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► To cite this version:

Isabelle Clair. “La racaille,” a performed figure in French contemporary youth. *Ethnography*, 2021, pp.146613812110385. <10.1177/14661381211038534>. <hal-03507432>

HAL Id: hal-03507432

<https://hal.science/hal-03507432v1>

Submitted on 4 Jan 2022

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“*La racaille*,” a performed figure in French contemporary youth

**Ethnographic comparison between low-income housing projects,
working class rural areas and Parisian *bourgeois* neighborhoods**

Isabelle Clair

Abstract

In France, *la racaille* is a stereotyped figure of a young (usually identified as Arab or Black) man who lives in a suburban *cité* (social housing estate). I have repeatedly met *la racaille* during my ethnographic studies on heterosexual romantic relationships among 15 to 20 year old youngsters from three different social backgrounds—working class in *cités* (2002-2005), working class in villages (2008-2011), bourgeoisie in Paris (2016-2020). I *encountered* it in the form of a *performed figure*—object of speech, clothing choices, gestures, movements, and ways of speaking. This presence reveals a collective fascination in which various negative judgments are mixed with shared admiration for its high social visibility. Stylish and powerful, *la racaille* is fascinating, at any rate because it embodies an exaggerated masculinity that is untroubled and unquestionable.

Keywords

Youth – Gender, class, race, sexuality – Ethnography – bad boy figure – France.

Introduction

In France, *la racaille* [la Rakaj] is a stereotyped figure of a young (usually identified as Arab or Black) man who lives in a suburban *cité d'habitat social* (a social housing estate, *cité* for short). When referred to by adults, this stereotyped figure has negative connotations, but this is not always the case when it comes to young people. Over the past fifteen years, I have repeatedly met *la racaille*¹ during my ethnographic studies on heterosexual romantic relationships among fifteen- to twenty-year-old youngsters from three different social backgrounds. The figure of *la racaille* first came up in conversations I had with girls and boys living in *cités*. I also heard about this figure during conversations that I had with rural working-class boys and even more often when talking to Parisian upper-class youngsters who also enjoy being photographed and filmed parodying *la racaille*.

La racaille is a figure rather than a real person or even a character. And it is a figure that is performed, not just a topic of conversation. Its presence is noticeable through cultural tastes, political expressions, everyday vocabulary, and body attitudes. It appears as a collective obsession that reveals both race/class hatred *and* a fascination for an uncensored masculinity at a time when equality between sex groups has become a Western (white and middle/upper class) value and a distinctive quality for the bourgeoisie. Because it is partly a hip-hop African-American creature made in the USA (listening to rap music and sporting a ghetto look), *la racaille* is not just associated with lower class immigrants. This other “origin,” a culturally legitimate one, contributes to its appropriation by white and upper-class youth. Fashionable *and* violent, particularly toward girls and gay boys, *la racaille* can appear as “the real man.” For this reason, it can be an object of desire and identification for young people in various contexts, even those where sexism and homophobia have become a stigma (Tissot, 2018).

The notion of *performed figure* allows me to name the apparition of a haunting stereotype in the field. First it is rooted in my attention to body performances—after Judith Butler’s theory

of gender (Butler, 1990) and its sociological extensions to the conceptualization of class “as not only a material location but also a performance” (Bettie, 2000: 10). Secondly, it draws on reflections in theater studies upon characters and figures (Sermon, 2008) that are useful to identify the uses of a stereotype mainly based on body attitudes and social visibility.

As an ethnographical category, the *performed figure* also seeks to capture reciprocal social judgments between three social contexts as well as common judgements that circulate among them. I will analyze *la racaille* not only in relation to its original social context (suburban segregated *cités*), as a “re-valu[ation of] the pathologized figure” (Tetreault, 2008: 159), but also as it travels through society with its various meanings based on different class, race, gender, and sexuality normativities, and group interests. Through the circulation of this figure I seek to show how social frontiers between the three groups that I have investigated are produced in their everyday life. *La racaille* then appears neither only as a stigmatized figure produced by the media or politics, nor as a positive figure produced by ghetto youth to resist stigma, but instead as an *attractive* figure that goes through class and race frontiers *because* it is stigmatized as a danger to social order—mainly by adults of all backgrounds.

The term *la racaille* can be roughly translated as “yob” or “scum.” However, this article will use its original French form so as not to lose the meaning the words convey about the historical and national characteristics of this hegemonic version of the “bad boy” figure in contemporary France. Its misleading color-neutrality in a constitutionally color-blind republic (Lieberman, 2001), its feminine form in a “grammatically gender marked and (comparatively) highly inflected” language such as French (Gilbert and Gubar, 1985: 520), and the polysemic image that the word *racaille* creates when pronounced (scum *and* quail²) must all be taken into account in order to understand (and maybe get a sense of) this ambivalent figure—non-white, overtly masculine, sexy, powerful, and frightening.

***La racaille*, a powerful performed figure**

In French suburban *cités*, *la racaille* refers to only *one* stereotypical way of being a boy. Elsewhere, i.e., outside of these *cités*, people consider *la racaille* to symbolize *all* “young people from the *cités*”—in other words, non-white boys with hoods or caps who are necessarily violent, delinquent, and live in segregated urban or suburban neighborhoods.

La racaille is not the only word used to describe this stereotypical figure. Depending on the context, period in time, and what is highlighted in the negative judgments made about boys from the *cités*, “sauvageons” (savages) and “casseurs” (hooligans) are just two of the many terms also used. But *la racaille* is the term that came up most often during my study. For a long time now, its use has not required contextualization, as everyone knows what it refers to.

The “2005 riots” crystallized the term within political discourse, and it began to be used frequently across the media and in political publications. For example, it cropped up in the title of the 2006 book *La racaille de la République*, co-written by Fadela Amara (an anti-racism activist who, in 2007, became secretary of state for urban policy under president Nicolas Sarkozy) and Mohammed Abdi (co-founder, along with Fadela Amara, of the feminist collective Ni Putes Ni Soumises). This book does not explain what *la racaille* means; in fact, the authors do not use the term at all in their text. It is, however, a word that both attracts attention and is attached to a specific space and population. Using it in the title alone is enough to evoke a wide range of issues involving young people from the suburban *cités* and violence (the most developed theme in the book—racist violence against young people from postcolonial migrant populations, sexist violence by boys against girls, violence by young men from the *cités* against state institutions, Islamic violence against the secular Republic). *La racaille* is also a word that young people from the *cités* themselves use to identify a way of being, among other possible ways. Once again, this use of the word was taken up in political discourse, which helped to spread both the word itself and the stigma so strongly attached to it. As minister of

the interior, Nicolas Sarkozy tried to justify his use of the term in a public appearance in Argenteuil on October 25, 2005, only a few days before the first “riots” that November, by saying that *racaille* was a word used by the people living in social housing estates themselves to describe young delinquents.³

For all of these reasons, I will use the signifier *la racaille* both as an object of analysis and as a commonly accepted label to designate a recurring figure in the comments heard and the self-presentation observed in my three field surveys.

However, *la racaille* is not just a word. I *encountered* it throughout my study in the form of a *performed figure*. As an object of speech, it has also come to life in the minds of many boys and some girls, through clothing choices, gestures and movements, and ways of speaking and behaving. The notion of *figure*, which has established itself in theatrical theory from visual arts, in competition with that of a character, “makes the character on stage not only a product and a vector of imagination, but also the place of an ‘imaginative’ production, an aesthetic form and regime of visibility” (Sermon, 2008: 117). Fictional, *la racaille* has appeared in my successive field surveys as a silhouette, an image conveying an aesthetic, a figure, rather than a character with interiority and being played by actors learning a role.

This figure has appeared in discussions, in photos or videos published on social networking sites, and during group meetings or individual interviews, as if it occasionally took possession of the young people in my study. The prevalence of its presence reveals a kind of collective fascination in which various negative judgments are mixed with shared admiration for its high social visibility. *La racaille* fascinates the young people of the bourgeoisie because its unique style makes it stand out from all other typical youth figures. It also fascinates white lower class rural boys by its ability to capture the attention of cameras, politicians, and ultimately everyone, while they themselves remain invisible and are identified by only one stereotype devoid of any panache: the hick. Stylish and powerful, *la racaille* is fascinating, at

any rate because it embodies an exaggerated masculinity that is untroubled and unquestionable. Representing the last (or worst) macho example left in French society, it appears to be an object of identification for many boys, including in spaces where gender violence and homophobia are most often euphemistically expressed or sheltered from private spaces—as is the case of the Parisian bourgeoisie where I carried out my last field survey. Putting the stereotype into words and images is a way of saying and showing what is forbidden or inaccessible, but nevertheless desirable—statements, behavior, and tastes that are considered improper within the bourgeoisie, and seen as a form of political power by the rural (and peri-urban) working classes. It therefore fulfills a comparable function—expressing the impossible—in different ways depending on the location. And everywhere, it manifests itself as a sexual figure. This is because the stereotype of the “young people from the *cités*” is associated with the over-publicized phenomenon of the “*tournantes*” in the 2000s (the name given to the gang rapes perpetrated by young men living in segregated *cités*, see Mucchielli, 2005) and because it arouses the desire of some girls and many boys for whom it embodies a 100 percent heterosexual figure—at an age when the sexual status of individuals is the focus of much concern. Indeed, during all my field surveys the continuous opposition between two repulsive figures, the “*pute*” (whore) and the “*pédé*” (faggot) reveal how much girls must constantly demonstrate their virtue, which involves in particular their explicit “appropriation” by a man or boy (a father, a big brother, or a boyfriend) (Guillaumin, 1978). Boys, on the other hand, who are dominant in the gender order, must continually demonstrate that they are worthy of belonging to their sex group, particularly by expressing their desire for girls. In both cases, the line of sexuality crosses gender groups, with differentiated effects due to the hierarchy of the latter.

Playing *la racaille* involves appropriating the props and expressions of a caricature, using them to stage oneself, to experience extraordinary sensations vicariously, to inhabit another body for the duration of a discussion, a mime, or a song. It is primarily through music that the

figure takes shape: rap is both its cultural universe of reference and the main means of disseminating the stereotype. Today in France, rap is the music that young people in general listen to the most.⁴ All those whom I interviewed during my survey played it on a loop at parties, and rap songs are on most of the playlists of the boys I have been interviewing as part of my most recent field survey. Rap's assignation "to an imaginary suburb" from the 1990s and its "trivialization in cultural industries" from the 2000s (Hammou, 2016) means that the genre today has great stylistic diversity. This music is therefore appropriate for various audiences, while remaining rooted in a social elsewhere for young people who live outside of suburban *cités*.

The figure of *la racaille* is also personified in a look—baggy sweat suits, sneakers, caps or branded hooded sweaters. It is also exemplified in its own language, in *verlan* (backslang), and in an approach and a gesture associated with an urban landscape that has been depicted time and time again in films and other stories, where young people from the *cités* are the heroes or anti-heroes, watched by their distant peers.

A subject of speech, outfits, gestures, a soundtrack. . . the different ways in which the figure of *la racaille* pervades the conversations and bodies of the people I have met not only inform the ideas that these people have about the boys who live in these *cités*: the judgments that the figure of *la racaille* generates and the various ways in which boys perform it without any trouble are indicative of the sexual and gender norms that are at work, in varying degrees of explicitness, in each of the three cohorts of young people studied. More than the representation itself, it is these social uses of the stereotype that are at the heart of this paper.

Methods

Three field surveys, three social contexts

This article is based on a large-scale ethnographic study comprising three successive field surveys focused on girls and boys aged between fifteen and twenty years old. Each field survey comprises ethnographic observation and formal (recorded and in-depth) interviews—the interviewees were met in the field and observed outside the interview itself. Not all the interviewees within each field survey knew each other, but no one has been an isolated individual either. I have always met people in relation with their social networks as I am interested in what people think about each other, and I have tried to spend time with them either when alone or with (boy/girl)friends or brothers and sisters. Furthermore, sociability-based interviews make it possible to crosscheck information and compare points of view about similar events or situations that the interviewees recount separately. During the interviews, I asked people to talk mainly about love, sexuality, and friendship, and secondarily about the other issues that mattered to them (family, school, work, and leisure time). I observed them in many different settings, and mainly spent time with individuals, couples, or peer groups in their everyday lives—at community centers, in their homes, in cafés, in the street, during the day or at night. In recent years I have also made use of social networking sites, not only as a way of maintaining relationships with interviewees between my meetings with them, but also as a place of sociability and presentation of self that I could observe.

Detailed description

The first field survey (from 2002 to 2005) was conducted in four *cités*, located in two suburban towns just outside Paris. The first one had around 25,652 residents in 1999. It was smaller and not as well-known as the second town (39,378 inhabitants), which was classified among “the 23 underprivileged districts” (*quartiers sensibles*) of France in 2004. At that time, the unemployment rate in the *département* in which the two towns were situated was higher than the national rate (as it still is today)—13 percent v. 9.7 percent in total in France in 2003.⁵

I met with thirty-five girls and twenty-one boys from these two towns, and made sixty-one recorded interviews. I repeatedly spoke with them and observed them going about their everyday life but I conducted only one interview with most of them, and up to five with a small number of them. None of them allowed me to visit them at home and I conducted my interviews in side rooms at community centers, outside or in fast food restaurants. My being a white young woman, my diploma, and the fact that sexuality and gender relations are regularly used by white people against racialized young men made them suspicious. I was well accepted by them but there were more restrictions than during my two following field surveys. All of the boys and girls I interviewed were aged between fifteen and twenty, and their parents were mainly blue-collar workers or unemployed. Since ethnicity statistics are illegal in France, I cannot provide any general information on this, although I did ask the interviewees about which country their parents were born in. Twenty-two had parents born in North Africa (among them, three had only one parent born in North Africa, with the other born in metropolitan France), seven had one or two parents born in metropolitan France, seven in DOM-TOM (former colonies—mainly the Antilles—that still belong to France), nineteen in sub-Saharan Africa, two in Asia, and two in a European country other than France. Thirty-one of the young people I met with identified themselves as Muslims, thirteen as Christians, and eight as having “no religion.”

The second field survey (from 2008 to 2011) was conducted in several villages⁶ spread across the regions of Pays de La Loire and Centre-Val de Loire, in a rural area delimited by Le Mans (north), Blois (east), Tours (south), and Angers (west). In this area, the unemployment rate was below the national rate (8 percent v. 10 percent) but the proportion of low-skilled workers was above the national rate (17 percent v. 13 percent).⁷ Over three years, I conducted seventy ethnographic interviews in this area and regularly met with nineteen girls and eleven boys. Unlike in my field survey in the *cités*, I conducted up to eight interviews with some of them and at least two with all of them. I also got to meet them at home, which is where I spent

most of my time with them. Almost all the interviewees were white, apart from one adopted black girl born in sub-Saharan Africa. All of them belonged to the lower classes because their parents were unemployed or employed as blue-collar workers, lower grade white-collar workers, and small-scale farmers, and the young people themselves had left school without any qualifications, or were still attending vocational schools (mostly care or sales professions for girls, building trades or mechanics for boys, or agriculture for both sex groups). I also observed their activity on internet social networks, although only a few of them (mainly girls) used them at the time.

The third field survey (2016-2020) was conducted in the bourgeois districts of Paris (mainly the 8th, 16th, and 17th *arrondissements*). These are the richest *arrondissements* in the city, where the professional categories “senior executives and intellectual professions” and “traders and company directors” are over-represented (accounting respectively for around 40 percent and 6 percent of the population aged fifteen and over in each district).⁸ The group of young people with whom I have been meeting and following since the beginning of this third field survey comprises sixteen girls and thirteen boys. All of them, apart from one mestizo, are white. All are senior high school students in Paris. Their parents are part of higher salariat—senior executives, company directors, lawyers, journalists, artists, *etc.* I conducted sixty recorded interviews, between two and six with each participant, mainly in cafés (where this survey’s girls and boys spend most of their free time). After three years I started asking them if we could record interviews in their homes so that I could see where they live and elicit more spontaneous personal conversation in their bedrooms. I have also been observing their (intense) activity on social networking sites (mainly Instagram) which is an interesting way of collecting information about their lives, viewing their social networks, and observing how they present themselves to their peers.

In trying to draw conclusions from this long-term survey, I am confronted with some specific difficulties in terms of writing about and organizing the evidence. My analysis will look at the three different study areas, as well as differences between the sexes, which will require regular contextualization that may limit the variety of ethnographic cases that I discuss, as well as the detailed analysis of each case. Nevertheless, the examples mentioned in the following pages are given in their context within the survey as a whole, and each person's sociodemographic characteristics are provided, most often in footnotes to help with concision.

[Insert Figure 1. Geographical localization of the field surveys]

A stylish figure: Cultural parody and political aesthetic among the Parisian *bourgeoisie*

The figure of *la racaille* is a partially positive figure in the eyes of boys from nice neighborhoods because it embodies a style. But they cannot fully replicate *la racaille* style, since its attractiveness also comes with an element of vulgarity. That's why, to be truly stylish, the figure of *la racaille* performed by the boys from these upper-class Parisian neighborhoods often has an American accent. These young people's "passion" for the United States, and their "international capital" (Wagner, 2011),⁹ thus finds a form of expression, linked to other musical tastes—the pop of their parents' youth, rock, contemporary French music, and so on. Similarly, these young people's use of *verlan* alongside numerous Anglicisms is largely absent from the language used in the *cités*. The imaginary surrounding the figure of *la racaille* thus feeds on a chic transatlantic exoticism mixed with a peripheral exoticism struck by poverty and illegitimacy.¹⁰

This reference to American origins is generally accompanied by parodic role-playing games that feed a performance that is far removed from the stereotype of *la racaille*.

[Insert Figure 2. Adam, 16 years old, 2017 (Instagram screenshot)]

The Screenshot from Adam's¹¹ Instagram account above shows all the parodic aspects of how the figure of *la racaille* can be embodied in the 17th *arrondissement* of Paris. In the photo (Figure 2), Adam is “being a guy,” as it is known in his social milieu, meaning that he is “asserting himself” as a boy and “boasting about it.” In presenting himself as a “king of the world” (see the comment accompanying his post), Adam mimics the archetype of the suburban guy. . . perched on an *autolib'*, a symbol of Parisian life within the city walls.¹² Everything is there: the hood, the sneakers, the brand on display, the nonexistent smile, the gestures inherited from the American gangsta rap scene that originally signaled which gang a rapper belonged to. The figure of *la racaille* is being used distinctively here. Adam uses his power to “rehabilitate” an “unworthy” figure (Grignon and Passeron, 1989: 61), using a cultural appropriation approach specific to the dominant classes, at an age particularly porous to “cultural eclecticism” (Gans, 1974; Octobre et al., 2011: 34–35). The “gentrification” of popular cultural practices (Tichi, 1994) that contributes to the diversity of bourgeois tastes is also reflected in how young people in the west of Paris borrow and use the slang of young people from the *cités*: “reuf” for “brother” and “kiffe” for “like” are terms from a familiar lexicon used for forming friendly relationships. The parody is also racial—*la racaille* has a dark complexion. The use of the English *negro* (widely used in French rap¹³ and which is based on a linguistic practice of reversing stigma) makes it possible to express the figure of *la racaille* by euphemizing the ethnic connotation in any French term that makes reference to skin color.

The parody indicates a distanced borrowing, one that resonates with the way hip-hop artists tend to stage themselves. The ego trip (self-glorification) and “self-irony” often combine

to give rise to a discourse of self-deprecation by individual artists who present themselves as being better than others (see Pecqueux, 2007: 14 and subsequent). The low-angle shot reuses this theme by creating an exaggerated effect of grandeur and by putting Adam's shoes in the foreground. Adam, at that time, was making money by illegally selling sneakers at his high school that he had bought on the legal market. This "bizness" (Tafferant, 2007) is probably not unrelated to his fondness for this kind of staging. An invisible thread binds him to boys from other social backgrounds, through money and his law-breaking activities. In this study area, this connection based on money and a transgressive attitude toward the law is particularly embodied by boys who are closer to the economic pole of the bourgeoisie, and whose leisure activities focus on the 16th arrondissement, where they meet their peers from Catholic schools. They often plan on leaving the country to study at foreign business schools. They stand in contrast to those boys who are closer, in terms of family anchoring and aspirations (less commercial, more national), to the cultural pole of the bourgeoisie.

The figure of *la racaille* indeed embodies a style but also a transgressive ethos that tends to impress the boys in each of my three field surveys. Coming across as a real boy and fully enjoying one's youth goes hand in hand with the questioning of the rules of the adult world. The *la racaille* stereotype derives part of its prestige from its nature that is both undisciplined and cannot be disciplined. It is through fear tinged with admiration that the *la racaille* stereotype most often enters the lives of young people, by means of TV news, the press, family discussions, and warnings in schools—"don't behave like *la racaille*" warns the guidance counselor of a high school in the 16th *arrondissement* of Paris following an altercation between boys and a supervisor in the winter of 2016. *La racaille* is delinquent, violent, burns cars, traffics various contraband goods, and is rude to teachers. It renews the age-old fear created by young men from "dangerous classes" (Chevalier, 1958; Tripier, 2004: 186), who are routinely portrayed by a stereotypical figure that varies depending on the country and period in time. Because the

term *la racaille* is adorned with a monochrome varnish, unlike other openly racist categories, it can be used in various social contexts, including by people who claim to be anti-racist. This is because, even better than “rebeu” or “black” (terms themselves borrowed from the language of the *cités* aimed at euphemizing racial assignment in French bourgeois speech), its racializing content is only suggested, it is not said.

The danger that *la racaille* poses to the rest of society, and particularly to the ruling classes, contributes to its style. Clothes and music, and also weapons, are its main accessories. Many boys have them on their Instagram accounts, often by means of film images.

[Insert Figure 3. “Hate.” French poster of movie *La Haine* (Mathieu Kassovitz, 1995)]

[Insert Figure 4. “Hate.” One of the posters for *La Haine* for an anglophone audience]

[Insert Figure 5. “Love.” Picture of a poster by French artist Jack le Black (2015), on a Parisian wall, posted on Instagram by Adam in May 2015 (screenshot)]

When Adam was fourteen, he posted several images from the classic French film *La Haine*, as well as a photograph of the hijacking of a poster made by Parisian artist and t-shirt seller Jack Le Black (see Figure 5). Adam later removed these posts from his account. Jack Le Black did not use the French version of the *La Haine* poster to create a disconnect between the image and the mention of love, but that from the poster aimed at an anglophone audience. The distance created by this international detour allowed for the insubordination and violence obviously admired by Adam to be aestheticized when he was taking his first steps on Instagram, before he embarked on his “business venture,” for which his account has become a showcase.

But linguistic deviation is not always required, and the transgression enabled by performing *la racaille* is also open to young people who are closer to the cultural pole of the

bourgeoisie, including girls, when it takes on a more political dimension. French rap can be favored in order to create a political aesthetic of adolescent rebellion with an instantly comprehensible message. Léa's¹⁴ videos testify to this. Each of the "episodes" she has published on her Instagram account has its own soundtrack.¹⁵ Léa's eclecticism can be found in a wide variety of musical genres ranging from French chanson to rock, and including electro. While the Italian partisans' song "Bella ciao"¹⁶ serves as the background music for a compilation of scenes of carefreeness and lawful leisure activities, it's French "introspective" rap that accompanies "La vanille a un goût amer" (Vanilla Has a Bitter Taste) and "Brigands" (Robbers),¹⁷ two short films composed of images of violations, in which the figure of *la racaille* features. The first of these two short films opens with Léa's group of friends standing in front of a wall with the slogan "Madness is the price of freedom" tagged on it—the high schoolers I met and interviewed were mostly in the literature track, and their parents, owner-inheritors of Parisian apartments, were often senior managers in the private or public sector, teachers, or artists. A succession of sketches follow one another where we see the same friends, both boys and girls and in groups or alone, smoking cigarettes and joints, drinking rum, partying, sharing a kebab, riding a scooter around the streets of Paris, copying rappers' gestures, and wearing hats back to front. Images of their high school blockade also appear at the beginning of the video. During the winter of 2017 to 2018, several Parisian high schools were blockaded by groups of students in support of various days of national mobilization (in defense of civil servant status, against police violence, and so on) or to protest, not as part of any legal demonstrations, against government policy in general. Some people in my study like Lea participated in one or more blockades and took to the sidewalks, something that they were proud and excited about.

Rap music, whatever its actual content, thus seems to impose itself as the music of transgression and rebellion. It makes it possible to show and share among friends the "crazy"

parts of existence that are difficult to show in their raw forms. The *stylization* of deviance, by using a social alternative, allows deviance to be *shown* by transforming it into a cultural practice and even an aesthetic object. This deviance is even more striking among girls, who perform a kind of masculine figure. They embody a political relationship to the world that does not often take female traits into account, except in relation to topics that are considered specifically female/feminist (contraception, sexual assault, etc.).

A violent figure: A power that young hicks cannot attain

In the countryside, choice of clothing and style is much less developed than in the city. Boys are particularly reluctant to take care of their appearance—such concern is generally conceived as reflecting a lack of manhood.

Rather than style, it is the violence of the figure of *la racaille* that comes to life in rural areas. This violence is both a source of admiration and resentment. When describing their own life, rural young people refer much less to class relations than young people from the *cités* do, but they know that like them they occupy a social position dominated by a chronic lack of money and employment prospects, and also by strong geographical isolation that limits their desires and ambitions. Known about but forgotten, their situation moves no one. They tend to consider the large amount of attention their racialized peers receive because of the fear they inspire as an additional discredit. This general disapproval is part of them recognizing the power that the boys from the *cités* have and that they lack.

[Field notes recounting the day of June 5, 2010 spent in a village in Loir-et-Cher, about Christopher¹⁸, 18 years old, trainee electrician, and Alexandre, one of his friends, whom I met only informally, 17 years old, a student at a local public agricultural high school]

Christopher is less than one meter seventy tall, his cap is back to front (with his “stage name” initials on it: MCJ; he raps) blond, a little drunk when I met him, laughing and showing off. [. . .] He says “my brother” regularly, listens to rap and raps himself (he has a blog), and continually talks about “fighting” and “killing” anyone who touches his family. [. . .] His main topic of conversation is to talk about the boys from the *cités*. “Those from Source” (a well-known *cité* in Orléans) who “come down” sometimes to fight with those from Tours or Blois. [. . .] Christopher adopts the vocabulary, recognizes comparable values of masculinity, would like to be armed too—there has been a lot of talk about weapons of war, while people round here have hunting guns at best. Christopher has a “22 [long-rifle].” He would like to knuckle punch a guy he wants to “kill” because this guy beat up one of his friends. But actually, he doesn’t like the young people from the *cités* because he doesn’t like “bicots”¹⁹ [. . .] Christopher recounted that his grandfather, who “did Algeria,” kept many weapons from that period. In the evening, when we were in the supermarket parking lot, Christopher and Alexandre competed with each other with the music they played on their mobile phones. At one point, Christopher put on a pretty amazing track, and he was all happy. We first heard a woman’s voice singing in Arabic, then machine-gun fire, and finally the Marseillaise (which he sang at the same time, smiling, saying, “that’s good!”). Alexandre looked offended.

La racaille is dangerous because it challenges the social order and especially the adult order, and because it is the product of a history made of subordinations and wars. In the contemporary countryside, even (hunting) weapons are old-fashioned and associated with an unpopular activity pursued mainly by older men—something only a local boy (and not Christopher), a farmer’s son on his way to becoming a farmer himself, might practice. The memory of the Algerian war, however, testifies to the past existence of a real struggle between

young people set in opposition with each other by the colonial state, or due to the color of their skin, religious backgrounds, and family origins. A historical battle, told as a family story, which can have no other reality for Christopher than an imaginary battle with its descendants. This reference supports him presenting himself as a violent rapper—and for this reason a powerful person—at the same time as it underlines the inequality between the (helpless) youth to which he belongs, and that of the *cités*.

The boys in my second field survey had few qualifications and are strongly affected by the precariousness of employment. As “hicks,” they suffer from a real collective neglect and erasure that, according to them, contrasts with the treatment of young people from the *cités*. Rural young people take great interest in this subject, as can be seen by their unexpected participation in the Skyblog “Pour ma ville” (For My City) launched in 2007 by Fadela Amara, then Secretary of State for Urban Policy.²⁰ This blog aimed at gathering testimonies from young people from the *cités* about their living conditions. Young people from rural areas highlighted the same types of complaints as the expected target audience of the initiative, “more activities for young people and more transport” (Roché and Zagrodzki, 2007: 26). But very often their remarks were accompanied by a comparison with young people from the *cités*, who they claimed had an advantage and who they accused of obtaining political attention through their use of violence. Their problems were not recognized because they themselves were not a problem. The comparison they made between their powerlessness and the symbolic power of their suburban peers appears in rural young people’s discourse as additional violence against themselves. The gap between the stereotype of *la racaille* and these rural young people’s ways of performing it is less a parody than an incomplete imitation or an imaginary game that highlights their own powerlessness. It is probably partly in connection with this feeling of helplessness that I sometimes heard in the background not only the mainstream versions of hip-

hop but also some racist songs with a rap rhythm, performed by groups in tracksuits and caps in village squares.

Only a small number of the boys I met on my second field survey were explicitly racist. The amount of hatred declared varied depending on the person and the situation in question. Christopher, a rapper himself, brandished his abusive words with a certain amount of delight, but this was less the case with his friend, Alexandre. They also used racist insults in the afternoons I spent with them, and their mobile phones played rap songs as well as chants, some of which called for the murder of Arabs and Blacks. But when I asked them questions about their song choices and I reminded them of my presence, both were embarrassed, “no, no, no, this is not good, it’s not worth remembering, it’s racist rap.” In these discussions and by talking about their generation’s music, it is worth noting that they targeted “young people” (from the *cités*) more than the entire population linked to postcolonial migration. Their fascination was tinged with a jealousy of people who were the same age as them and with whom they shared a partially similar social situation. A color line and a division between urban and rural worlds separate these two fractions of the French working-class youth.

A similar jealousy (minus the racism) was found in the *cités* themselves, where here too the figure of *la racaille* appeared as an admired and enviable figure (Tetreault, 2008). *La racaille* impressed the good boys, who could wear the outfit without engaging in the accompanying rebellious behavior, keeping the hidden transcript of domination safe from repression by distancing themselves from any illegal or outlandish acts (Scott, 1990). It also elicited a discourse of contempt among some of the young people, which my presence was likely to stimulate because they feared being perceived as personifying a stereotype that oppressed them on a daily basis. But it was not only the stereotype in their statements, but also their own experience of violence, described in varying degrees of accuracy, that they condemned. Maalik’s view of the movie *La Haine* is revealing in this respect:

I like movies like that, with a moral at the end. I like to see what everyone says, what I think all the young people in the *cités* know. We feel a kinship with a few of the characters. . . This kind of movie is like a warning, its purpose is to warn young people. It moved me because it was so much like reality. It's good for young people, it makes you think. There should be more movies like this.

[Maalik²¹, 17 years old, June 19, 2002, at a community center]

Spectators of their own lives, staged more or less realistically, Maalik and many of his friends also had a distant relationship with the figure of *la racaille* that they could not, however, content themselves with aestheticizing or being jealous of. This is because it exemplified real violence in their day-to-day environment and because it was constantly replayed from a social elsewhere that judged them from afar and gave them a heroic and at the same time self-destructive image.

A sexual figure: 100 percent heterosexual

In contemporary France, *la racaille* appears as the hegemonic version of the traditional bad boy. Unlike the bad girl (Lees, 1986; Fine, 1988), the figure of *la racaille* is not initially defined by its sexuality, or rather its relationship to sexuality is generally not the aspect first chosen to characterize its transgressive position. I would like to show here, on the contrary, that *la racaille* is actually a highly sexual figure, not only because the violent sexuality that shrouds it is one of the reasons for its bad reputation (Mucchielli, 2005), but also because this stigma is a reason for young people to see *la racaille* as a reference figure.

La racaille represents a young working-class man, descended from families who come from outside of France. Unlike other bad boy figures that have previously arisen in France (Robert and Lascoumes, 1974; Mauger and Poliak, 1983), which were not characterized by

foreign family origins (or for which such origins were not seen as a determining factor in sociological analyses or included in ethnographic descriptions), the figure of *la racaille* evokes an imaginary that is located not only on the margins of the city and of legality, but also on the margins of the nation. It renews the colonial stigma of the erotic beast that the feminine noun *la racaille* and the animality of the metaphor underline. *La racaille*, half man, half beast, is frightening. It seems to prowl on the fringes of society, ready to pounce, like its colonized ancestor. The sexualization of indigenous people (Taraud, 2003; Dorlin, 2006) and then of postcolonial migrant men is a process of alterisation frequently carried out by the majority population of France (Mucchielli, 2005). The bestiality contained in the migratory heritage makes *la racaille* the leading figure in male domination over women. For this reason too, it is eroticized, just as the young Algerian man was at the time of the Algerian war (Shepard, 2018).

Continually singled out as the last representative of sexism in France, “the uncivilizable *racaille*” (Guénif-Souilamas and Macé, 2004: 11) holds appeal for the very same reason. Completely masculine, it veils and violates, it is dominant in its relationships with girls and women, and its power is exercised without restraint—as witnessed by the media outpouring about the gang rapes at the start of the 2000s, of which it was the main protagonist (Hamel, 2003). However, while domination of girls as a marker of masculinity is more visible in the suburban or rural working classes than in the more civilized bourgeoisie, especially in the presence of an adult woman, it nevertheless appears everywhere, including explicitly. For example, during an interview, Christopher said you have to “train women,” and several girls told me that Adam, in the high school canteen in the spring of 2017, spent a meal throwing chunks of bread at one of his female classmates, saying, “are you hungry, huh?” because she “pécho” at parties.²² None of the other girls or boys who were there reacted to Adam’s behavior. The girls only complained about it among themselves and in various discussions with me, without questioning the good image Adam enjoys in their eyes, in particular because this kind

of attitude seems to them to be the opposite of his usual behavior. But when he staged himself on his *autolib*’ as a parodic *racaille*, Adam did not just appropriate a culture that was beneath him: he also adorned himself with the traits of unambiguous masculinity. Although he does not make any explicitly sexist or homophobic remarks during our discussions, appearing as completely manly—and therefore making it impossible for his heterosexuality to be called into question—is of primary importance for Adam, as it is for most of the boys. This performance complements his other attributes by allowing him to express an accentuated male style while still displaying a certain amount of respect toward girls, a standard promoted in his social environment and an issue of class distinction but also of whiteness (Dyer, 1997). That is why young white people from the rural working class also often combine the sexual element of the performance of *la racaille* with some of the other social signifiers mentioned above.

For example, in my second study area, Jérôme, who told me he paid little attention to his clothes, which he bought as cheaply as possible (he usually wore a tracksuit and did his shopping at a local discount store), decided to get a piercing in his left eyebrow—“not the right; that’s gay.” When his mother saw it, she said, “You already look like a *racaille*, so if you wear a piercing like that...”²³ In my rural study area, the boys wore fewer accessories than elsewhere. Any accessory they did wear said something about the wearer. Here, the connotation was sexual: in the two opposing reactions of the adult woman and her son, both the homosexual and *la racaille* are presented as undesirable figures, but in contrasting ways. While *la racaille* is a pejorative figure for the mother, there can be no confusion between it and the homosexual, which is also present in the choice of jewelry, either for her or for Jérôme.

The lack of gender ambiguity associated with the figure of *la racaille* is also important for many girls. This is why the boys who identified with this figure have value on the teenage love market in low-income *cités*.

I think I'm more attracted to *la racaille*, baggy sweat suits, and all that. I hate guys who dress in skintight clothes, I'm always out hunting for *la racaille*. From a certain age, you look for the right person: when I get older, I won't go looking for *la racaille*. I'm still a kid: I'm not looking for the one at the moment. [. . .] Maybe I want to show off because I've been out with lots of *racailles*, maybe that's why I want to show off. . .

[August 14, 2002, at a community center with Yasmine²⁴]

La racaille fascinates young people and can only arouse desire at this age, according to Yasmine, ready to bet on the changing of her love interests as she gets older, aware that the attributes of a desirable masculinity change from one stage of life to the next. She also provides the key to understanding why being tainted by the stigmatized figure of *la racaille* can in fact be valuable. When Yasmine goes out with *racailles*, she shows off about it. Adam was showing off when he posed as “the king of the world” and illustrated his comment with a bomb emoji (Figure 2). When Christopher gave me a detailed description of everything he planned to do with his American punch, he was showing off. Because *la racaille* is not shy, does “bad things” and draws attention to itself. Being linked to it in imagination or in love is like sharing a little scoundrel heroism, it's about slumming it yourself. It's about becoming sexy.

Racailles are thus desirable in the eyes of some girls from the *cités*, who see them as real boys, not those who “act like teachers' pets” in the front row of the classroom or those, with questionable sexuality, who wear tight clothes. The girls' desire contributes to feeding boys' attraction toward this hyperbolic male figure. Karim²⁵, 20 years old, in a secret relationship with a very prominent “little sister” in the neighborhood, was therefore promoted to the rank of the superlative *racaille*: “Several of my friends tell me, ‘you're the shadiest guy in V., you're the biggest *racaille* because you're dating her [. . .] Some are dealing drugs, it's nothing compared to you. Because if her brother finds out, it will be a disaster’.” It is danger, fire, risk-

taking, and contempt for fear that make *la racaille*. Defying the older “killer” brother, and thus defying *la racaille* is like Christopher adorning himself with the finery of the latter. Karim’s comments were imbued with great admiration for this older brother who allegedly threatened to kill a boy who was hanging around his sister, saying, “if you come near her again, I’ll kill you! [. . .] I don’t care about going to jail, I don’t care about dying.” Médina was her older brother’s “favorite sister” and Karim’s “great love,” who he planned to marry. The two boys would be ready to face any danger, even death. . . even Médina’s sexuality and what was expected of them to prove their own sexual morality. Because sexuality is frightening at an age when it is about the unknown and when it changes social position by transforming boys into men, girls into women, performing *la racaille* not only makes you sexy but also gives you power (and courage) in the face of the expected and feared sexual experience.

Sexuality was also a part of the evening in 2010 when I met with Christopher, described earlier. As was the case whenever we met again afterwards, Christopher was obviously trying to impress me, with his epic tales of gang wars, his violent music, his strong views, his knowledge of his friends whom he called “brothers” the way young people from the *cités* do, and his ostensibly protective tone when talking about his “little sister.” He then started writing to me a lot, regularly asking me when I was going to come back and complaining about my absences. I was not responsive to Christopher’s increasingly intrusive advances and his aggressiveness made me uncomfortable to the point of forgoing seeing him. But the sexualized content of this first discussion is indicative of the sexual dimension that this boy, and others, may have, whereby he performs his gender by performing *la racaille*.

On the contrary, Adam’s posing on the *autolib*’ earned him some enamored comments from girls who were not part of his offline inter-knowledge group. (Figure 2) Again, sexual desire is an explicit part of the effects of performance. And such reactions echo the way Barthélémy, a seventeen-year-old gay boy I met on my third field survey²⁶:

And straight boys, what are they like?

Boring as hell! Some of them are nice—the ones who are relatively gay friendly, it's pretty nice because they're cool. But there's a closed-off attitude from all the other boys who know I'm gay. I don't talk to them at all. [. . .] They smoke in front of school, they eat together in the canteen, they play around in class when they feel like it. They talk about chicks. They're always hitting each other, hitting each other on the head every time they see each other. It's really the measure of the cocks. They're in groups. They all love rap—you can see it in what they listen to, you can see it in their clothing style. . . They all love soccer. They're really passionate! It's not a cliché.

[Barthélémy, aged 17, high school, on February 9, 2018, in a brasserie in the 16th *arrondissement*]

Rap, sports, and tracksuits seem to act as elements of cohesion for groups of heterosexual boys in their daily lives, who “hit each other on the head every time they see each other.” These boys, with their “closed-off attitude” toward gay boys, share the same passions in sports, clothes, and music, and they “play around in class when they feel like it.” Stulian, another gay boy from my third study area, while speaking to me about his painful middle school years, described his older brother: “There was a guy who took me under his wing because I was a big shot's little brother. My big brother is the total opposite of me; he's a bad boy, a *racaille*, a weightlifter.”²⁷ This second-hand protection “held him back” as he was trying to make a place for himself within the group of boys, without ever managing to do so. Girls are supposed to be the legitimate objects of these boys' desires, but they also seem to feel a love for each other that the Jack Le Black poster illustrates well: open solidarity, proximity to a gun (a phallic object if there ever was one), and the pleasure of belonging to a masculine in-group without any suspicion. This is

an expression of the desire for homosociality among men without any suspicion of homosexuality (Sedgwick, 1985).

Conclusion

After appearing in French public discourse in the early 2000s, the figure of *la racaille* has remained a stereotypical bad boy type, but it is also the only figure that appeared in all three of my study areas, despite each having its own distinct social characteristics and despite the surveys being conducted over more than fifteen years. This term has continued to crop up everywhere, associated with poor areas (suburban social housing estates), a specific time of life (youth), a sex (boys), and ethno-racial minorities. Although it has been reappropriated in many different ways based on the area in question, the figure of *la racaille* always includes the stable characteristic of embodying a sexuality above all suspicion—that is, explicitly heterosexual and seen as inevitably dominating.

The boy who utters obscenities, who does not respect the codes of conduct imposed by adults, the boy singled out, directly or indirectly, poses a challenge to the authority of *la racaille* and represents a danger. Violence, both verbal and in the form of an affront to good behavior in general, is prized for defining itself and the other as truly masculine, and does not shy away from explicitly dominating girls and denigrating boys who are gay. This is a central characteristic of the demonstration of the social legitimacy of boys, potential men, who want to appear unambiguously as “real boys,” who cannot be suspected of effeminacy and homosexuality. Adults in families, schools, and workplaces almost unanimously see the figure of *la racaille* as solely negative, but this is not always the case with young people, wherever they live. The masculine force attributed to the figure of *la racaille* can make it desirable in the eyes of some girls and partly admirable in the eyes of boys, who use it to express inappropriate or inaccessible social power. *La racaille* is therefore not only a positive figure for young people

from the *cités* in accordance with a “counter-discourse” aimed at reversing the stigma (Tetreault, 2008). Performing *la racaille* is also part of a boy growing up and becoming a man. Despite the negativity surrounding it, the performance of *la racaille* thus constitutes a class marker, and makes it possible for boys in particular to maintain heterosexual order everywhere, including in places that claim to be gay friendly.

Conflict of interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

¹ Despite referring to a male figure, *racaille* is a feminine noun in French (preceded by the feminine article *la*).

² *Caille* means quail.

³ See “Nicolas Sarkozy continue de vilipender ‘racailles et voyous’,” *Le Monde*, November 11, 2005. For an analysis of the political and social roots of this lexicon, see Beaud and Pialoux (2005).

⁴ Rap is the most listened to genre, especially by high school students. Its audience then declines, in particular to the advantage of a greater diversity of musical tastes (Octobre et al., 2011: 45–47).

⁵ Source: Insee, *Enquête emploi 2003*.

⁶ According to French statistical definitions, “municipalities are considered to be rural when they are not part of an urban unit.” In France, an urban unit is defined as a continuously built-

up area with more than 2000 inhabitants. (Source: <https://www.insee.fr/fr/metadonnees/definition/c1501>)

⁷ Source: Insee, *Recensement de la population 2009*.

⁸ Source: Insee, *Recensement de la population 2015*.

⁹ Anne-Catherine Wagner defines international capital as follows: “capital that is inseparably cultural, linguistic, and social, largely inherited and reinforced by international school curricula and professional experience in several countries” (Wagner, 2011: 6).

¹⁰ Hip-hop culture in the suburbs is itself largely produced in reference to American hip-hop (Béthune, 2004), both in terms of music and clothing style. In the *cités*, the “*cainri*” style (derived from “*ricain*,” a shortening of “*américain*”), which refers specifically to American basketball subculture, has little to do with the New York accents appropriated by the bourgeoisie. These two takes on American culture can even be opposed, as Pili explained in my second study area: “I like my older cousins. Some of them are *racaille*, some are *cainri*—“*cainri*” means American style, some people are pretty serious about it.” For her too, the figure that borrowed from African-American subculture acted as a distinct alternative to the French home-grown *racaille* style. When adopted by the bourgeoisie, however, both styles are blended together, with the former lending some of its allure to the latter. NB: Pili lived mostly with her mother (her parents had been separated since she was little). She was the oldest of six children. Her mother, 40, born in the Congo, was unemployed and had a partner. Her father, 42, also born in the Congo, worked as a tax official and had remarried. Pili said she was a practicing Protestant.

¹¹ At the time, Adam was 16 (born in 2001) and was in his first year at a public high school in the 8th arrondissement. He lived mostly with his mother, not far from where his father lived, with his younger sister—his parents had divorced when he was around 10. His mother, 50, worked in private sector communications, and did not have a partner. His father, 50, worked in public sector communications, and had a partner. Adam said he was not religious.

¹² *Autolib*’ was an electric car sharing service in Paris and its region, operational from 2011 to 2018.

¹³ See Béthune, 2004.

¹⁴ Léa’s parents had separated four years previously, and she lived between their homes. For a while, her mother had stayed in the large apartment the family had occupied in the 17th arrondissement, but she eventually had to sell it and move to a smaller apartment in the 18th arrondissement. Her mother was a primary school teacher and volunteered at a theater company. Her father was a former journalist who had gone into dramatic writing, with mixed success.

Léa said that “all my grandparents are really rich” and that they gave her lots of pocket money at Christmas and for her birthday. She had two older brothers and one younger one. She said she was not religious.

¹⁵ Among her posts are twenty-five “episodes,” each about one minute long, from December 2018.

¹⁶ This song sung by Italian partisans (its lyrics were written in 1944 to an Italian popular tune) became a song of international resistance.

¹⁷ Episode 15, entitled “La vanille a un goût amer” (57 seconds long, posted on Léa’s Instagram account on November 14, 2017), and episode 25, “Brigands” (1 minute long, posted on October 7, 2018). Josman is one of the rappers that Clara Heysch described as using “sensitive rhetoric” as part of a more recent trend in French rap, which has also been called “introspective.” This trend was largely started by the rapper Lomepal (see Heysch, 2019).

¹⁸ Christopher lived with his parents, who were married. He had one younger sister and said he was not religious. His mother, 42, worked as a cashier in a supermarket. His father, 44, was a butcher in the same supermarket.

¹⁹ A “bicot” is a derogatory and racist term for a North African Arab.

²⁰ Skyblogs are blogs on the social networking site Skyrock.com, popular with young people in France.

²¹ Maalik, 17 (born in 1985), lived with his married parents. He was the fifth of six children. His father, 56, born in Tunisia, in France since the Seventies, was a skilled laborer. His mother, same age, born in Tunisia, in France since the Seventies, was unemployed. Maalik said he was a muslim.

²³ “Pécho” is *verlan* for the French verb “choper”, commonly used in *cité*, which means “to hook up,” among other things.

²⁴ Interview on August 11, 2008, when Jérôme was out of school and without a job at 17. He was living with his married parents in a small, run-down detached house, and also sometimes with Floriane, when she wasn’t at boarding school (on weekends and during holidays). He had one older brother and was not religious. His mother, 49, was unemployed. His father, 53, was a skilled laborer.

²⁴ Yasmine, 15 (born in 1987), lived in the south of France, but was on vacation at her cousin Rafika’s house. She was at this interview and at the one that followed, in the Thiel *cité*. Her parents were married and had been born in Morocco, but had been in France since the age of

20. She was the fourth of five children. Her father, 45, was a farmer. Her mother, 38, was a nursery assistant. Yasmine said she was a Muslim, that she respected Ramadan and did not eat prohibited food, but that she “doesn’t pray.”

²⁵ Karim lived with his married parents, who were born in Algeria. He was the elder of two children. His father, 49, was a plumber. His mother, 47, was unemployed. Karim defined himself as a practicing Muslim.

²⁶ Barthélémy lived with his married parents. He was an only child. His father, 50, came from a working-class family and was a journalist. His mother, 50, was a relaxation therapist. He said he was not religious.

²⁷ Stulian was 16 (born in 2001) at the time of the interview, conducted on October 3, 2017, on a café terrace in the 9th arrondissement. He was in the second year of public high school in the 9th arrondissement, in the literature track. He lived with his married parents in the same neighborhood. His father was an artist, and his mother worked “in fashion.” He had an older brother in art school. He said he was not religious.

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