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## Christophe Guilluy's *France Périphérique* and the absence of race from Michel Houellebecq's *Sérotonine*

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### ABSTRACT

*Sérotonine* (2019) is Michel Houellebecq's most overtly politically engaged novel to date: the novel's content and the framing strategies that Houellebecq employed at the time of its publication converge to encourage readers to interpret the views expressed therein as Houellebecq's own. This holds particularly true in relation to the apparently genuine concern that *Sérotonine* exudes for the regions of France that geographer Christophe Guilluy labels 'la France périphérique'. Reading Houellebecq's novel alongside the work of Guilluy, for whom Houellebecq has expressed respect, also helps to explain the surprising absence of protagonists who express racist views against French citizens of postcolonial immigrant descent, or depictions of race-related conflict, from *Sérotonine*. That absence does not imply a corresponding absence of racism. Rather, excluding non-white French populations from his narrative allows Houellebecq to echo Guilluy by implicitly excluding them from both the marginalized communities for which his novel expresses such concern and, more broadly, the category of 'French'.

### RÉSUMÉ

*Sérotonine* (2019) est, jusqu'à présent, le roman de Michel Houellebecq le plus ouvertement politiquement engagé: et le contenu du roman et les stratégies de cadrage que Houellebecq a employé dans les semaines autour de sa publication encouragent le lecteur à interpréter les prises de position qui y sont articulées comme celles de Houellebecq lui-même. Cette observation est particulièrement pertinente en ce qui concerne la préoccupation, apparemment sincère, qui en ressort pour les régions de la France que le géographe Christophe Guilluy a baptisées 'la France périphérique'. Houellebecq a exprimé publiquement son respect pour Guilluy; une lecture croisée de *Sérotonine* avec les travaux de ce dernier permet d'expliquer l'absence surprenante de personnages qui expriment des opinions racistes envers les citoyens français issus de l'immigration postcoloniale, ou de représentations de conflit lié à la race, du roman. Cette absence n'implique pas que le racisme soit également absent. Au contraire, le fait d'exclure les populations françaises non-blanches de son ouvrage permet à Houellebecq, tout comme Guilluy, de les exclure de façon implicite des communautés marginalisées pour lesquelles son roman exprime tant de préoccupation, et, plus globalement, de la catégorie de 'Français'.

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In a May 2017 television interview, Michel Houellebecq lamented his own ignorance regarding the political concerns of 'la France ... qui hésite entre Marine Le Pen et rien': populations living outside of big cities, marginalized by economic globalization. His lack of understanding of the preoccupations of people living in 'les zones périphériques décrites par Christophe Guilluy' constituted, he said, 'une faute professionnelle assez lourde' for a contemporary novelist (Sgherri 2017). His most recent novel, *Sérotonine* (2019b), reads like an attempt to redress that failing. Its narrator, Florent-Claude, leaves his Paris home for Normandy, seeing for himself the impoverishment of inhabitants of rural and peri-urban France; their anger at that situation fuels rural unrest that erupts into violence. This article explores how Houellebecq's novel depicts the problems facing these regions, and particularly how its problematic racialization of them as white echoes ideas popularized by the geographer Guilluy.

It approaches the issue by discussing two striking features of *Sérotonine*. Firstly, the novel is Houellebecq's most overtly politically engaged to date, exuding distress at the dire situation facing inhabitants of what Guilluy labels 'la France périphérique', personified in Florent's friend Aymeric d'Harcourt. Seth Armus (2017) and Russell Williams (2019) note that the last novel Houellebecq wrote before *Sérotonine*, *Soumission* (2015a), was already more obviously engaged than his earlier fiction, although they diverge over how this impacts the novel's literary qualities. Armus (2017, 127–128) sees a 'serious work of engagement', in which 'Houellebecq sets a brilliant tableau' of contemporary France; Williams (2019, 74–75) describes the more overt politics of *Soumission*, which includes numerous dog whistles aligning its contents with hard-right discourses, as rendering it 'ultimately less inventive' than Houellebecq's earlier works. This paper agrees with the latter position, arguing that *Sérotonine* continues a shift from the literary towards the quasi-polemical that Houellebecq started in *Soumission*.

The second notable feature of *Sérotonine* that the essay explores is a surprising absence of the references to racial tensions that are consistently present in Houellebecq's earlier novels. Reading the novel alongside Guilluy's work, the paper argues that the near disappearance of such material does not imply that Houellebecq's views on race have evolved; rather, excluding non-white French people of postcolonial immigrant descent from his narrative allows him to echo Guilluy by excluding them from both the marginalized communities for whom *Sérotonine* expresses such concern and the broader category of 'French'. The article's central argument is thus that, while the novel contains little overt racism against postcolonial immigrants to France or their descendants, enough evidence remains to suggest that it reproduces a deeply problematic racial politics: a politics echoing the arguments of both Guilluy and a broader transnational hard and far right.

## Christophe Guilluy

Before exploring how *Sérotonine*'s depiction of France resonates with Guilluy's ideas, it will be helpful to briefly summarize those which are most relevant. Since the mid-2000s, Guilluy has been arguing that a growing divide separates France's twenty-five (an apparently arbitrary number) biggest cities, which have profited from capitalist globalization, and a 'France périphérique' impoverished by the same economic developments. His diagnosis differs from the classic description of an urban-rural split dividing French

society, his 'France périphérique' including peri-urban areas and small towns that would normally be considered urban alongside rural regions: peripheral France, put simply, is everything that is too far from the 'métropoles mondialisées' to be anything other than impoverished by economic globalization (Guilluy 2014, 26–32).

Although critics deride Guilluy's analysis as simplistic and methodologically questionable (see for example Ballif et al. 2018), such criticisms are not this article's focus. For the current purposes, more problematic still are the racialized underpinnings of his arguments. Although he partly blames gentrification for the problems of working-class communities in peripheral France, whom he argues were forced out of the metropolises when an influx of highly qualified workers drove up house prices, he also blames immigration. He (2014, 40–42) claims without supporting evidence that mass migration has forced what he labels 'les catégories populaires traditionnelles', or 'd'origine française ou d'immigration ancienne', barely disguised dog whistles for white people, out of traditional working-class metropolitan neighbourhoods. They do not, he (2014, 134, 139–141) argues, want to 'devenir minoritaire' in these neighbourhoods, and particularly the *banlieues* of big cities; he apparently considers this 'insécurité culturelle' wholly justified. He thus restricts his concern for the 'catégories populaires' to those of them who are white, implying that non-white working-class people do not share their problems, and even help cause them. At times, Guilluy echoes the discourse of the *grand remplacement* conspiracy theory popularized by far-right polemicist Renaud Camus (2011), who claims that postcolonial immigrants and their descendants wish to 'replace' France's 'native' whites: Guilluy (2014, 13–14, 47–48, 64–65) blames the rising Rassemblement national (RN) vote in southern France on the juxtaposition of 'une population autochtone vieillissante et une population d'origine immigrée plus jeune', claiming that 'la substitution des populations ... est dans tous [sic] les têtes'.

Among the numerous problematic aspects of Guilluy's arguments, he implies that peripheral France is entirely white and the *banlieues* are entirely non-white. Ignoring the more complex demographic reality enables him to treat the problems of peripheral France and those of a putative 'white working class' as synonymous, claiming, for example, that:

Majoritairement concentrés dans les quartiers de logements sociaux des grandes métropoles, les immigrés bénéficient d'un accès aux zones d'emploi les plus actives du pays. À l'inverse, beaucoup d'ouvriers non immigrés vivent en dehors des zones d'emplois les plus actives, souvent dans cette France périphérique et industrielle en crise (Guilluy 2014, 40–41).

That Guilluy refers to non-white populations indiscriminately as 'les immigrés', not differentiating between actual immigrants and their French-born descendants, hints at how legitimately French he considers them to be. He underlines his assumption that metropolitan and peripheral working-class districts are effectively racially segregated by blaming immigration, rather than globalized economics, for social problems in the former. He (2014, 13–14) claims that 'si les difficultés des banlieues sont réelles, elles sont d'abord liées à l'émergence d'une société multiculturelle et à la gestion des flux migratoires, mais en aucun cas aux retombées d'une économie mondialisée'. By blaming immigration and multiculturalism, rather than globalized economics, for problems facing the *banlieues* like unemployment or high crime rates, Guilluy suggests that such issues are generated by the putative cultural alterity of their inhabitants; the implication appears to be that these

racialized populations are congenitally criminal. He even claims that they benefit from globalization, rather than being harmed by it like their peripheral compatriots. The metropolitan job market ‘ne s’adresse plus à tout le monde, mais surtout aux plus qualifiés et aux peu ou pas qualifiés’; the geographical proximity of (non-white) metropolitan working-class populations to that job market grants them, but not (white) peripheral populations, access to unqualified jobs in the metropolises (Guilluy 2014, 8–9, 13–14). Guilluy apparently does not consider that being restricted to precarious, poorly paid employment and dilapidated social housing looks more like exploitation than inclusion.

For Guilluy, then, the problems globalized economics cause for peripheral France and those he believes white French people face in an increasingly ethnically diverse nation are indistinguishable. He thus uses language traditionally associated with the political left, critiquing the impacts of neoliberal globalization on working-class populations. In practice, however, his arguments are often barely distinguishable from those of the far right. He (2020, 62–63) claims, for example, that ‘c’est en cassant le rythme d’une immigration perpétuelle que les pouvoirs publics pourraient agir sur le contexte social’. Even when he argues for greater social protections, then, he explicitly underlines his belief that such reforms can only be implemented if immigration is first reduced.

It is, then, unsurprising that hard and far-right political actors have embraced Guilluy’s work, which allows them to characterize xenophobic policies as representing working-class interests while obscuring the socio-economic drivers of class inequality. Under Laurent Wauquiez’s leadership, Les Républicains (LR) were the party to do so most overtly, reproducing both Guilluy’s territorial analysis and his dog-whistle racism (Albertini 2020). The RN have less explicitly adopted Guilluy’s territorial analysis, remaining more attached to a traditional urban/rural binary, but their rhetoric has markedly shifted towards a similar use of pseudo-leftist language to promote traditional far-right solutions (see Mondon and Winter 2020, 109–112). The shift has, at least partly, been legitimated by reactionaries who identify as part of the left like Guilluy or Jean-Claude Michéa (2017).

Such discourses reflect a broader international context in which hard-right politicians and their supporters claim to represent an embattled ‘white working class’. In March 2016, Fox News described then U.S. presidential candidate (and billionaire property heir) Donald Trump as ‘the working-class candidate’; on the day of the 2016 referendum on the United Kingdom’s membership of the European Union, right-wing tabloid *The Daily Express* labelled the Brexit movement a ‘working-class revolution’ (cited in Mondon and Winter 2020, 107–108). This transnational hard-right often echo Guilluy by using territorial inequalities as a rhetorical tool to split the working class along racial lines. In October 2016, prior to Trump’s election victory, former United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) leader (and former banker) Nigel Farage wrote that ‘blue-collar workers in the valleys of South Wales angry with Chinese steel dumping voted Brexit in their droves. In the American rust belt, traditional manufacturing industries have declined, and it is to these people that Trump speaks very effectively’ (cited in Mondon and Winter 2020, 107–108). As Aurélien Mondon and Aaron Winter (2020, 109) note, racializing working-class communities outside of large towns as white, and scapegoating non-white people as partly to blame for their struggles, distracts attention from socio-economic solutions that might help working-class people (white or otherwise):

The elite, seen as out of touch and contemptuous, is still targeted through populism. Yet the real enemy is clearly the other, whether immigrants, Muslims, refugees or their allies. In this discourse, it is them, not the elite, who threaten jobs and resources. The construction of a “white working class” is therefore a displacement of rightful anger in the form of a struggle in which the enemy is defined only by race, ethnicity or foreign nationality rather than class (Mondon and Winter 2020, 115–116).

If Guilluy validates the claims of the French hard right to represent the ‘peripheral’ working class, the broader transnational hard right also has its enablers. Political scientists Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin claimed that the 2016 Brexit vote was fuelled by a ‘left behind’ working class in deindustrialized regions, who feared a loss of cultural identity in ‘a more diverse and rapidly changing Britain’ (cited in Mondon and Winter 2020, 107–108). Venture capitalist J.D. Vance, meanwhile, echoed Farage’s suggestion that the overtly racist Trump appealed to impoverished working classes in rural America (cited in Mondon and Winter 2020, 107–108). Guilluy himself has echoed the latter claim, questionably transposing his own work from the French context into that of the U.S. by claiming that:

C’est “l’Amérique périphérique” qui a voté Trump, celle des territoires désindustrialisés et ruraux qui est aussi celle des ouvriers, employés, travailleurs indépendants ou paysans. Ceux qui étaient hier au cœur de la machine économique en sont aujourd’hui bannis (Pétreault 2016).

Mondon and Winter (2020, 101, 109–119) note that such claims are based on misrepresentation. Once factors like abstention are accounted for, claims that recent far-right electoral gains in France, the U.K., and the U.S.A. have been enabled by a surge of working-class support outside large towns do not withstand scrutiny. Neither the far right nor commentators like Guilluy represent a ‘white working class’ so much as they ventriloquize it to legitimize themselves as voices of ‘the people’ (a concept with which the working class is typically assumed to have a privileged relationship, even if this rarely translates into redistributive economic policies). Not only the racism of commentators like Guilluy must be challenged, but so should their claim to speak even for those working-class people who are white.

### **Sérotonine, political engagement, and the European Union**

Houellebecq’s novel does neither, instead depicting its protagonist, Florent-Claude, travelling through an impoverished peripheral France that recalls Guilluy’s descriptions. Depressed, Florent-Claude abandons an unfulfilling life working for the Ministère de l’agriculture in Paris to visit aristocrat turned dairy farmer Aymeric in Normandy. After his friend commits suicide during a stand-off with riot police at a demonstration against E.U. agricultural policies, Florent-Claude continues chasing the happiness of his youth: remaining in Normandy, he tracks down his beloved ex-girlfriend Camille, who left him several years earlier after he was unfaithful. However, he cannot summon the courage to approach her, returns to Paris, and ends the novel waiting to die in an anonymous studio apartment.

The predicament of Aymeric, who graduated with Florent from the Institut national agronomique, symbolizes Houellebecq’s perception of the problems facing peripheral France. Upon graduation, Aymeric spurned a conventional career path in the agri-food

industry, instead following his passion by opening a dairy farm ‘basé sur une production raisonnable et de qualité’. His profitability has, however, been hamstrung from the outset by unfavourable E.U. legislation and competition from unethical multinationals (Houellebecq 2019b, 258–259). By the time Florent visits, he is an alcoholic, depressed divorcee, only remaining afloat financially by gradually selling off his family’s ancestral lands. His fellow local dairy farmers, with no excess land to sell, are still more desperate. Farmers’ union leader Frank laments to Florent that three have killed themselves since the year began: a particularly shocking revelation given that he makes it mere weeks after new year’s eve (Houellebecq 2019b, 239–240).

Houellebecq leaves no ambiguity over who is to blame for the impoverishment of French farmers, with several well-informed protagonists citing E.U. policies. These include Florent himself, who has spent most of his professional career in civil service roles supporting and developing French agriculture in a European context, and is considered one of France’s foremost experts in this area. This anti-Europeanism mirrors Houellebecq’s own longstanding antipathy to the European project. He has consistently critiqued the E.U. as both undemocratic and a threat to national cultural specificities, describing his opposition to it as his ‘only political engagement’ (Sweeney 2019, 54–55). Although Houellebecq gave no interviews to promote *Sérotonine*’s publication, in his one contemporaneous public intervention he (2019a) reiterated that stance by stating that France would ‘become totally independent once again when the European Union is dissolved (the sooner, the better)’. He (2019a) did not mention his novel in this article, published in English by *Harper’s Magazine*, but both criticized the E.U. and praised protectionist economic measures like those enacted by then President Trump, echoing views Florent expresses in *Sérotonine*. Significantly, these positions also recall those of the transnational far right discussed above.

By underlining Houellebecq’s own endorsement of his protagonist’s views, the *Harper’s* article invited readers to identify the former with the latter: an identification already implied, in typically Houellebecqian fashion, by their shared biographical details, both having studied at the Institut national agronomique. Equally, that Houellebecq’s *only* contemporaneous public intervention was polemical, not even mentioning literature, invited readers to view him as much as a political commentator as a novelist. Both functions converge to promote reading strategies focussed less on *Sérotonine*’s imaginative qualities than what the novel says about Houellebecq’s views regarding contemporary political debates. This continued a pattern that Williams (2019) notes Houellebecq first set when *Soumission* was published in 2015. His comments regarding the earlier novel similarly encouraged readers to interpret it more straightforwardly as reflecting his own politics than was the case of his previous fiction: in a radio interview, for example, he claimed that the Islamist takeover of France depicted therein was a plausible long-term outcome, thus stressing not his imaginative freedom as a literary author, but the putatively realistic nature of his plot. This characterization of the novel both invited readers to interpret it as a diagnosis of France’s contemporary political situation and echoed the language of far-right ideologues like Camus or Eric Zemmour, who claim that Muslims intend to ‘Islamize’ France and Europe. An article that he (2015b) wrote that November for the *New York Times* further encouraged readers to interpret his novel through the lens of Islamophobic right-wing discourses. Following the November 13<sup>th</sup> jihadi attacks in Paris, Houellebecq claimed that Muslim immigration to France posed a security threat, calling



for tightened border controls. Like in the later *Harper's* article, he did not mention literature, situating himself solely as a political commentator (Williams 2019, 73–74). Both Houellebecq's framing of *Soumission* and his extra-literary public interventions thus encouraged readings of his novel as reproducing his own politics, and particularly an apparent affinity with the hard right. Williams (2019, 70–73) adds that such readings are further encouraged by the presence in the novel of numerous 'dog whistles' linking Houellebecq's narrative to the work of right-wing polemicists like Zemmour or Alain Finkielkraut.

Williams (2019, 46–47) and Carole Sweeney (2019, 67–68) both note the withering away in *Soumission* of what Martin Crowley (2002, 22–26) labelled the 'insulating framing devices' that problematized straightforward attributions of the controversial views expressed in Houellebecq's earlier novels to their author. Racist or misogynistic views were, for example, previously expressed only by protagonists who explicitly stated their own unreliability. Alternatively, whether such views were being expressed by protagonists or an apparently omniscient narrator, and the extent to which that narrator spoke for the author, might be left unclear; equally, Houellebecq's earlier novels could be interpreted as including such views to denounce rather than promote them. These 'insulating frames' did not *entirely* distance Houellebecq from the troubling views his protagonists expressed, but left a pervasive doubt over whether, or how far, they reflected the author's own (Crowley 2002, 26–27).

Williams (2019) adds that Houellebecq's earlier novels further distanced themselves from political readings by depicting obviously fantastic solutions even when they engaged with real-world problems, implicitly highlighting the imaginative autonomy of fiction. *Soumission's* depiction of Europe embracing Islam is rather less imaginative than, for example, the replacement of humanity with a superior posthuman species, again reducing the distance between Houellebecq's fiction and contemporary political discourses. Houellebecq observed at the time of *Soumission's* publication that he knew of no novel that had changed the course of history. Williams (2019, 74–75) suggests that *Soumission* may, then, have represented a deliberate 'movement away from the exclusively literary' towards a 'less undecidable, less ambiguous', and more overtly political, form of writing that Houellebecq perhaps considered capable of having a greater political impact.

*Sérotonine* supports Williams's argument, which he made before it was published. In January 2019, Houellebecq intervened in public discourse *solely* as a polemical political commentator, undermining purely literary readings of his novel still more than he had when *Soumission* was published. Although in 2015 he highlighted his belief that *Soumission* depicted a plausible scenario, he remained willing to discuss it as literature. He also maintained some ambiguity regarding how the novel should be read. In one interview, he claimed to have portrayed the Islamization of France as beneficial to the nation, stating that, having re-read the Qur'an, it was 'plutôt mieux que je ne pensais', and 'les djihadistes [étaient] de mauvais musulmans' (Bourmeau 2015). Several months later, however, he criticized a putative 'discours ... bien rodé' characterizing Islam as 'une religion de paix', and praised commentators who stigmatize the Muslim faith as a threat to the Republic for refusing to 'nier l'évidence' (Toranian and de Viry 2015, 18–19). His words destabilized his earlier claim to now view Islam more positively than before, re-opening the possibility that his intent in writing *Soumission* was to stigmatize Muslims



and their religion as a threat to France. His conflicting framings of the novel converge to leave readers a degree of interpretative autonomy, even if his implicit assumption in both interviews that most French Muslims would support an Islamist political party remains problematic regardless.

His one public intervention at the time of *Sérotonine*'s publication, the *Harper's* article, left no such ambiguity, underlining that the anti-Europeanism expressed in the novel mirrors his own politics. Moreover, the scenario *Sérotonine* depicts is still further from the fantastic outcomes of Houellebecq's earlier fiction than that of *Soumission*, the greatest technological innovation he imagines being the development of a new anti-depressant. Crowley considers the unreliability of his narrators to be another insulating frame in Houellebecq's pre-2005 fiction: their misogynistic views can be interpreted as undercut by their own status as embittered romantic failures. This argument remains pertinent in relation to Florent's misogyny, but holds less true regarding his criticisms of E.U. agricultural policies: as noted above, he is a recognized expert in this specific area. In one professional role, he has even played 'un certain rôle dans l'élaboration de la position française sur le budget agricole européen' (Houellebecq 2019b, 111–112, 182–183). If Florent is an expert on only one issue, it is European agricultural policies. The similarity of his criticisms of the E.U. to Houellebecq's own further undercuts any suggestion that Florent's views should be read as ironic.

Indeed, the techniques through which Houellebecq once distanced himself from his protagonists have largely disappeared from *Sérotonine*. Williams (2019, 64–65) notes, for example, that *La Possibilité d'une île*'s narrator, Daniel, is clearly a caricature of Houellebecq. Following the controversy aroused by *Plateforme*'s virulently racist, Islamophobic, and misogynistic content, it was surely no coincidence that an overtly Islamophobic and misogynistic millionaire comedian narrated his next novel. However, Houellebecq undercut any straightforward identification of Daniel with himself by having his protagonist add 'pseudo-paedophilic' comments to statements that otherwise recalled things Houellebecq had said elsewhere. His narrative strategies thus played with readerly desires to conflate author and protagonist, apparently encouraging them to do so while adding material that seemed calculated to undermine any pleasure they might take from it. Florent is not distanced from Houellebecq in this way. Far from expressing pseudo-paedophilic desires of his own, he passively observes the actions of a paedophile, recalling Houellebecq's own ambivalent textual reproductions of such unsavoury material: he keeps his promise to a man whom he witnesses abusing a young girl that 'je ne dirai rien à personne' (Houellebecq 2019b, 217–218). Where *La Possibilité d'une île*'s paedophilic content seemed calculated to destabilize readerly desires to identify Houellebecq with his protagonists, Florent's role as a detached observer of child abuse amplifies such an identification.

Florent comes close to explicitly urging readers to identify him with Houellebecq by musing that 'le terme d'autofiction ne m'évoqu[e] que des idées imprécises ... toujours est-il [qu'il] me sembl[e] de plus en plus que le mot conv[ient] à ma situation, qu'il [a] même été inventé pour moi' (Houellebecq 2019b, 157–158). It is unclear how the word 'autofiction', however defined, could relate to the situation of Florent, who writes no fiction, autobiographical or otherwise. His remarks make more sense, however, if interpreted as Houellebecq himself overtly encouraging the reader to assume that his novel has some autobiographical element. The section breaks down, even if only temporarily,

the barrier between Houellebecq and Florent; if any insulating frame remains to separate the author from the views of his protagonist, it is as flimsy as his unwillingness to define 'autofiction'.

One important qualification is necessary. Crowley argues that the insulating frames in Houellebecq's earlier novels 'make it impossible to accuse Houellebecq of embracing the *offensive* material he presents' (Crowley 2002, 21–22, my emphasis). The views expressed in *Sérotonine* that Houellebecq encourages readers to interpret as his own are primarily criticisms of the E.U. Although critics like Emmanuel Berretta (2019) accuse him of misrepresenting E.U. policies, his criticisms are not inherently offensive like the misogynistic views to which Crowley refers. This article argues that the vision of race underpinning *Sérotonine* is problematic; the convergence between Florent's views on Europe and Houellebecq's own helps justify the assertion that the novel reflects Houellebecq's own politics. However, this does not mean that misgivings with the European project in themselves necessarily signify racism (even if anti-E.U. sentiment is undoubtedly a feature of the far-right discourses evoked above).

By apparently encouraging readers to conflate the views expressed in *Sérotonine* with his own, Houellebecq accelerated the move from the literary towards the polemical that Williams had already noted. Accordingly, critical reception of Houellebecq and his work has increasingly focussed on his politics. In December 2020, *Le Nouvel Observateur* published an article entitled 'Houellebecq est-il d'extrême droite?', asking five long-standing associates of the author to situate him politically. Several interviewees discussed a perceived proximity between Houellebecq and the form of hard-right pseudo-leftism described above, Aurélien Bellanger describing him as 'une sorte de marxiste de droite' (Caviglioli and Grégoire 2020). That the views expressed in Houellebecq's fiction have become so difficult to separate from the figure of the author also reflects deeper features of the contemporary media/literary landscape in France and elsewhere. Ashley Harris (2020, 34–35, 39) notes that as 'cultural value has become ever more closely linked to commodification and marketing', authors have increasingly needed to become media celebrities, utilizing their public personas to help promote their works. As Jérôme Meizoz (2016) puts it, 'la modernité médiatique a substitué au livre son auteur audible, visible ou télévisuel'.

These comments hold particularly true of Houellebecq, who has consciously filled the quasi-celebrity role that Harris labels 'écrivain médiatique'. As well as positioning himself as a political commentator, he has expanded his creative output beyond the novel to include multiple other forms. He has also cultivated a provocative public persona, expressing himself in ways reflecting the controversial content of his fiction, and publicizing aspects of his private life, for example by publishing his wedding photographs shortly before *Sérotonine*. He has further amplified his own public status even within his fictional oeuvre by depicting caricatured versions of himself, for instance when he included himself as a protagonist in *La Carte et le territoire* (2016 [2010]). As Harris (2020, 36–37) puts it, such moves form 'part of a larger strategy to "re-birth" the author in response to the contemporary mediatised context', stimulating book sales by increasing Houellebecq's own visibility and notoriety.

Cultivating his personal brand in this way has been integral to Houellebecq's success, but, as Harris (2020, 36–37) notes, has further blurred the boundaries between the author and his works: 'at the mere sight of the name of the *écrivain médiatique*, assumptions

about the author come to mind and the text is regarded within the specific restraints that these bring'. The interpretation of Houellebecq's works can no longer be abstracted from his public persona: they are treated as reflecting his own politics and vice versa (Harris 2020, 38). While Houellebecq's two most recent novels validate 'political' readings more overtly than his earlier fiction, the contemporary media/literary environment and Houellebecq's conscious embrace of the status of *écrivain médiatique* equally encourage such readings.

This post-Barthesian rebirth of the author helps render meaningful a reading of Houellebecq's fiction alongside Guilluy's polemical interventions. Both writers occupy a public position somewhere between their primary role (novelist and geographer respectively) and celebrity: if critics eagerly await Houellebecq's new releases, Saïd Mahrane (2020) equally notes that 'un livre de Christophe Guilluy est toujours un événement'. Guilluy has arguably slid into self-caricature in consequence. Between 2016 and 2020 he published three new essays, as many as in the decade separating 2004 and 2014, despite having little new to say. Reviewing the famously nostalgic (if not reactionary) geographer's latest text, *Le Temps des gens ordinaires* (2020) in *Le Point*, a publication generally sympathetic to Guilluy, Mahrane (2020) ironized that 'même Christophe Guilluy, c'était mieux avant'. While the racialized assumptions underpinning his work were always problematic, his initial insight regarding the territorial splits in French society was not necessarily entirely worthless. His more recent works, however, have drawn increasingly simplistic, racialized binaries between peripheral France's 'gens ordinaires', whom Guilluy idealizes, and a malevolent metropolitan 'élite'. This has built brand Guilluy, but otherwise only further stripped of nuance an already polarized set of discussions.

Comparisons can be drawn with Houellebecq here. Guilluy's descent into self-caricature has generated writing that retains the problematic racial underpinnings of his earlier work without its analytical value; the withering of literary ambiguity has, at least in this reader's view, had a similar effect in Houellebecq's writing. As discussed above, Williams (2019, 74–75) suggested that the polemical turn he noted in *Soumission* may represent the start of a 'less undecidable, less ambiguous, and ultimately less inventive' phase in Houellebecq's writing. *Sérotonine*, like *Soumission*, is formulaically Houellebecqian at best, vindicating that prediction. The slide into self-caricature of both Houellebecq and Guilluy, partly generated by the market logics under which both operate, has also accentuated the aspects of both of their work that resonate with hard-right discourses.

### Guilluy and *Sérotonine*

The apparent ideological affinities between Houellebecq and Guilluy hold interest given how significantly *Sérotonine*'s depiction of France and Guilluy's ideas intersect. Florent's lifestyle early in the novel reads like a caricature of that enjoyed by the affluent elite that Guilluy holds inhabit the Parisian metropolis. He shares a luxurious fifteenth *arrondissement* apartment with his entitled, decadent Japanese girlfriend, Yuzu, whose wealthy parents secured her an undemanding job nearby. Yuzu habitually sleeps in until midday, spends hours daily on her beauty regime, and attends 'soirées libertines'; Florent leaves her after finding video footage of her engaging in group sex, first with multiple men and then, more disturbingly, with two dogs (Houellebecq 2019b, 49–52, 54–55 65–66).

That the Japanese Yuzu seems more comfortable in Paris than Florent, who hides in the spare bedroom when she invites friends to the apartment, underlines the cosmopolitan nature of the metropolitan elite (Houellebecq 2019b, 47). Guilluy (2014, 36) notes that, as one of the world's major cities, Paris occupies a still more privileged position than France's other metropolises. Yuzu reflects the globalized status of Paris, as does Tam, the English bureaucrat with whom Florent was unfaithful to Camille. Tam lives in London and Florent in Paris, but they met on E.U. business in Brussels, subsequently continuing the affair during Tam's regular trips to the French capital (Houellebecq 2019b, 183–184). Florent was in Brussels specifically because of his Parisian job, having left a previous role in Normandy after realizing that he could not influence E.U. policy from the periphery: 'Le vrai pouvoir était à Bruxelles, ou au moins dans des services de l'administration centrale en relation étroite avec Bruxelles' (Houellebecq 2019b, 177). Paris, Brussels, and London emerge as three nodes in a transnational network of metropolises from which peripheral regions are excluded, and are home to a privileged elite able to easily move between these urban hubs. That the two characters most comfortable in these metropolises are the Japanese Yuzu and Tam, a black Englishwoman 'd'origine jamaïcaine ... ou peut-être la Barbade', further recalls Guilluy's racialization of these cities as non-white (Houellebecq 2019b, 183–184).

The luxury enjoyed by the (non-white) Parisian elite, which Houellebecq caricatures through Yuzu, contrasts with the above-noted poverty of the (white) Norman dairy farmers Florent meets. He explicitly blames their predicament on the 2015 abolition of the quotas the E.U. previously imposed on milk production, claiming that the subsequent drop in prices 'plonge[ait] des milliers d'éleveurs français dans la misère, et les rédui[sait] à la faillite' (Houellebecq 2019b, 151–152). Local farmers' union leader Frank agrees: following another drop in milk prices, he supports a protest, reasoning that 'si on laisse passer ça on est tous foutus, jusqu'au dernier' (Houellebecq 2019b, 239–240). Florent and Frank are experts in E.U. policies and how they affect Norman dairy farmers, and both believe that the French government should implement protectionist measures to safeguard them from destitution. Florent has been vainly recommending such measures to his hierarchical superiors for years, and when he shares his belief that French dairy farmers are economically doomed, Frank plaintively responds: 'vous pensez qu'il n'y aura jamais de mesures protectionnistes?' (Houellebecq 2019b, 249–251). His protagonists' advocacy of protectionism is one of the key opinions that Houellebecq's extra-literary interventions have encouraged readers to interpret as his own. In the *Harper's* article, he praises Trump for favouring 'old-fashioned protectionist measures' when free trade would undermine American interests. He contrasts this with the dogmatism of free-market liberals whom he considers 'as fanatical as communists', consequently describing Trump as 'one of the best American presidents I've ever seen' despite considering him 'pretty repulsive' as a man (Houellebecq 2019a). He thus echoes Guilluy's (2014, 87–88) conviction that economic protectionism is necessary to protect peripheral France against European and global competition. Mobilizing an apparent critique of free-market liberalism to defend reactionaries like Trump is, as noted above, also central to the discourse of the transnational far right.

Florent echoes Houellebecq's criticisms of economic liberals when explaining his own professional failure to support French agriculture against international competition. No-

one, he believes, could convince France's bureaucrats to abandon a commitment to free trade that amounts to a 'superstition de caste':

Mes interlocuteurs ne se battaient pas pour leurs intérêts, ni même pour les intérêts qu'ils étaient supposés défendre ... ils se battaient pour des idées; pendant des années j'avais été confronté à des gens qui étaient prêts à mourir pour la liberté du commerce (Houellebecq 2019b, 249-250).

He laments that the 'mesures de protection raisonnables' that he has suggested have consistently been ignored by these ideologues in favour of 'le triomphe du libre-échangeisme' (Houellebecq 2019b, 251).

Houellebecq's portrayal of a French political class unwilling on ideological grounds to countenance any alternative to free trade resonates with Guilluy's work. In Guilluy's view, France's ruling class, which is overwhelmingly based in the nation's metropolises and particularly Paris, is unable to comprehend the struggles of its peripheral compatriots:

Comment ne pas bénir la mondialisation et l'ouverture des frontières lorsque l'on observe les résultats de la région-métropole parisienne qui génère un tiers du PIB Français! Vus des métropoles, les débats autour du protectionnisme et de la régulation des échanges paraissent anachroniques (Guilluy 2014, 33-34)

When Guilluy originally made this argument, his references to the ruling class primarily designated the traditional mainstream parties: the PS and LR. Although both were subsequently humiliated in the 2017 presidential election, with Emmanuel Macron elected ahead of second-placed Marine Le Pen, Guilluy does not believe that this signalled a shift in the dominant ideology: Macron simply offered a rebranded version of the globalized economics championed by the previous mainstream parties, remaining 'le candidat des métropoles mondialisées' (Bherer 2017). Despite neither the PS nor LR now being in government, Guilluy thus believes that a metropolitan elite continues to impose free-market economics and all the ills they entail upon peripheral France.

Florent again echoes Guilluy, and the transnational far right, by suggesting that the RN might pose a viable challenge to globalized economics. As politicians feign concern for Norman dairy farmers after their protest degenerates into a bloodbath, with eleven protesters killed by riot police, he observes that 'seul le Rassemblement national sembl[e] tout à fait clair' regarding the need to abolish milk production quotas (Houellebecq 2019b, 265-266). This resonates with Guilluy's claim that, while LR and the PS are not 'des partis opposés mais complémentaires', both promoting globalization, 'Le FN [now the RN] s'inscrit au contraire dans une critique de ce modèle' (2014, 83-84). It would be an overstatement to suggest that *Sérotonine* should be read as a declaration of Houellebecq's support for the RN but, as Armus (2017, 130-131) notes is the case in *Soumission*, they emerge from the novel with more credit than their mainstream opponents.

Guilluy describes peripheral France as, like the RN, united against globalization despite significant social heterogeneity:

Hier opposées, elles partagent désormais le même destin. L'employé du lotissement pavillonnaire, l'ouvrier rural, le chômeur du bassin minier, le petit fonctionnaire, mais aussi le petit paysan qui voisinent aujourd'hui dans la France périphérique contribuent à la recomposition sociale des milieux populaires (Guilluy 2014, 19).

*Sérotonine* reproduces this vision of peripheral France as united despite its social diversity. A newsagent in a small Norman town confides to Florent that he 'n'[est] pas insensible à la détresse de plus en plus criante des agriculteurs de la région' (Houellebecq 2019b, 186–187). When Florent later tells a hotelier in another nearby town that Aymeric, whose public suicide has turned him into a symbol, was his friend, the man's reaction demonstrates that '*comme tous les habitants de la région*, il [est] solidaire des agriculteurs' (Houellebecq 2019b, 268–269, my emphasis). The respect with which a local restaurateur subsequently treats him convinces him that '*le bruit que j'étais un ami de "monsieur d'Harcourt"* [doit] s'être répandu'. The restaurant's patrons, meanwhile, discuss the actions of the CRS in hushed, angry tones; their simmering resentment underlines how widely support for the farmers is shared (Houellebecq 2019b, 269–270). This near-unanimous solidarity recalls Guilluy's description of a peripheral France in which disparate populations of varying backgrounds, in areas that would traditionally be considered both rural and (peri-)urban, are united by their anger at their own marginalization.

While Houellebecq's opposition to the E.U. is longstanding, his concern for peripheral France developed recently. When his previous novels contrast Paris, where most of his protagonists live, with some putatively more authentic *France profonde*, it is typically along traditional urban/rural lines. His most sustained engagement with this divide comes in *La Carte et le territoire*. Paris remains comparatively prosperous in the 2010 novel, but has lost its French character, with protagonists sadly noting the demise of beloved, stereotypically French institutions like the Parisian cafe (Houellebecq 2016 [2010], 111). By contrast, an embattled rural (rather than peripheral) France, is filled with '*village[s] décrépit[s]*', and increasingly impoverished (Houellebecq 2016 [2010], 398). As Ruth Cruickshank (Cruickshank 2019, 103–105) notes, any surviving 'French culture' is commodified in form, designed to satisfy the appetite of foreign tourists for '*un pays enchanté ... constell[é] de châteaux et de manoirs ... où, partout, il fai[t] bon vivre*' (Houellebecq 2016 [2010], 94).

*Sérotonine* includes similar depictions of a romanticized vision of rural France being commodified for touristic consumption. In the *Relais Châteaux* Florent and Yuzu visit early in the novel, for example, '*il y [a] un cocktail de bienvenue, des serveurs empressés et multiples, des cannelés et des macarons disposés à notre intention dans des coupelles de porcelaine, une bouteille de Ruinart nous atten[d] au frais dans le minibar*' (Houellebecq 2019b, 43–44). The food served in these and other upmarket hotels also recalls *La Carte et le territoire*. Cruickshank (2019) notes that, in the earlier novel, the commodification of gastronomic heritage is integral to the effective transformation of rural France into a kind of cultural theme park: tourists are served '*a fiction of "French" food eaten neither historically nor in the fictional present by the French*', but which meets their expectations of a mythologized culinary tradition. Similarly, the hotels of *Sérotonine* play on their international clientele's expectations of French cuisine through menus which '*revisit[ent] de manière créative le terroir*', served by waiters who '*déclame[nt] la composition du moindre amuse-bouche, le ton enflé d'une emphase mi-gastronomique mi-littéraire ... dans le but ... de faire du repas une expérience conviviale partagée*' (Houellebecq 2019b, 44–45).

If certain problems facing rural France remain constant between *La Carte et le territoire* and *Sérotonine*, however, the latter diverges from the former by moving beyond the urban/rural divide to also contrast metropolis (or at least Paris) and periphery. Several



locations Florent visits, most notably Aymeric's farm, are clearly rural. However, Houellebecq's depiction of a disparate but united proletarian mass living both in rural France and larger towns like Caen or Niort resonates more with Guilly's descriptions of *peripheral* France. His appropriation of the metropolis/periphery binary popularized by Guilly during the period separating *La Carte et le territoire* and *Sérotonine* is a new development with regard to his earlier fiction.

## The absence of race

One might object that, even if Houellebecq does reproduce Guilly's distinction between metropolis and periphery, this need not imply that he also reproduces his racism. Indeed, *Sérotonine* differs from Houellebecq's earlier novels precisely by evoking race far *less* frequently, depicting neither interracial conflict nor any protagonists who are overtly racist regarding French people of postcolonial immigrant descent. This sharply contrasts, for example, with *Plateforme*, which depicts France on the verge of civil war, as men 'de type antillais' commit gang rape with apparent impunity, Muslim men oppress 'their' women within the Hexagon, and jihadi terrorists massacre tourists overseas (Houellebecq 2001, 29–30, 205–207, 276–277, 340–341). While this is Houellebecq's most visceral novel, none of his pre-*Sérotonine* fiction is free of such material: even *La Carte et le territoire*, in which Williams (2019) notes 'Houellebecq's hallmark topics' of racism and misogyny are less prominent than elsewhere, occasionally evokes a certain level of racial tension. The protagonist is, for example, intimidated outside his late father's home by 'un grand Noir qui l'observ[e], de l'autre côté de la rue' (Houellebecq 2016 [2010], 403–404).

*Sérotonine* does not even include this kind of innuendo. The only non-white French protagonists in the novel are Arab brothers who own a cybercafé in the town of Coutances, and who are anomalous enough to seem like comic relief. Florent notes that they:

se ressembl[ent] tellement qu'ils [doivent] être jumeaux, et [leur] look salafiste [est] si outré qu'ils [sont] probablement inoffensifs. Je m'imagin[e] qu'ils [doivent] être célibataires et vivre ensemble, ou peut-être mariés à deux sœurs jumelles et vivre dans des maisons mitoyennes (Houellebecq 2019b, 270–271).

There are, however, three mentions of the *banlieues* which Guilly racializes so explicitly. Florent, thinking back to student days when he would return by bus to the Institut national agronomique in Paris after spending the weekend at his parents' peri-urban home, recalls that:

lorsque je traversais Villiers-le-Bel, puis Sarcelles, puis Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, puis Saint-Denis, lorsque je voyais peu à peu autour de moi s'élever la densité de population et les barres d'immeubles et dans l'autobus la violence des conversations augmenter, et le niveau de danger visiblement s'accroître, j'avais chaque fois la sensation nettement caractérisée de revenir en enfer (Houellebecq 2019b, 46).

He subsequently reflects gladly that becoming comparatively affluent 'm'[a] permis d'échapper, je l'esp[ère] définitivement, au contact physique et même visuel des classes dangereuses' (Houellebecq 2019b, 46). If the *banlieues* are almost completely absent from *Sérotonine*, it is partly because Florent finds them distasteful enough to actively avoid them.



The dangerous *banlieues* also contrast with Aymeric's rural *département*, which, although poor, is 'paisible ... la criminalité [est] presque inexistante'; Aymeric tells Florent that 'les gens laiss[ent] souvent leur porte ouverte lorsqu'ils s'absent[ent] dans la journée, ce qui [est] devenu rare même en zone rurale' (Houellebecq 2019b, 266–267). While Florent describes the crime-free nature of the area as exceptional, his use of the qualifier 'même' indicates that rural districts remain safer than urban counterparts of which only the *banlieues* have been flagged as dangerous. This contrast between perilous, implicitly racialized, *banlieues* and a comparatively law-abiding rural France is an established far-right trope. Reacting in April 2017 to suburban riots, for example, Marion Maréchal-Le Pen asked 'Pourquoi nos campagnes qui souffrent tellement ne déclenchent-elles jamais d'émeutes, ne brûlent-elles jamais de voitures?', implying a racial or cultural rather than socio-economic determinism without making it explicit (@MarionMarechal, 25 April 2017). Her ostentatious concern for 'nos campagnes qui souffrent' represented another example of far-right politicians feigning concern for populations racialized as belonging to an imagined white working class purely to scapegoat ethnic minorities.

*Sérotonine* does not racialize the contrast any more explicitly than Maréchal-Le Pen. The novel does, however, hint that peripheral France should be read as white by depicting white, European immigrants as, unlike the obviously incongruous Arab cybercafé owners, entirely at home there. During Florent's relationship with Camille, her Portuguese parents warmly welcomed him to their Bagnoles-de-l'Orne home. He recalls that 'j'ai remarquablement mangé pendant ce séjour', linking Camille's peripheral, white immigrant family to an idealized heritage of French gastronomic conviviality which seems elsewhere to be dying out (Houellebecq 2019b, 186–187). The food of globalized Paris reflects its belonging to a transnational network of metropolises, and consequent loss of any French cultural specificity. While in the capital, Florent binges on multiple varieties of hummus: a foodstuff of which the roots clearly lie outside France, while the availability of multiple varieties equally suggests an uprootedness from any North African or Middle Eastern heritage. Restaurants, meanwhile, offer 'un fooding novateur' haphazardly fusing the cuisines of various cultures into chaotic mixtures like 'crevettes panko avec leur sauce salsa verde' (Houellebecq 2019b, 86–87).

If an idealized French culinary heritage survives in the peripheral home of white, Portuguese immigrants, the practices of the only non-white characters seen in the periphery recall the culturally rootless Parisian metropolis. The cybercafé-owning Arab brothers offer Florent mint tea before serving him an orange Sprite. They apparently stock this American beverage over an iconically French alternative, Orangina, while mint tea is typically associated with Maghrebi culture; Houellebecq's association of these elements with the novel's only Arab protagonists links multi-ethnic France and globalization in a fashion reminiscent of Guilluy's work (Houellebecq 2019b, 57, 89–90, 184–185, 272). That they own a cybercafé, while strangely anachronistic in 2019, equally ties them to the online networks so symbolic of the globalized present. Where white, European immigrants fit seamlessly into peripheral France and an imagined French heritage, non-white French people, like the Parisian metropolis, are associated with the economic processes that both Guilluy and Houellebecq believe are undermining it. Notions of Frenchness are associated with the periphery, but both are associated with whiteness.

That Florent's concern for the problems of the white periphery is counterbalanced by a total disinterest in the racialized *banlieues* implies that the two do not experience the

same problems. As noted above, Guilluy makes this argument explicitly, arguing that the *banlieues* and their inhabitants are actually prospering economically at the expense of the periphery. He even claims that politicians and media outlets focus solely on the problems of non-white *banlieusards* while ignoring those of peripheral France:

La question sociale sembl[e] définitivement circonscrite aux banlieues. À tel point que l'ensemble de la classe médiatique et politique ne cess[e] de ressasser que la question sociale, celles des "classes populaires", se résum[e] qu'aux "quartiers" (lire les territoires où se concentrent les minorités ethniques) (Guilluy 2014, 10-11).

The near-complete absence of either the *banlieues* or protagonists of postcolonial immigrant descent from *Sérotonine* represents, this essay suggests, Houellebecq's attempt to right that putative imbalance. A crucial scene in this respect comes near the novel's end, when Florent returns to Paris and moves into a thirteenth *arrondissement* studio apartment. He is disappointed to notice that 'La vue de mes fenêtres [est] inutilement étendue, sur la banlieue Sud'; however, he reflects that this does not matter because 'il y [a] des volets roulants', which he resolves to 'clore à jamais' (Houellebecq 2019b, 331). Like in the earlier scene, where he gladly notes that he no longer needs to encounter the inhabitants of the *banlieues*, this underlines that Florent is ignoring them deliberately rather than simply not crossing paths with them. Houellebecq's choice to mark, on two separate occasions, the exclusion of metropolitan working-class neighbourhoods coded as non-white from his novel suggests that they are simply not part of the story he wants to tell about the impact of globalization on the French working class: a category from which, like the hard and far-right figures discussed above, he excludes the inhabitants of these neighbourhoods. Houellebecq's novel sets out to correct the disparity that Guilluy claims exists between the attention dominant discourses grant the *banlieues* and peripheral France respectively by pointedly ignoring the former in favour of the latter.

Florent's only other mention of the *banlieues* comes when he recalls accompanying Yuzu to a 'soirée libertine' where most male attendees were younger and less affluent than their female counterparts, and had 'un look nettement "banlieue"': a description with obvious racial undertones independently of any reference to Guilluy. Florent wonders if these men are being paid, but decides that they are unlikely to be victims of exploitation: 'baiser gratuitement pour la plupart des hommes est déjà une aubaine' (Houellebecq 2019b, 51–52). Houellebecq's vision of contemporary sexual relations as reproducing free market logics has been a constant throughout his oeuvre, since the protagonist of *Extension du domaine de la lutte* stated that:

Tout comme le libéralisme économique sans frein, et pour des raisons analogues, le libéralisme sexuel produit des phénomènes de paupérisation absolue ... C'est ce qu'on appelle la "loi du marché" ... Le libéralisme économique, c'est l'extension du domaine de la lutte ... De même, le libéralisme sexuel, c'est l'extension du domaine de la lutte (Houellebecq 2004 [1994], 134-135).

The comparative success of these young men in the metropolitan sexual market suggests that, while material poverty may prevent them from fully belonging to the city centre elite, they are at least partially included by it. This partial inclusion contrasts with the total exclusion of Aymeric, whose wife left him for an internationally renowned London-based pianist, who 'fait des concerts partout dans le monde' (Houellebecq 2019b, 206–207). He has not met anyone new since she left, and apparently has few opportunities to do so.

Men coded as non-white are thus included in the metropolitan sexual market while white Frenchmen in the periphery face the 'paupérisation absolue' described in *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, as women like Aymeric's wife choose privileged metropolitans over them. *Sérotonine* echoes Guilluy both by studiously ignoring the racialized *banlieues* to focus on an implicitly white peripheral France and by depicting *banlieusards* as included by the metropolitan model which is suffocating those peripheral regions: again, Houellebecq's visions of the economic and sexual marketplaces mirror each other. The compassion that the novel expresses for peripheral France is predicated on this vision of racialized *banlieusards* as not sharing, and perhaps even complicit in causing, its problems. While the novel includes fewer explicit comments about race than Houellebecq's earlier works, its vision of race relations in France remains deeply problematic, resonating with those currently being expounded by the French and international hard and far-right.

## Conclusion

To conclude, *Sérotonine* is Houellebecq's most overtly politically engaged novel to date, expressing an apparently genuine distress regarding the damage that globalization and more specifically the E.U. have done to Guilluy's *France périphérique*. That sympathy, however, is like Guilluy's predicated upon the exclusion of communities of postcolonial immigrant descent from the category of 'French working class'. They are treated as eternal outsiders, either facing different problems to their white, peripheral compatriots or actively profiting at their expense. Unlike Guilluy, Houellebecq does not say this explicitly; instead, he excludes non-white French people and the racialized *banlieues* from his novel by having a protagonist who cares deeply about peripheral France's problems avoid even looking at them. The absence of racially charged comments from *Sérotonine* does not reflect an absence of racism, but an unwillingness Houellebecq shares with Guilluy to accept that non-white French people can be wholly French, or share the problems of their white compatriots. *Sérotonine*, like Guilluy's polemical interventions, must therefore be read alongside the political discourse of a contemporary far right that feigns concern for a so-called white working class to promote racist policies. Houellebecq, in positioning himself as an *écrivain médiatique*, once deftly trod the line between encouraging readers to identify author with oeuvre and defending the imaginative autonomy of literature. His most recent two novels, however, have by accident or design eroded the devices he once used to maintain literary ambiguity in favour of a blunt, quasi-literary polemicism. The result, in *Sérotonine*, is a novel including little explicitly racialized content (at least against postcolonial immigrants to France or their French descendants), but which contains sufficient evidence to suggest a highly problematic attitude to race on its author's part.

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