels his son “[un] petit trou du cul […] qui n’aurait] pas dû être” and declares his suicide “loin d’être une catastrophe” (*Possibilité* 321, 30). He spins his personal failures as “[un] geste noble […] pour divertir un public de salauds et de singes, ne méritait de me survivre” (Houellebecq *Possibilité* 395). The death of his dog devastates him far more than his second wife’s suicide: “quelque chose céda en
moi […] qui n'avait pas cédé lors […] de la mort d'Isabelle” (Houellebecq Possibilité 388-389). He musters even less compassion for strangers: after witnessing a cold-blooded murder in the Elohimite church, he declares himself ready for the new era of amorality: “je n'aurais aucun scrupule à appartenir à cette nouvelle espèce, […] mon dégoût du meurtre était d'ordre sentimental ou affectif, bien plus que rationnel […]et] l'assassinat d'un chien m'aurait choqué […] peut-être davantage” (Houellebecq Possibilité 297). So Daniel1’s shocking racist discourse contributes both to his career and his broader portrayal in La Possibilité d’une île as a sociopath “[qui crèverait] avec de la haine et des soubresauts” (Houellebecq 118).

Likewise, the broader portraits of Daniel 24 and Daniel25 undermine the authority of their discourse on race. In addition to the millenia separating them from their distant ancestor Daniel1, Houellebecq’s neohuman narrators are emotionally and intellectually estranged from humankind: “les joies [et les malheurs] de l’être humain nous restent inconnaissables,” “[après] la disparition du rire […]et des] larmes […] la cruauté et la compassion, n'ont évidemment plus grand sens,” “nous ne pouvons comprendre […] l’émotion religieuse” “[ni] ce que les hommes entendaient par l'amour” (Possibilité 11, 63-64, 44, 449). Furthermore, they have visibly lost our capacity for critical thought--animated conversations leave Daniel25 “ébranlé, et comme affaibli” (Houellebecq Possibilité 246). “Dans les conditions d’absolue solitude où se déroulent [leurs] vies,” neohumans discover the world primarily through “le récit de vie du prédécesseur” (Houellebecq Possibilité 64, 183). Consequently, Daniel24 and Daniel25 literally receive their ideas from Daniel1, whom they judge to be “représentatif des limitations et des contradictions qui devaient conduire l'espèce à sa perte” (Houellebecq Possibilité 429).
Their claim that “les véritables buts des hommes […] étaient exclusivement d'ordre sexuel” and affirmation of “le caractère insoutenable des souffrances morales occasionnées par la vieillesse” clearly echo Daniell’s remarks: “Toute énergie est d'ordre sexuel, non pas principalement mais exclusivement,” “la vieillesse […] était] une somme de frustrations et de souffrances […] très vite insoutenables” (Houellebecq Possibilité 326, 91, 222). It is only logical, therefore, that their vision of human history should be informed--or rather misinformed--by the Islamophobic and racist discourse permeating Daniell’s narrative.

Faced with the doubts raised by the speakers and scenes of racist discourse in La Possibilité d’une île, the reader must again turn to the novel’s portrayal of minority populations and characters to resolve the implied author’s ambiguous position. The author’s plot choices for minorities, however, often resonate with the discourse of his racist speakers.

Africa is portrayed as a confluence of humanitarian crises in La Possibilité d’une île: in addition to Daniell’s allusion “aux cadavres des clandestins nègres rejetés sur les côtes espagnoles,” the narrative features unprecedented depopulation “en Afrique par […] des épidémies et du sida” and alarming terrorist activity--“le danger représenté par l'intégrisme musulman n’était nullement exagéré” (Houellebecq 23, 446, 233).

La Possibilité d’une île problematically connects immigration with Islamic fundamentalism, oppressive patriarchy and violent cultural conflicts: “en l'espace d'une à deux décennies” “[en] s’appuyant sur une immigration massive et incessante, la religion musulmane se renforça dans les pays occidentaux […] s’adressant en priorité aux populations venues du Maghreb et d’Afrique noire, elle n’en connaissait pas moins un
succès croissant auprès des Européens ‘de souche,’ succès uniquement imputable à son machisme” (Houellebecq 356-357). This grand remplacement is not entirely peaceful: “l'adoption d'une politique d'immigration massive […et les] guerres ethniques et religieuses qui s’ensuivirent […] devaient constituer le prélude à la Première Diminution [de la population mondiale]” (Houellebecq Possibilité 446). Islam’s tenure as Europe’s “religion ‘officielle’” is short-lived: “Tout cela ne pouvait, pourtant, durer qu'un temps, et le refus de […] se transformer en bonne grosse mère de famille devait […] toucher] les populations issues de l'immigration” (Houellebecq Possibilité 358, 359). Drawing inspiration from “une révolte massive de la jeunesse [dans les pays arabes],” the populations issued from immigration reject evangelical propaganda compelling them to become “une épouse soumise, chaste et voilée,” and revert to “un mode de vie basé sur la consommation de masse, la liberté sexuelle et les loisirs,” as evidenced by “les beurettes à nouveau offertes sur le marché sexuel” (Houellebecq Possibilité 357, 359, 47-48). The portrait of these minority populations in Houellebecq’s fifth novel, therefore, only supports the protagonist’s ignorant vision of a culture defined by militant fundamentalism and repressed “salopes […] voilées” (Possibilité 49).

The few minority characters featured in La Possibilité d’une île fail to challenge these broader stereotypes. In her cameo in the novel, Naomi Campbell dances during a gathering of Parisian fashionistas and primarily serves to contextualize Karl Lagerfeld’s designation of Danielle’s second wife as “la plus belle femme ici” (Houellebecq Possibilité 42).

Houellebecq’s sexual objectification of the most important black woman in the novel, Fadiah, is far more explicit and inexcusable. Like Danielle who describes her as
“une nègresse super bien roulée,” the author evidently finds it “difficile de dépasser à son propos le plan du strict jugement érotique” (Houellebecq Possibilité 110). Barely granting her the power of speech (her contributions include “Waaouuh! Grave!” “Bonjour!” and “une espèce de ‘Yeep!’”), Houellebecq dresses her in skimpy clothing (“Un bandeau blanc recouvrait partiellement ses seins […] une minijupe moulante,” “une sorte de body en vinyle léopard”) and defines her by her lack of sexual inhibitions (while stargazing with her Catholic in-laws, “Fadiah […] avait les cuisses écartées […] et se branlait” ; at the Elohimite Summit, she greets others by “frottant son pubis contre [leurs] fesses, posant ses mains à hauteur de [leur] bas-ventre” and rejoices when chosen by the Prophet for “une nuit en sa compagnie”) (Possibilité 113, 194, 257, 111, 113, 122, 257).

Finally, “un grand Noir vêtu comme un ouistiti de cirque” hosts an adolescent bikini contest featuring “[des] filles [qui] s'avancèrent sur scène, en bikini, pour effectuer une sorte de danse érotique” that disgusts even Houellebecq’s hero (Possibilité 262, 263). The narrator not only casts this minority character as a ringleader of reprobates, he also provocatively plays on the literal definition of ouistiti by describing the “grand Noir” in bestial terms : “en rugissant d'enthousiasme […] il posa deux ou trois questions à toutes les autres, bondissant et se rengorgeant dans son smoking lamé argent, multipliant les astuces plus ou moins obscènes” (Houellebecq Possibilité 262 : emphasis added).197 198

Although the protagonist in La Possibilité d’une île clearly parodies Houellebecq’s provocative persona, the stereotypical representation of minorities throughout the work reveals little intent or effort to surpass it.

197 Although this provocative language must be attributed to the narrator, the author who conceived the bikini contest scene included no details that might redeem the repulsive host.
198 Ouistiti, literally a small monkey with a silvery coat, may also refer to a strange or suspect person.
CARTE: *La Carte et le territoire*, on the other hand, initially appears to validate Houellebecq’s claim in *Ennemis publics* that “[ses] provocations poussives ont depuis, heureusement, fini par lasser” (8). As we observed in our chapters on Islamophobia and misogyny, his sixth novel generally lacks the provocative punch of his previous works; analogously, the racism of the speakers manifests itself in microagressions, rather than vehement attacks.

Characters in *La Carte et le territoire* exclude “quelques femmes arabes” from “[les] membres actifs, productifs de la société,” expunge “un [hôtel de charme] franco-marocain” from the *French Touch* tourism catalogue and claim that “les femmes exagérément plantureuses n’intéressaient plus que quelques Africains et quelques pervers” (Houellebecq 160, 96, 73). However, these remarks implicitly relegating Arab women to the cult of domesticity, promoting an exclusionary vision of French culture and portraying African men as sexually perverse are qualified by elements in their scenes of enunciation.

When boarding an airport shuttle on his way to photograph Houellebecq for his portrait, Jed Martin observes “surtout des jeunes, des étudiants probablement, qui partaient en voyage, ou qui en revenaient […] Des retraités également, et quelques femmes arabes” whom he deems “à peu près tout le monde à l’exception des membres actifs, productifs de la société” (Houellebecq *Carte* 160: emphasis added). The racist undertones of Jed’s categorization of these women are mitigated by their status as stay-at-home mothers “accompagnées d’enfants jeunes” (Houellebecq *Carte* 160). Like the protagonist who feels “à sa place dans cette navette,” having spent ten solitary years
preparing his portraiture series “des métiers simples” “en peintre du dimanche,” these women could also “rentrer à nouveau dans le milieu [professionnel]” when their children enter the school system (Houellebecq Carte 209, 160, 161).

When Jed and his girlfriend Olga protest the inclusion of a Franco-Moroccan hotel in Michelin’s regional tourism catalogue, French Touch, it is with reference to a fantastic and superficial vision of France. Realizing that “Olga ne connaissait au fond que Paris […] et lui-même, à vrai dire, guère davantage,” Houellebecq’s protagonist is seduced by the guide’s presentation of France “comme un pays enchanté, une mosaïque de terroirs superbes constellés de châteaux et de manoirs, d’une stupéfiante diversité mais où, partout, il faisait bon vivre” and proposes a weekend getaway to the Massif Central: “pour toi, c’est parfait […] c’est très français […] ça ne ressemble à rien d’autre que la France” (Carte 94, 95). Their objection to Franco-Moroccan fusion is not categorical: despite acknowledging that “un truc franco-marocain peut marcher pour un restaurant branché du canal Saint-Martin,” they speculate that the tourists who patronize “un hôtel de charme dans le Cantal” “[veulent] du franco-français” (Houellebecq Carte 96).

Finally, the narrator alludes to the predilection of “quelques Africains” for exceptionally full-figured women during a dubious digression on the historical evolution of beauty standards (Houellebecq Carte 73: emphasis added). Arguing that human civilization “[revenait à l’idéale de la] beauté exprimée dans la plénitude chez la femme, dans la puissance physique chez l’homme,” Houellebecq’s narrator unpersuasively relies upon an exception to prove his rule: the classically beautiful Olga--“une des cinq plus belles femmes de Paris”--nevertheless chooses Jed--“[un] plutôt joli garçon, mais dans un
genre petit et mince pas tellement recherché en général par les femmes […et loin de] l’image de la brute virile qui assure au pieu [qui] revenait en force” (Carte 73, 75, 72).

The remarks of these speakers, moreover, prove consonant with their broader characterizations in La Carte et le territoire. “Un être humain relativement inexpérimenté,” Jed Martin reveals himself to be “fort des idées reçues” (Houellebecq Carte 104, 78). Houellebecq’s protagonist employs stereotypes to capture his artistic subjects--referring to Damien Hirst’s “[visage] typiquement anglais […proche] d’un fan de base d’Arsenal” and Jeff Koons’ “apparence de vendeur de décapotables Chevrolet”--and to make sense of a society “à laquelle il n’avait jamais totalement adhéré” (Carte 10, 426). 199 The narrator’s use of internal focalization reveals frequent generalizations: Jed believes that “les habitants des zones rurales sont en général inhospitaliers, agressifs et stupides,” “La Mercedes en général est la voiture de ceux qui ne s’intéressent pas tellement aux voitures […celle de] la bourgeoisie mondiale,” “[les anciens chefs d’entreprise] ont souvent des problèmes avec la drogue,” and that an aging retiree resembles “un artiste lyrique sur le retour–un chanteur d’opérette par exemple, qui aurait obtenu ses plus grands triomphes au festival de Lamalou-les-Bains” (Houellebecq Carte 40, 355, 343, 341). 200 Meanwhile, Olga not only works in tourism--an industry that deals in cultural stereotypes--but was also raised in a Russian elite “qui ont appris au cours de leurs années de formation à admirer une certaine image de la France–galanterie,

199 Stephan and Rosenfield argue that “The major function of attaching labels to different racial and ethnic groups is to impose order on a chaotic social environment […] to divide the social world into intelligible units” (95).
200 Here, Jed’s description befits the lighthearted comedy of the operetta.
gastronomie, littérature et ainsi de suite—and se désolent ensuite régulièrement de ce que le pays réel corresponde si mal à leurs attentes” (Houellebecq *Carte* 71).

Jed’s penchant for generalization is only rivaled in *La Carte et le territoire* by the third-person narrator, who confidently defines the psychological investment of grandparents in their grandchildren, “[la curiosité] du détail de la vie des autres […] des hommes en général,” “[les] besoins de conversation des mâles d’âge moyen ou élevé [dans les pays latins],” “[les dessins des] petits garçons,” “la vie des avocats d’affaires,” the fashion sense of “un polytechnicien de modèle courant,” “[la] symbiose […] entre les restaurants et les people,” the conditions leading Japanese businessmen to “[envisager] un seppuku,” the domestic behavior and preferred reading material of “la quasi-totalité des policiers,” the shifting economic ideology of “tout un chacun en Europe occidentale,” and “[le] typique égocentrisme d’artiste” (Houellebecq 22, 35, 57, 81, 85, 182, 304-305, 396-397, 414). Despite the readiness with which he generalizes, the narrator rarely criticizes his characters’ values or behavior, failing to reproach speakers who evoke racial stereotypes in his narrative.

The representation of minorities in *La Carte et le territoire*, however, speaks more clearly to the implied author’s prejudice, displaying patterns of racial stereotyping present in his previous novels.

These migrants understandably risk encounters with “des pirates qui les dépouillaient de leurs dernières économies, quand ils ne les jetaient pas purement et simplement à la mer,” because their homeland is portrayed as rife with epidemic violence and disease (Houellebecq *Carte* 113, 190). In Franz’ gallery, Jed observes “de grandes sculptures de métal sombre, dont le traitement aurait pu s’inspirer de la statuaire africaine traditionnelle, mais dont les sujets évoquaient nettement l’Afrique contemporaine: tous les personnages agonisaient, ou se massacraient à l’aide de machettes et de Kalachnikov” (Houellebecq *Carte* 113). 201 Meanwhile, epidemics (“La recrudescence de la variole dans les pays de l’Ouest africain”) prompt billionaire philanthropists to issue a humanitarian call to arms (Houellebecq *Carte* 190). Violence similarly defines the Arab world, where photojournalists document “les restes éparpillés d’un kamikaze libanais” and reports “d’un attentat suicide particulièrement meurtrier” have become banal in the evening news (Houellebecq *Carte* 76, 328).

Moreover, minorities are often sexually objectified in *La Carte et le territoire*. In Notre-Dame de la Gare, “une jeune fille noire […] priait] face à une statue de la Vierge […] Son cul, cambré par l’agenouillement, était très précisément moulé par son pantalon de fin tissu blanc” (Houellebecq *Carte* 211). At Jean-Pierre Pernaut’s party, “Julien Lepers [était] accompagné d’une Noire magnifique qui […] portait une robe […] décolletée dans le dos jusqu’à la naissance des fesses” (Houellebecq *Carte* 238). Finally, during Jed’s second major exhibition, “François Pinault [était] flanqué d’une ravissante jeune femme […] d’origine iranienne” (Houellebecq *Carte* 197-198). Other minorities

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201 Although Jed is responsible for interpreting these sculptures, his probable reference to the Rwandan genocide nonetheless shapes the portrait of Africa in the narrative.
are more explicitly reified, serving as prostitutes “en Thaïlande […] où les prestations restent excellentes” and in France “[où] la prostitution avait même connu, sur le plan économique, une, véritable embellie, due à […] l’infatigable activité des immigrantes d’Afrique de l’Ouest” (Houellebecq *Carte* 145, 415).

The most significant minority characters in *La Carte et le territoire* fail to refute or compensate for these trends. In fact, certain characters actively reinforce them. Jed loses his virginity to “son ancienne amie malgache,” Geneviève, a fellow student at *Beaux-arts, “[qui] faisait commerce de ses charmes [pour financer ses études]”* (Houellebecq *Carte* 122, 56). Even though Jed ascribes “une réelle valeur [à son art],” Geneviève ultimately abandons both Jed and her artistic ambitions “[pour] s’installer avec un de ses clients réguliers–un avocat d’affaires” (Houellebecq *Carte* 58, 57). Later, while finishing his portraiture series, Jed solicits the services of Layla, “une escort-girl libanaise […] qui justifiait amplement les critiques dithyrambiques qu’elle recevait sur le site Niamodel.com” (Houellebecq *Carte* 121).

Other characters fail to provide entirely positive portraits of minorities. The state provides the protagonist’s father with a caretaker “une Sénégalaise acariâtre et même méchante appelée Fatty qui […] refusait de changer les draps plus d’une fois par mois” (Houellebecq *Carte* 18). When Jed clears out his father’s house in the banlieue, he uncomfortably takes note of a menacing “Noir qui l’observait […] une baraque impressionnante, au crâne rasé, [qui] devait mesurer plus d’un mètre quatre-vingt-dix et

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202 Although “Jed trouvait que cette expression surannée lui convenait mieux que le terme anglo-saxon d’escort,” the humorous, lighthearted tone does not change Geneviève’s occupation as a prostitute and primarily sexual role in the novel (Houellebecq *Carte* 56).
peser dans les cent kilos” (Houellebecq *Carte* 18). 203 Finally, one of the Lebanese detectives working on Houellebecq’s murder, Michel Khoury, possesses “cette qualité si rare chez les policiers d’*inspirer confiance*,” but also stupefies his colleagues with the subjectivity of his analysis: “la tranquille assurance avec laquelle […] affirmait ces choses, appartenant […] au domaine éminemment complexe et incertain de la psychologie humaine […] comme s’il relatait des faits expérimentaux, observables” (Houellebecq *Carte* 311, 314).

Although the author’s “provocations poussives” are virtually absent from *La Carte et le territoire*, the minorities populating Jed Martin’s world only reinforce the trends of racial prejudice running through his oeuvre (Ennemis 8). 205

SOUMISSION: While the coincidental release of *Soumission* on the day of the Charlie Hebdo shooting certainly stoked controversy, the novel’s premise of a Muslim government in France already announced the provocative author’s return to form. But in revisiting the thematic terrain of his most significant scandal, Houellebecq may have taken greater precautions to preempt accusations of inciting racial hatred and additional appearances in court.

203 This menacing figure echoes a banlieue scene in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, where the hero encounters “Deux jeunes Arabes [qui l’ont] suivi du regard, l’un d’eux a craché par terre à mon passage” (Houellebecq 159).

204 Michel Khoury’s talents as a detective could be a nod to the novelist’s psychological analysis.

205 It must be noted that the author’s portrait of non-minorities is not always positive. We might think of two obvious examples—the murderers in *La Carte et le territoire*, Adolphe Petissaud “un pervers grave, qui exerçait sa perversion à un niveau inhabituel” and Patrick Le Braouzec “une brute […] sans scrupules” “[dont la] carrière de délinquant s’achevait comme elle s’était toujours déroulée, dans la stupidité et la violence” (Houellebecq 388-389, 387). However, the problem emerges from the consistently unflattering, provocative and stereotypical portrayals of the rare minority characters who appear Houellebecq’s novels.
By articulating racial discourse through immigration, the author indeed appears more circumspect in *Soumission*. Houellebecq’s characters systematically tie France’s immigrant population to cultural upheaval, conjuring up fears of *le grand remplacement*: the protagonist, François concurs with “les ‘Cassandres’ […qui] prévoyaient une guerre civile entre les immigrés musulmans et les populations autochtones d’Europe occidentale”; his colleague at the Sorbonne, Lempereur, predicts that “l’immigration […] accentuera encore le phénomène,” sounding the death knell for “l’humanisme athée”; and the university president Robert Rediger argues that “l’arrivée massive de populations immigrées [musulmanes] empreintes d’une culture traditionnelle encore marquée par les hiérarchies naturelles, la soumission de la femme et le respect dû aux anciens constituait une chance historique pour le réarmement moral et familial de l’Europe” (*Soumission* 55, 70 276).

Sociological analysis of immigration demographics underscores the racial implications of these remarks: “[the] social acceptance enjoyed by most second-or third-generation whites means that their formal minority status […] is of little significance when compared with the stigmatization experienced by many of the children and grandchildren of African or Asian immigrants,” particularly those “originating in the Maghreb […]who] have been both quantitatively dominant and qualitatively hardest hit” (Hargreaves *Immigration* 29, 26). Houellebecq’s narrator confirms this racial subtext, specifying that the aforementioned “guerre civile” will be “[un] conflit ethnique” pitting “le camp des blancs […]contre] toute installation de Noirs [et] d’Arabes” (*Soumission* 55, 73). The scenes of enunciation, however, feature significant factors that cast doubt over the racialized discourse on immigration in *Soumission*. 
Reminding the reader that “Cassandre offrait l’exemple de prédictions pessimistes constamment réalisées,” François espouses alarmist predictions of civil war and denounces “[ceux qui] ne fassent que répéter l’aveuglement des Troyens” (Houellebecq, *Soumission* 55, 56). But the details of the scene undermine his pessimistic predictions. On the evening of the first presidential debate, Houellebecq’s narrator confesses to his political apathy and ignorance: “Beaucoup d’hommes s’intéressent à la politique et à la guerre, mais j’appréciais peu ces sources de divertissement, je me sentais aussi politisé qu’une serviette de toilette” (*Soumission*, 50). He then proceeds to squander his latest opportunity to educate himself, “[ratant] une grande partie des arguments échangés” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 54). Had he attentively observed the debate, Houellebecq’s hero may have been placated by the politicians, “[qui] multipliaient les marques de déférence mutuelles […] donnaient l’impression d’être à peu près d’accord sur tout […] et se désolidarisaient avec vigueur de [la violence politique]” (*Soumission* 54-55).

Instead, François places his faith in “un site Internet identitaire,” whose report of deadly “affrontements […] entre des militants d’extrême-droite et un groupe de jeunes Africains” “[est vite démenti par] le ministère de l’Intérieur” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 54). He firmly entrenches himself in conspiracist thought, taking the absence of coverage on “les affrontements inter-ethniques” as evidence of their existence (Houellebecq *Soumission*, 56).

Lemperœur’s prediction of “[une guerre civile] entre les musulmans et le reste de la population” is similarly qualified by the scene of enunciation (Houellebecq *Soumission* 70). After inviting François for a night-cap, he claims that the Socialist government engineered a “black-out total” in the media, because “toute image de violences urbaines,
c’est des voix en plus pour le Front national” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 56, 66).

Embellishing his conspiracy theory, he suggests that the *Front national* is increasing pressure “[par des provocations] anti-islam” ordered through untraceable “passerelles” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 67). Like Houellebecq’s hero, Lempereur is informed by xenophobic and racist identitarians : although he dishonestly claims to have cut ties with “[le] mouvement identitaire,” he shares their opposition to “la colonisation musulmane” and “l’idéologie multiculturaliste […] oppressante,” and betrays an intimate familiarity with their literature, offering his guest “un des [pamphlets les] plus synthétiques, avec les statistiques les plus fiables” (*Soumission* 68, 71, 69).

The scene of enunciation similarly undermines Rediger’s positive spin on the socio-cultural impact of Muslim immigrants. Because the Sorbonne’s new statutes forbid non-Muslim professors, Robert Rediger attempts to persuade François to convert and return to the faculty, showering him with flattery and gifting him a copy of his best-seller *Dix questions sur l’islam*. Upon returning home, François does his due diligence and researches Rediger’s publications. Despite finding *Dix questions sur l’islam* “très agréable à lire,” Houellebecq’s hero questions the author’s arguments—“la démonstration [lui] paraissait [parfois] fausse” (*Soumission* 274). His research also uncovers earlier articles in which “il s’était montré nettement moins prudent,” arguing in favor of global jihad and economic inequality (Houellebecq *Soumission* 270). Rediger’s remarks on immigrants are found in his most far-fetched argument; he asks “ses anciens camarades […] identitaires” to embrace Islam because “l’Église catholique était devenue incapable de s’opposer à la décadence des mœurs” “l’Europe occidentale n’était plus en état de se sauver elle-même,” “[et] qu’une hostilité irraisonnée à l’islam les empêche de reconnaître
[…qu’ils] étaient, sur l’essentiel, en parfait accord avec les musulmans” (Houellebecq Soumission 275-276).

The broader characterization of these speakers provides further grounds to question their prejudiced vision of France’s immigrant and minority populations. The author imbues Godefroy Lempereur with features that potentially complement his eurocentrism, racism and xenophobia: beyond “[sa] peau très blanche,” “[et son] cachet intellectuel de droite” noted by the narrator, his “hôtel particulier, cossu et élégant, typiquement Second empire” literally places him in a colonial framework and a position of privilege (Houellebecq Soumission 57, 60, 65: emphasis added).  

The author’s portrayal of the Sorbonne president as an unscrupulous political opportunist should also elicit the reader’s suspicions: “ce côté discours bien rodé […] rapprochait inévitablement Rediger du champ politique”(Houellebecq Soumission 270). Confessing past ties to the identitarian movement whose members were “pas très loin” from racism and fascism, he embraces Islam upon the closure of an Art Nouveau bar that he interprets as a harbinger of Europe’s “suicide” (Houellebecq Soumission 255, 256).  

His practice of Islam proves piecemeal, unorthodox and even “blasphématoire”–Rediger continues to consume alcohol and draws an analogy between “l’absolue soumission de la femme à l’homme, telle que la décrit Histoire d’O, et la soumission de l’homme à Dieu, telle que l’envisage l’islam” (Houellebecq Soumission 260). His sudden transformation into a best-selling Muslim author “célèbre pour ses positions pro-palestiniennes” clearly

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206 Even though France’s colonial expansion ramped up after 1870 in the Third Republic, the Second Empire already encompassed Algeria.

207 While Houellebecq’s hero’s observation that “l’hôtel Métropole […] avait conservé une grande partie de son ancienne splendeur” casting doubts over Rediger’s claims about Europe’s decline, François still ultimately yields to his proselytism (Soumission 279).
constitutes a machiavellian plot to secure fortune, privilege and power—a luxury apartment in the fifth, “un majordome,” “une épouse de quarante ans pour la cuisine, une de quinze ans pour d’autres choses,” the Sorbonne presidency and a likely nomination as “ministre des Affaires étrangères” (Houellebecq Soumission 36, 243, 262, 298).

The narrator’s portrait in Soumission likewise undermines the authority of his predictions of impending ethnic and religious conflicts. While his characteristic misanthropy, egocentrism, elitism, misogyny and Islamophobia render François generally unsympathetic to the reader, it is his unapologetic ignorance that proves most pertinent to his claims about contemporary France. After confessions that “[il ne connaissait] au fond pas bien l’histoire,” “[il ne prêtait] jusqu’à présent qu’une attention anecdotique, superficielle, à la vie politique,” “[et il se sentait déconcerté] que l’histoire politique puisse jouer un rôle dans [sa] propre vie,” his conclusion that “[la France] se dirigeait depuis longtemps vers la guerre civile” hardly appears compelling (Houellebecq Soumission 104, 144, 116).

Given the doubts cast over the racialized discourse on immigration in Soumission by the scenes of enunciation and characterization of the speakers, the author’s elusive position can only be elucidated through his representation of minority characters. Do Houellebecq’s minority figures validate or undermine the problematic associations between immigration, fundamentalist Islam and cultural conflict in his seventh novel?

Without a doubt the most significant minority figure in the narrative, Mohammed Ben Abbes, only validates fears of France’s insidious Islamization through

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208 Mohammed Ben Abbes is not quite a full-fledged character in Soumission: his ideas and discourse are almost exclusively reported by other characters “Plus que tout autre, rappelait-il cette fois-ci, il avait bénéficié de la méritocratie républicaine ; moins que tout autre, il souhaitait porter atteinte à un système auquel il devait tout, et jusqu’à cet honneur suprême de se présenter au suffrage du peuple français” (108). The only possible direct quote of the Muslim president concerns “[ses] réformes [qui] visaient à ‘redonner toute sa place, toute sa dignité à la famille’” (Houellebecq Carte 199).

209 François suggests that Ben Abbes gets away with reactionary politics thanks to “[la gauche] tétanisée par son antiracisme constitutif […] qui était incapable de le combattre” (Houellebecq Soumission 154). Again, the reader will recall a similar line of reasoning in La Possibilité d’une île, where the protagonist suggests that he gets away with his misogynist stand-up thanks to “[sa] tête d’Arabe […] et le seul contenu résiduel de la gauche en ces années […] l’antiracisme, ou plus exactement le racisme antiblancs” (Houellebecq 23)
As an exceptional historical figure and “vraiment un type remarquable,” Ben Abbes may not necessarily reflect France’s typical minority population (Houellebecq *Soumission* 289). However, many of the novel’s other minority characters only lend further credence to the purported rise of fundamentalist Islam.

François encounters increasing numbers of Muslim minorities at the Sorbonne: “un Noir bonhomme, un Sénégalais” “[qui] avait eu, lui aussi, à se convertir pour être réembauché [comme vigile…s’il n’était pas] déjà musulman,” “un groupe de Maghrébines voilées” in his colleague’s class, and “trois types […] deux Arabes et un Noir [qui] bloquaient l’entrée [de sa salle de cours]” while keeping tabs on their sisters--“deux filles d’origine maghrébine […] vêtues en burqa noire” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 119, 266-267, 28, 32-33). As la Fraternité musulmane ascends the polls, “[les] filles en burqa” overtake the institution--“elles avançaient de front par trois dans les couloirs […] comme si elles étaient déjà maîtresses du terrain” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 78).

Minorities, moreover, are the most clearly identifiable participants in the rumoured “violences dans les banlieues, les affrontements inter-ethniques” “[qui] chaque fois […] avait au départ une provocation anti-islam” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 56, 68). On the day of the presidential debates, François learns of “des affrontements […] à Montfermeil entre des militants d’extrême-droite et un groupe de jeunes Africains […] suite d’une profanation de la mosquée” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 54). When Houellebecq’s hero later comes upon the aftermath of such a conflict at a highway rest stop, he finds the corpses of a cashier and “deux jeunes Maghrébins, vêtus de l’uniforme typique des banlieues,” whom he catches red-handed--“l’un d’entre eux tenait encore un pistolet-mitrailleur à la main” (*Soumission* 130). Meanwhile, the author systematically
anonymizes the other violent militants in *Soumission* : “une quinzaine de types […] masqués, cagoulés, armés de mitrailleuses” ; “des bandes armées” ; “des groupes d’hommes masqués, très mobiles, armés de fusils d’assaut et de pistolets mitrailleurs” (Houellebecq 72, 136 121).

Finally, while not directly adhering to the narrative of islamization in *Soumission*, the remaining minorities problematically support the broader trend of racialized sexual objectification in Houellebecq’s oeuvre. After *la Fraternité musulmane* emerges as a frontrunner from the first round of the presidential election, François has an epiphany that “tout pouvait disparaître” while ogling “[une] petite Noire […] au cul moulé dans un jean […]qui] allait certainement disparaître, ou du moins être sérieusement rééduquée” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 90). “Nadiabeurette […]une prostituée d’origine tunisienne [qui] avait complètement échappé à ce mouvement de réislamisation qui avait massivement frappé les jeunes de sa génération,” proves boring, “conventionnelle,” and generally unremarkable, serving to shatter François’ erotic fantasies of Muslim women piqued by “[les] circonstances politiques globales”--“[il se sentait] capable de l’enculer, sans fatigue et sans joie, pendant des heures entières” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 185, 186). 210 Another Maghrebi prostitute, Rachida is even more intensely reified; beyond explicit sexual details, she is flatly characterized as “une Marocaine de 22 ans” (Houellebecq *Soumission* 197).

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210 In yet another example of Houellebecq’s limited vocabulary of racial types, Nadia, “[qui] avait l’intention de continuer jusqu’à la fin de ses études,” strongly echoes Geneviève from *La Carte et le territoire*, “[qui] faisait commerce de ses charmes [pour financer ses études]” (*Soumission* 186-187 ; *Carte* 56).
The racialized discourse on immigration in *Soumission* is certainly subject to significant attenuating factors: Houellebecq’s speakers cite questionable sources (“un site Internet identitaire [démenti par le ministère de l’Intérieur]” “[des images] sur Rutube”), promote conspiracy theories (“[le gouvernement a] décidé le black-out total”), espouse radical ideologies (“un mouvement identitaire,” “une idée […] blasphématoire [de l’islam]”), make specious arguments “[dont] la démonstration […] paraissait fausse,” and confess to paying “une attention anecdotique, superficielle à la vie politique” (54,66, 68, 84 274, 144). Despite these considerable doubts, the author’s representation of minorities ultimately bolsters their claims. The few minority figures in *Soumission* spared from “ce mouvement de réislamisation,” nevertheless point to the implied author’s prejudice by reinforcing his broader tendency to treat minorities as sexual objects in his fiction (Houellebecq 185).

CHAPTER CONCLUSION: Trends from our narratological analysis of the discourse on race in Michel Houellebecq’s fictions provide a much clearer portrait of the author’s alleged racism. The racist discourse featured in Houellebecq’s novels runs the gamut from microaggressions (“Un truc franco-marocain […] ne peut [sûrement pas] marcher […] pour un hôtel de charme,” “[Aïcha était] une fille sérieuse”) to cases of inciting racial hatred and violence (“NIQUE LES BÉDOUINS,” “Défonçons l’anus des nègres” “fais-toi donc la main sur un jeune nègre! […] Il te faudra bien sûr tuer le type”) with countless generalizations in between (*Carte* 96 ; *Plateforme* 96; *Possibilité* 96, 195; *Extension* 136).
These expressions of racism, however, are typically qualified by remarkable and sometimes extenuating circumstances in the scenes of enunciation. Racist remarks are made in the midst of homicidal plots, projects to commercialize sexual tourism, awkward conversations in tourism agencies or hostess bars, alcohol fueled confessions that are beyond the pale, acts of child abuse, imploding marriages, bouts of crippling depression, advertisements for international marital agencies, shock comedy routines, traumatizing near-death experiences and far-right propaganda campaigns. Houellebecq’s racist speakers, moreover, are often endowed with negative qualities that undermine their lucidity and authority—pathological pessimism, acute social anxiety, paranoia, clinical insanity, burn-out, misanthropy, sociopathy, egocentrism, pedophilia, inhumanity, amorality, disinterest in politics, philistinism, ignorance of history, penchants for provocation and compulsive stereotyping.

Yet, despite the doubts engendered by the aforementioned attenuating factors, telling trends in the representation of minorities across these novels reveal the racial prejudice of the implied author. Houellebecq’s minority characters overwhelmingly fall into one of two categories: menaces to society (agents of violence, economic burdens, religious zealots, radical political forces) or sexual objects (professional or amateur prostitutes, scantily clad eye-candy and ravishing arm-candy, promiscuous and perverse individuals). By portraying minorities as either antagonistic or servile, at odds with French society or in service of the Français de souche, these novels testify not only to the author’s limited vocabulary of racial stereotypes, but also to the barriers to assimilation faced by non-white citizens issued from immigration.
DISsertation conclusion:

This dissertation seeks to address two troubling trends in the criticism of Michel Houellebecq’s novels—the remarkable polarization of his reception and the exceptional influence of the author’s persona on readings of his works. Other scholars have taken note of these phenomena: Raphaël Baroni observes that “de nombreux commentateurs ont fondé leur analyse en niant […] les frontières qui séparent traditionnellement les opinions de l’auteur de celles […] ses personnages” while Liesbeth Korthals Altes asserts that “the [striking] tendency in the reception of Houellebecq towards a personalist rather than work-centered approach” yields two vastly different visions of the novelist as a politically incorrect engaged author or a phony “product of marketing and mediatic strategies” (Baroni 75; Altes Authorship revisited 111, 113-114).

Our analysis was predicated on the conviction that a systematic, work-centered narratological approach to Michel Houellebecq’s prose fiction would make a meaningful contribution to the fierce critical debate that seems to have reached a stalemate, with critics either firmly entrenched in their camps or, alternatively, refusing to pick a side. A clearer, more reliable picture of the implied author can be derived by carefully examining the presentation of the Islamophobic, misogynistic and racist discourse in Houellebecq’s novels—identifying attenuating factors in the scenes of enunciation and the characterizations of the speakers and the narrator before weighing them against the portrayal of Muslim, female and minority characters.
Our analysis of Michel Houellebecq’s public posture in Chapter 1 bolsters this work-centered approach to his novels. Lending credence to the author’s claims in *Ennemis publics* that his publicity strategy shifted around the publication of *Les Particules élémentaires* [1998], there seems to be a marked ratcheting up of provocation between his lucid critique of his subject’s racism in *H.P. Lovecraft, contre le monde, contre la vie* [1991] and his later essays, “La question pédophile” [1997] and “L’Humanité, second stade” [1998] in which he sympathizes with pedophiles and ruthlessly ridicules feminists. Michel Houellebecq’s self-representations in his sixth novel *La Carte et le territoire* [2010] and Guillaume Nicloux’s film *L’enlèvement de Michel Houellebecq* [2014], moreover, make a case for separating the author’s public figure from his novels by dramatizing the Barthesian death of the author and the reading public’s fixation on his persona.

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 demonstrate how expressions of Islamophobia, misogyny and racism in Houellebecq’s novels are systematically subject to attenuating factors that undermine the authority of the speakers and preserve the author’s possible difference of opinion. Victims of Islamic terrorism, identitarians and disillusioned expatriates from Arab countries discuss Islam; middle-aged sex tourists, post-gender post-humans, gynophobic single men, alpha males and self-proclaimed machos discuss women; individuals who shamelessly boast about their racism, attempt to publish racist tracts and perform shock comedy discuss minorities. Controversial statements are further qualified by more or less serious extenuating circumstances: misguided jokes, career burnout, an alcohol induced stupor, mental illness, homicidal plans and neo-liberal plots to profit from sex tourism in developing countries. Yet despite the many doubts cast over the
controversial discourse in Houellebecq’s novels, their portrayal of minority characters not only fails to provide a compelling counterargument, it overwhelmingly coincides with the reductive ideas of his Islamophobic, misogynistic and racist speakers.

So, based on this narratological analysis of Michel Houellebecq’s novels, the implied author broadly corresponds to the public author’s unsavory reputation as an Islamophobe, “réactionnaire, cynique, raciste et misogynne honteux” (Houellebecq Ennemis 7). From this perspective, the author appears to package himself as a provocateur and satirist as a means of expressing his Islamophobia, misogyny and racism with impunity.211

These results, however, by no means justify a personalist approach to literature. A personalist approach could also lead critics prematurely to exactly the opposite conclusion. A faithful portrait of the implied author’s values can only be derived from the text and the text alone. Attention should certainly be paid to an author’s public persona when it is particularly provocative or mediatized, but only in so far as critics should strive to control this potential source of bias. Rather than drawing attention away from the novels, a provocative author should only recenter our focus upon them.

The problematic nature of Michel Houellebecq’s novels should not discourage future readers and critics. First, like Céline, whom he reproaches for “[ses idées] très cons, genre antisémitisme,” Houellebecq without a doubt presents abject ideas in his writing (Ennemis 61). But, like Céline, Houellebecq’s novels also provide thought-

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211 In other words, the author is not far removed from his analog, Daniel1 in La Possibilité d’une île, who declares “le plus grand bénéfice du métier d’humoriste, et plus généralement de l’attitude humoristique dans la vie, c’est de pouvoir se comporter comme un salaud en toute impunité, et même de pouvoir grassement rentabiliser son abjection […] avec l’approbation générale” (23).
provoking portraits of modern life: workplace mental health (*Extension du domaine de la lutte*), transhumanism (*Les Particules élémentaires*), UFO religions (*Lanzarote*), neocolonialism (*Plateforme*), atomization and social media (*La Possibilité d’une île*), contemporary art (*La Carte et le territoire*), and the future of French politics (*Soumission*). Second, Houellebecq’s novels offer a particularly compelling and challenging subject for literary analysis. In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth deemed the implied author’s “emotions and judgments,” “love and hate” “the very stuff out of which great fiction is made” (86). The unreliable narration, unstable irony, humor, metafiction, autofiction, extenuating circumstances, ambiguities, incongruities, questionable characters and suggestive statements in Houellebecq’s novels are “precisely what makes his work both aesthetically and ethically interesting” (Altes *Revisiting Authorship* 110).
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