

So Many Ways to be an Outsider: 'Nerdism' and ethnicity as signifiers of otherness

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Abstract

The concept of the nerd and loneliness is an interesting one when we consider the idea of what 'outsider' status means and how it is communicated within popular culture. It is important to note that being identified as a nerd does not necessarily align with being lonely or holding outsider status as a negative quality. Indeed, within the mainstream Americanised evolution of the nerd we see the development of someone who although considered 'strange' or 'odd' and at times 'other' by their peers does have value and finds their place within the group, nerd becomes in these circumstances a shorthand for socially awkward rather than a true outsider.

Keywords: nerds; loneliness; otherness; disability; ethnicity; television

This article will consider the status of 'outsider' within popular television culture. The work will use as its textual analysis case study the France 2 produced French police procedural *Cain* (2012-)ⁱ, specifically considering the use of the character Nassim Borel (Mourad Boudaoud) within the show. Such a selection allows consideration of the nerd outside of the established Anglo-American iterations which permeate popular TV culture. Nassim Borel is a character who encompasses many of the stereotypical traits of the nerd within popular culture but also importantly combines these aspects with the implications of the character's French-Algerian ethnicity. Borel encompasses a range of character traits that can be identified within the nerd stereotype and as such immediately confirm a reading of loneliness or enforced outsider status because of this. Within the show Borel's social naivety and lack of 'cool' are defined through clothing, interests and behaviours, and perceived sexual inadequacy.

Such allocation and perceived confirmation of a Beta male status underscores how the nerd stereotype provides a short cut for an audience and within *Cain* creates a strong dynamic which supports other forms of representation. Through the casting of Boudaoud as Borel we can consider how national assumptions may be adhered to or challenged within the series and in turn how the character's might be read by both national and international audiences. This offers the opportunity to consider the discourses which surround the narrative usage and reception of such a character, enabling exploration of concepts related to the posited outsider status of Borel. With this in mind his lonely status can be connected to the myriad of reasons for his positioning as 'odd one out' within his team, in terms of both a nerdist reading of his character but also the ethnic placement and concerns regarding race and perceived nationality leading to his distinct outlander status and treatment. Such analysis in turn raises considerations of racial stereotype and the perceived social and cultural effect of being ethnically different in a predominantly white country. Borel can also be seen as a representative of colonised peoples in French society. As a character of Algerian heritage there is an implication of enforced outsider status, difference and the loneliness felt when you are treated as different. Boudaoud's casting as Borel enables a wider interrogation of the stereotype of the nerd figure within popular culture. Such consideration can counter the formulaic use of whiteness in the nerd stereotype and extend the concept of where outsider status is welcomed or inflicted upon characters. Integral to this examination of the utilisation of the nerd within the *Cain* narrative are the associations of masculinity which form a central concern within the exploration of the nerd stereotype and within the programme the reinforcement of hegemonic expectations of the male within popular culture and within that iteration as a part of the French psyche. Such a specific discourse is foregrounded as the lead

character, the eponymous Frédéric Caïn, is a paraplegic who is confined to a wheelchair, yet also regularly enters the field of investigation. The address of Caïn's disability, his personal treatment of his situation and the ways in which other characters respond to his paralysis, it is proposed, uses the status of Borel to narratively underpin the attitudes and physicality of the Caïn character. In so doing the interaction of the nerd stereotype and expectations of traditional masculine behaviour become central to the exploration of the characters within the show. A set of relationships where sociological placement and institutionalised behaviours are formed producing the framework for the discourses explored within the varied plot lines and character uses. Within this the application of assumptions regarding normative/hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity we can consider how those outside of these social mores are treated. Such institutionalised sociological and cultural patterns can then in turn translate into how those disregarded (outsiders) or lonely people find, or don't find, voice or place within society. Sexuality and prowess within the series are markers of traditional masculinity and so 'fitting in'. To be single and shy therefore equates to a lesser Beta status. Such loneliness is enforced not only by Borel's lack of consistent female company but his apparent inability to engage successfully in sexual conquests. In the case of the show *Caïn* there are additional considerations attached to the establishment of masculinity and Alpha male status. As already indicated *Caïn* has at its heart a differently abled male lead, opening the comparison of how physicality and machismo can be a performative aspect of masculinity. The use and representation of such a character is key to understanding the treatment of a figure such as Borel, as national stereotypes are at once challenged and underscored within the programme and considerations of French attitudes to disability, nerdism, and race are foregrounded within an analysis of the text. It is within this area that this article seeks to contribute to existing knowledge. Firstly, taking the identity of the 'nerd' and exploring it within relation to the application of ethnic representation and associated national concerns. Secondly, exploring the use of this sociological and cultural stereotype to affect some change in reception to the use of a paraplegic protagonist.

Created by Bertrand Arthuysⁱⁱ and Alexis Le Secⁱⁱⁱ the Marseilles set series *Caïn*, currently in season eight, follows a long serving eponymous crime detective Caïn (Bruno Debrandt – 2012 to 2018 and Julien Baumgartner 2018 -) who has been injured and subsequently confined to a wheelchair. A small but loyal team comprised of Captain Fred Caïn, Lucie (Julie Delarme) a younger female detective under Caïn's mentorship and Borel the youngest and most inexperienced member of the team who is usually relegated to IT support or research status. Alongside weekly investigations an overarching plotline continues through UK seasons one and two

enabling a continuity of narrative and the opportunity to utilise the character of Borel in a more narratively central way. This is explored as he attempts to assist his female colleague, Lucie, by stepping into the Alpha male role of hero and saviour. In this instance the Alpha male concept is demonstrated through an attempt to use physical dominance to assist Lucie in a fight with a man and so rescue her. Borel's inability to complete this role successfully complicates the situation and opens the team to investigation. Such inability and failure confirm his status of under-experienced yet loyal nerd. A situation which is used by Lucie, Borel's female senior colleague, to exclude and punish him, increasing his loneliness as his attempts to behave as his colleagues expect are once again thwarted, of which more later.

Firstly, the application of the epithet 'nerd' to the character of Borel will be considered. It is proposed that there is an added value within the application of the nerd concept to Borel, both in narrative terms but also within a wider consideration of the racial and ethnic stereotypes within French culture. In academic explorations of the nerd within popular culture, much is written about its evolution and use of representation within American culture. This is similarly represented in British iterations of the template. Christine Quail and K. E. Lane both consider the ways in which the geek or nerd have insinuated their way into social and cultural consciousness through both negative and in turn positive presentations.

Lane specifically traces the mainstream cultural construction of the nerd through iterations in sketch comedy from *Saturday Night Live* in the 1970's and via sit-coms of the 80's following this tradition (2018). Lane's consideration places the idea of the nerd into the comedy realm, a figure of fun and ridicule which has become the cultural norm. Nerd culture is that of the outsider, one to be watched but not to become. K. M. Earnest (2018) offers an exploration of the geek as group member and the differing ways in which such groupings have assisted in changing or encouraging an evolving consideration of the nerd or geek within American television presentations. Such constructions certainly offer the concept of strength in numbers. Characters can be themselves in similar company, less hindered by social expectations as we will explore later in relation to mainstream hits such as *The Big Bang Theory*. The revising of the nerd as a dominant cultural force when in an ensemble underlines the loneliness of the nerd in situations where conventionality is prized.

The über nerd, one classed as 'nerdy' even within their own group of nerds, is not a concept commonly explored within depictions outside of America and Britain and so within this article I seek to consider the use of the more established and stereotypical aspects of the nerd. In this case the excluded status found when the nerd is placed within a conventional

cultural and social space, where standing out is not encouraged. The concept of the outsider is one which strongly intertwines with the idea of the nerd in popular culture, although there has been a contemporary move to integrate the nerd into character groups that might be deemed 'socially popular' within entertainment narratives. Such a move aligns with the use in popular culture of the 'nerd' or 'geek' as a character that, although not necessarily the social pariah, is still someone who is seen as alone or who does not follow mainstream mores or patterns of accepted social behaviour. With this in mind the placement of the 'nerd' character means they are at forbearance of more popular and socially 'conventional' characters who have accepted the 'nerd' into their friendship group or because the presence of the nerd is tolerated.

Concepts of multiple 'otherness' become elements to be stacked against a character, in a world where being a nerd is not necessarily negative. Other aspects must be considered such as ethnicity, neuro-divergence and extended gradations of perceived masculinity are added to the baseline nerd status. Masculinity in this context is defined as the traditional heterosexual socialisation which promotes physicality (athletic and sexual), detachment, independence, and toughness. It is important to note that a perception of lesser masculine status, regarding physical prowess, size and perceived sexual vigour, has always been an aspect of the condition of nerd, 'one of the hallmarks of the geek is a definite social and sexual awkwardness ...' (Wardell, 2018:252). The nerd traditionally is physically smaller than the 'jock', under-developed both athletically and sexually, they are unable to defend themselves and tend to be the friend zoned character rather than the romantic lead because of this awkwardness within traditional male conventions and behaviour. However, as the epithet of nerd becomes more mainstream, for example Leonard in *The Big Bang Theory*, Chuck Bartowski in *Chuck* and Ross Gellar in *Friends*, and associations of IT knowledge and masculine power become more entwined clearer physical distinctions and abilities are focussed upon to indicate true outsider positioning. If we consider the roots of the masculinity/nerd dialectic we can identify an ongoing consideration of physical, rather than mental prowess being valued. Or, as Flowers would suggest:

The cultural ideal of masculinity would come to be associated with technologies like lawnmowers, power tools, trucks, and tractors, as opposed to science and technology, which lacked the power to violently reshape the world around it (Flowers, 2018: 172).

We can see the application of Flower's idea in the attempt by Borel to physically vanquish Lucie's attacker, as referenced earlier. The impulse to action to validate masculinity is strong within the narrative of *Cain* and

although not an athletic or powerful man Borel attempts to conform. Borel is traditionally placed within the IT section of policing, his wish to be in the field is clear as it is aligned with both acceptance and the traditional concept of justice and punishment being a physical role rather than a technical one. Such prizing of physicality over cerebral ability is also advocated by Bishop et al, as they discuss student behaviour in the school environment:

In some schools, a tight knit group of 'populars' wielded normative hegemony over students in their grade. This centralization of normative hegemony in a student group that is typically dominated by athletes, cheerleaders, and students with a fun ideology undermines teacher efforts to develop a pro-learning culture (Bishop et al., 2004: 251).

Such research of real-life school experience reinforces the established fictional representation of the image of the 'nerd' in the American context of popular culture with an emphasis on athleticism and not learning. Indeed, in *Caïn* much focus is placed on gut instinct and intuition alongside physical grit and self-confidence, exemplified in the character of Caïn. Quail's 'awkward, math-savvy social and sexual failure' (2011: 460) establishes the roots of the nerd in popular culture through a focus on its evolution via the lens of American television and the creation through these iterations of the fictional nerd playbook found in Western representations. Additionally, there is an established identification of the nerd to be white and male although as Quail points out there have been exceptions which prove the rule, using the character of Urkel (Jaleel White) from *Family Matters* (1989-1987) to indicate some representation of differing ethnicities through the trope's TV evolution. With this in mind it is useful to note that even with nine years of additional media output, Quail's initial identifications that the nerd is white and male, is still the 'go to' stereotype within popular culture. However, television shows such as *The IT Crowd's* (2006-2013) Maurice Moss (Richard Ayoade), *The Big Bang Theory's* Rajesh Koothrappali (Kunal Nayyar), and *Leverage's* (2008-2012) Alec Hardison (Aldis Hodge), offer that there is a move to represent the aspects of the nerd stereotype within other ethnicities.

It is notable that American and British representations of the non-white male nerd dominate popular cultural vocabularies. Such narratives can also be seen in two French series *Caïn* with Mourad Boudaoud as Borel, and in *Lupin* (2021-) through Detective Guedira (Soufiane Guerrab). With this in mind, the nerd becomes represented not by skin colour, although whiteness still dominates and ethnicity offers an opportunity to further isolate a character, but more readily through semiotic aspects such as dress, appearance, and behaviour alongside sociological and cultural markers in interaction and interests. Use of these signifiers underline

Quail's assertion that 'The nerd is culturally placed in contrast with a more athletic, socially skilled, sexually aware individual—the cool kid or jock, who demonstrates a hegemonic heterosexual masculinity' (2011: 461). Such semiotic indicators are utilized within the character of Borel to simplify identification of his character as a nerd. His physique, personal presentation and body language all mark the character as divergent from the hegemonic concepts of heteronormative masculine display. As we will later explore these aspects become central to nerd characterisation within *Caïn*, becoming markers of otherness that may be focussed upon to secure understanding of the 'nerd's' place within the narrative and in relation to other characters.

If we consider dress initially as a marker of nerdiness, we can observe the use of this signifier in the case of Borel. He dresses in a manner we associate with office work, smart/casual, however when we compare his sartorial selections to those of his colleagues, nerd attire is represented through his choice of clothing. Generalised 'coolness' and masculinity are reflected in the coded 'breaking of the rules', which is a cornerstone to the show. Borel generally wears a checked shirt, tie, dark trousers, and a slightly formal trainer, nothing that he wears is markedly fashion inflected or carries any indicative aspects of nerd culture and affiliations to hobbies or pursuits. Importantly, he is the only character who wears a tie on a regular basis - an aspect which marks him out as a follower of coded dress rules. A tie is conformity; in this case orthodoxy and so otherness. The tie also represents a social and cultural placement within Caïn's team suggestive of an inability to take risks therefore casting doubt on Borel's masculinity and general physical ability. His attire also implies a docility and desire to fit in. The conventionality of dress underscores the inexperience of the character and low status within the team. If we dress for the job we want Borel is clearly in IT support and not the rough and tumble of action in the field. We can also consider Borel's wish to not be noticed through his clothing, the plain colour palette and 'safe' selections suggest a desire to become invisible, to not stand out in a crowd. The idea of blending in, in the case of Borel singles him out in a team that dress more flamboyantly, confirming rather than mitigating his outsider status and associated loneliness. Such a desire to integrate can be read in two ways: by dressing anonymously, attention is not drawn underlining the aspects of his character which relate to the status of nerd, fitting in with cultural expectations of a work environment.

Secondly, such invisibility could link to experiences of ethnic minorities being unfairly profiled and singled out for unwanted attention, so by dressing conservatively, Borel seeks anonymity. This is contrasted with the attire of both Caïn and Lucie. Each dress in a casual manner, using a social signifier - the leather jacket, to identify their rebellious disdain for

authority. As Dylan Jones asserts ‘Not only is it the most basic form of teenage rebellion – a black leather jacket, jeans and T-shirt – but it was the first. Not only is it prosaic, it is primal’ (2015). Jones’ identification of the teen rebellion aspect is also pertinent to Caïn and Lucie, their behaviour is, at times dangerous and ill-considered, in direct contrast to Borel. The leather jackets also indicate a masculine dominance which both Caïn and Lucie share indicating a physical capability that Borel does not display. Where Caïn and Lucie enter the physical fray frequently, Borel’s attempts to overpower suspects or be physically active within the narrative tend to end in embarrassment for him, underlining his lack of prowess. Such narrative strands confirm weakened status as a ‘nerd’, a figure who is seemingly alone in contrast to the narrative togetherness of Caïn and Lucie. As Connell and Messerschmidt identify ‘Masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personal traits of individuals. Masculinities are configurations of practice that are accomplished in social action and, therefore, can differ according to gender relations in a particular social setting’ (2005: 836). Borel therefore is positioned into a more traditionally and stereotypically feminine and less active role. He is frequently or easily disarmed/captured while in the field, underlining his vulnerability and lack of physical capability when compared to the male lead. Such confirmation of Borel’s lack of physical ability and therefore inherent nerd status, factors strongly into narrative positioning as the support for Caïn but also as a figure isolated by these distinctions. Such discourse focusses upon Caïn’s wheelchair bound status and raise narrative questions regarding his physical suitability for his role as police detective in the field ‘... using a wheelchair for mobility is highly visual, is perceived to be severe, and frequently elicits invalidation’ (Gerschick, 2000: 1264). Indeed, in the original iteration of a paraplegic detective *Ironside* (1967-1975) the character is no longer a serving police officer but a consultant having been forced to retire. Ironside relies on his mental ability and the physicality of others to solve his cases, a contrast to the eponymous Caïn who is violent and physically reckless. Alongside considerations of suitability for service, is the very visible nature of Caïn’s disability, as Gerschick maintains:

... for men with physical disabilities, masculine gender privilege collides with the stigmatized status of having a disability, thereby causing status inconsistency, as having a disability erodes much, but not all masculine privilege. (Gerschick, 2000: 1265)

Such potential inconsistency, is countered effectively, in *Caïn*, through the presence of Borel, a ‘lesser man’ in terms of physical prowess and social/cultural standing and a man very much on the periphery of the team.

In addition to this semiotic positioning of Borel as a male of lesser ability and standing than Caïn, we can also consider whether ethnic derivation is also used as shorthand for outsider status, or as a marker for supplementary social discomfort. Mis-readings of social situations and norms contributes towards the 'nerd' stereotype of characters in American shows like *The Big Bang Theory* where Kuthrapali's Indian roots position him as farther removed from the established national consciousness. With this in mind, we look to the character of Borel, a person of Algerian descent but French nationality, and the additional stigma of ethnicity as it isolates and distances the character narratively beyond their 'nerd' status. Concepts of the nerd and ethnicity is also demonstrated in the French Netflix show *Lupin* (2021). Detective Guedira (Soufiane Guerrab) is a French-Algerian character like Borel who is positioned on the periphery of his team. His outsider status confirmed by his exclusion from the jewellery heist case, which forms the backbone of *Lupin* Season 1 and his relegation to office researcher and IT support. Guedira exhibits less Beta masculine characteristics, he is physically larger than Borel and his behaviour is more assured and his desire to be heard more clearly communicated. In relation to Beta Male status we can consider a man who stands back, is softer and less obviously physical than his male peers. However, Guedira does inhabit the nerdist trope of being obsessed with a subject, in this case the *Lupin* literature which guides the main protagonist's actions. *Lupin* is a popular series of French literature by Maurice Leblanc focussing on a master gentleman thief Arsine Lupin set in the 1900's. These books form the basis of the creation of a persona by *Lupin's* hero Assane Diop (Omar Sy). By knowing the stories Guedira is able to track Diop and later assist him in his search for his son and justice. Placed within the nerd role, Guedira's observations, as Borel encounters, are dismissed without discussion. Borel and Guedira, as characters of French-Algerian heritage, serve as representatives of those sections of French society still seen as other or interlopers; Marseilles and Paris are centres of French-Algerian settlement, and in turn indicative of the attitudes and reactions to those from this ethnic background. Indeed, in *Lupin* a recurring theme is the invisibility of non-white people in France. For both characters, their identity is presented as an obstacle that they must overcome:

...semantic distinction between choosing a behavior and manifesting negatively perceived traits is important to stigma theory because behavior is changeable, while attributing negatives to another's appearance is merely an attribution that is socially influenced. (Cross, 2005: 27)

They are, in part, victims of their own success, each having moved into a sphere where they could be termed as belonging yet not belonging. Borel and Guedira both serve in the police force, a perceived bastion of whiteness, that clearly accepts the abilities of the men as their passport into this traditionally off-limits arena. Each character fits in, yet is easily focussed upon as different when the narrative requires such distinction to be drawn, their nerd status combining with their ethnicity to define a secondary difference and point of otherness or isolation, and so loneliness. Such considerations of ethnic diversity and difference are confirmed in *Lupin* with the casting of Omar Sy (a first-generation French actor of Mauritian and Senegalese heritage) in the lead role with the show offering a clearly drawn confirmation of overt racism and discrimination in the French capital and beyond. A step which is made possible in part by the contemporary nature of the series, released on Netflix in 2021 and through the popularity of Sy, an actor and writer who on many occasions has challenged the racism present in his country.

The presence of French-Algerians in both of the shows' main locations creates an illusion of a diverse France, but also a France which is not as culturally integrated as it might first seem. Most prominently through the lens of Borel in *Cain* the potential is offered to explore the difficult relationship between France and Algeria which has been ongoing for many decades. In *A History of Algeria* (2017) James McDougall offers the history of a country defined in the past five centuries by invasion and resistance. A substantial portion of Algeria's experience of colonial rule was under the French from 1830 to 1962, a relationship which has definite consequences for both countries into the present day. Within *Cain* and *Lupin*, specifically through the characters of Borel and Guedira respectively, and additionally through encounters with other characters representing those of Algerian heritage, the placement and reality of being French-Algerian can begin to be explored and brought to the fore. It is important to note that such tensions are tangentially offered rather than explicitly explored. However, in most cases on-screen Borel is the only non-white presence, visually lonely as well as narratively so. With this in mind, it is important to note that the history of France and Algeria is one which colours French politics today as Sabrina Kalem confirms:

Being Algerian in France means representing a different country within a country ... When I represent Algeria, I represent something that is in my DNA, in my blood. When I represent France, I represent the country where I was born, where I live currently. (Alsaafin, 2019)

Such experience is interesting when we think of Borel. He is pulled in three directions; by his heritage, nationality, and his job. As with many people of immigrant descent, his role as a part of the system of law and order

potentially places him at narrative odds with his ethnic community, at least in terms of the generalised portrayal of the group within the series. The perception of 'traitor' both within the wider community he serves and those he works for, adds to his loneliness and outsider status. There is a recurring identification of Borel as a character that must 'take sides' and demonstrate loyalty in a situation, indicative of the ways in which those with 'outsider' status must constantly establish their reliability. In the case of Borel, this manifests as fealty to the police force and Caïn, regardless of his treatment or feelings. This positioning underscores the loneliness of Borel, a character who is not fully accepted by any element of his life. His lack of self-confidence means that he aspires to be an integral part of the team. However, in most episodes, Borel is relegated to office assistant and researcher, a lonely role, but one which underscores his distance from the approval and recognition he desires.

The tension between France and Algeria is an ongoing one which has a long history steeped in colonial mistreatment and national disregard, elements mirrored in Borel's treatment by the team. The relatively recent colonial history and ongoing oppression of Algeria can be seen in the:

[...] murders of as many as 200 Algerians (estimates of the exact number vary) during a pro-independence demonstration in Paris in October 1961[...] (Ramdani, 2012; France24, 2012).

Such contemporary wounds, indicate the concerns of a people living within a nation that until recent times was a source of violent repression. Many would say that the wounds still have not healed for many French-Algerians, as: 'They continue to experience discrimination in every aspect of their lives, as well as police brutality' (Ramdani, 2020). The positioning of Borel as both French-Algerian and within the police is therefore of narrative interest with a view to wider social and political commentary, underscoring the concept of being lonely in one's own country. To be a part of what could be seen as a repressive and authoritarian group by one's own ethnic community, is a clear indication of the potential for outsider status that a character such as Borel faces. Within this consideration are a range of aspects of the character and casting which would suggest a French-Algerian characterisation that is at once representative, but also non-threatening in terms of a wider French audience. A portion of this is found in Borel as unobjectionable nerd, one who physically fits that identity and perhaps not the stereotypical 'Algerian', one whom in the French national psyche is still more clearly aligned with manual labour, a fact which positioned them squarely at the bottom of society:

... Algerian men – and others from France’s colonies – were recruited to rebuild the country’s damaged industry, working menial jobs and living in shanty towns on the outskirts of cities (Alsaafin, 2019).

Such a focus on ‘menial’ physicality also suggests a strong and traditionally masculine male. Borel certainly counters such stereotypical assertions about Algerian men, primarily via his nerd positioning. Borel is slight of build, he is not physically aggressive nor powerful, qualities utilized within the show to ensure confirmation of nerdist Beta male status and underscore Caïn’s Alpha masculinity. However, by adding institutional and societal elements to his presence we can increase his relevance as the lonely outsider. Flowers (2018) has posited that the IT specialism is an indicator of a new masculinity and an attainment of power through technical mastery that can result ‘in a kind of liminal identity that straddled hegemonic ideologies of masculinity, as well as more subordinate ones’ (Ibid: 172). In the case of Borel, the latter assignment as IT specialist, in addition to young subordinate confirm elements of the nerd persona. However, Borel’s Algerian heritage and position within the police force encourage us to carefully consider the treatment of his character, and through such investigation begin to explore ideas of integration and acceptance within French culture. Through Caïn, the audience is subjected to ‘a particular expression of nonhegemonic masculinity and favouring the more hegemonic, consumer-viable contrast’ (Quail, 2012: 461).

Considerations of the nerd in mainstream contemporary entertainment offer IT support and research skills, those jobs considered banal and too much trouble for the cooler rule breaking leads provides a role for the nerd to fit into in the police procedural world. Borel is the youngest and lowest ranked officer so on a superficial level, it makes sense for him to undertake the IT role. Additionally, it keeps him office-based allowing for Caïn to be the one entering the fray. Borel potentially lacks cultural and social capital because of his hierarchical positioning and Algerian heritage, but makes up for this in his ability and willingness to complete tasks of desk-based research. Borel’s value, then, within the office situation is that of the nerd, one who is coercible, completing mundane tasks because they understand that they are not socially a part of the higher value portion of the group. To an extent, Borel fulfils Benjamin Nugent’s identification of the second category of nerd, he ‘...is a nerd who is a nerd by sheer force of social exclusion’ (2008: 7). Therefore, we can attach more significance to those times when Borel is liberated from the office and is part of the action. Especially as, at these points he is not used to being out of the office, and his intentions do not necessarily always go to plan. For instance, in the conclusion to Ep8 Se1, Borel tracks Lucie to a covert meeting with her ex-lover/informant, Carsenti (François-Dominique Blin) and a fight ends with Carsenti being pushed off a cliff by the pair. Borel’s attempt to be a hero

ends badly, and in turn, he feels the wrath of Lucie. Borel's status within the group, allows for accusation and bullying from Lucie in a manner which would not be expected towards a stronger masculine character, particularly one of Caucasian descent. Lucie's callous punishment of Borel continues through the early episodes of Season 2, a situation to which Borel has no recourse and which increases his loneliness as he has no other person to tell or appeal to. Borel is bullied, as actions completed with the best of intentions are valued by his colleagues on a mandatory scale which serve their individual sensibilities at any given time.

The concept of being used is not just associated with those identified as Caucasian but those of different ethnic heritage, an important distinction which suggests that it is the combination of nerd and ethnicity which places Borel into the position of being easily manipulated. This is confirmed by Capitaine Émile Allard (Pascal Légitimus) in Ep1 Se1 as he flatters Borel, focussing upon his loneliness and disconnection from the team, into assisting him to research a case, 'A team always needs someone like you to do the shitty jobs...You're underappreciated really...You know when you have strong characters above you it's hard to climb the ranks'. It is important to note that Allard is played by an actor of Ethiopian and Armenian heritage, offering a successful non-white character to whom Borel can briefly connect, one who understands his struggle and sympathises. Importantly this connection is only for Allard's benefit at the cost of Borel, his moment of inclusion but a trick. That Borel is unable to establish a stable position within the group dynamic, except for that of scapegoat, places him into the social categorisation of nerd, one who is useful but never a true part of the team, although, at times he is allowed some hope of admittance. Such treatment increases the sense of loneliness that can be attached to Borel, with no significant other and no obvious social life outside of his job, he is reliant on any attention his job might offer, but such affirmation is consistently withheld, and his value regularly questioned by his teammates.

Borel is also important to the integrity of Caïn within the show and the value of the 'nerd' persona and associated isolated status feeds strongly into this element of the narrative. The association of nerd with a less masculine persona, is important as we have a main character who is the embodiment of the white hegemonic masculine stereotype with one exception: he is in a wheelchair. Caïn himself makes disparaging comments about being unable to walk, calling himself a cripple and repeatedly references the concept of being a paraplegic as a lessening of him in the eyes of others, and in part himself. With this in mind, it is important to consider how we relate Borel's status to Caïn's disability. Borel's nerd status and lowered social capital presents him as an unthreatening male, positioned to both help and hinder Caïn, a character whose 'heroic

masculinities depend absolutely on the subordination of alternative masculinities' (Halberstam, 1998: 1). Borel offers the servitude of a subordinate who can be sent to physically go where Caïn cannot, but also as an inferior specimen to Caïn's robust, and frequently underscored, heterosexuality and masculine worth. Borel's need for inclusion because of his enforced loneliness and general exclusion ensures willingness and availability to serve Caïn. As Caïn is wheelchair-bound it is important that the viewer believes his physical ability, the focus upon physicality ensures that Caïn is read as a potent male. As Shuttleworth et al identify in reference to the work of Harlan Hahn many 'disabled men [...] tend to identify on both personal and political levels with hegemonic notions of masculinity such as independence and bravado rather than identifying as disabled' (2012: 176).

This macho persona overtly drawn confirms the characters presentation as an Alpha male. Confirmation is offered through physical action, his literal strength in terms of moving around a generally hostile environment and in his use of physical or verbal intimidation when dealing with suspects or enemies. These elements confirm the traditionally positioned hierarchical and masculine status of Caïn's white middle class character; however, it is also obvious that despite such a strong representation the character is still physically impaired and so could be seen as 'less than' the stereotypical French male. It is also noteworthy that Caïn's middle-class white privilege also smooths the path for him to challenge stereotypical perceptions of a differently abled man. He can afford a light-weight wheelchair and an adapted sports car. That such potential inferiority is confronted by Caïn and used as a way in which he can undermine the attitudes of others directly addresses his assumed weakness in an ableist world. This makes Borel's nerd integral to the show. His presence reads as physically weak; although able bodied, as the actor cast is of slight build and uses a physicality which suggests uncertainty. Narratively, Borel is one who is easily overcome by others and who follows the rules providing a male 'competitor' that Caïn may comfortably better. The two are offered as opposed conceptions of the masculine – Caïn's white middle class gregariousness and centrality compared to Borel's French-Algerian loneliness and exclusion. Asch and Fine (1988) identify that there is a general perception that "Having a disability [is] seen as synonymous with being dependent, childlike and helpless—an image fundamentally challenging all that is embodied in the ideal male: virility, autonomy and independence"(Ibid: 3). To ensure the reading of Caïn is of one who can function within the action detective genre the focus is therefore placed upon his challenging of this conception of what it is to be male and differently abled.

Explorations of masculinity and associated popularity become a focus. Lucie also fulfils a more masculine role than Borel, offering within the show a variety of masculinities, which make sense only in hierarchical and contested relations with one another (**Pascoe, 2007: 7**). This concept of masculinity is situated in traditional male and female stereotypes, masculine activity compared to feminine passivity. Lucie is active more frequently than Borel who remains as technical support point 'man'. Importantly, Lucie inhabits both the masculine and feminine, positioned as acceptable tomboy her masculine behaviour and inherently connected bravado '[...]read as a sign of independence and self-motivation, and tomboyism may even be encouraged to the extent that it remains comfortably linked to a stable sense of a girl identity' (**Halberstam., 1998: 6**). Lucie dresses in a manner which combines masculine utility and toughness, jeans and a leather jacket, but in tandem with low cut tops which display her cleavage. The concept of the tomboy sits well within the placement of the female in the male dominated world of the police force, her ability situated within traditionally male skillsets and social approaches, firing guns and being physically active whilst still displaying female elements, long hair and clothing which enhances her female form. She flirts with Caïn and is confident in these potentially sexually charged situations with her male superior.

Borel's placement as nerd and so lesser male serves therefore to also to support Lucie's more masculine positioning. Borel is the lonely assistant, one who is easily bested in his job and in combat. There is a softness and naivety within Borel that Caïn and Lucie exploit. Such treatment is situated in the fact that Borel does not present as a physically aggressive or confident character, his 'nerd' status encompassing a more thoughtful and careful character than his senior colleagues who are uncompromising and combative. When Borel is attacked and taken hostage at gunpoint by murder suspect Milo (Thibault Pasquier), (**Caïn, Series 1, Episode 5**) it is Borel's nerd status which facilitates this. Borel's assumption of power in the interrogation offers his mis-reading of the situation. It is Caïn who secures Borel's release, offering an important physical and psychological comparison between the two men. Borel obviously overwhelmed, shakes and perspires as Milo restrains and threatens him, in contrast Caïn is calm and insouciant. Such a convention also enables us to believe in the positioning of Caïn as the Alpha male within the scenario so confirming his superiority. Such separation of the presentation of Caïn and Borel references Gerschick and Miller's 'Three R Framework', reliance, reformulation, and rejection (see **Shuttleworth et al, 2012: 177**). Where reliance indicates the adherence to traditional hegemonic markers of masculinity and so the approach of Caïn; while Borel offers a more complex relationship to the masculine potentially combining the

reformulation and rejection elements of the framework. While Borel can be seen through his behaviours to reformulate masculine tropes something undertaken in line with an individual's limitations, Borel also partially embraces an alternative masculinity, one based more on softness and kindness than dominance and aggression (**ibid: 177**). Alternative masculinity does not mean abandoning maleness but it does encourage embrace of difference, something which the character of Borel in the series can be seen to be struggling with in the orbit of Caïn. Caïn's approach to his differently abled status 'internalize[s] feelings of inadequacy and seek to overcompensate for them, perceiving the problem to be in themselves rather than the social structure' (**ibid, 177**). It is of importance to note that although this observation is in relation to the experience and approach of differently abled men a similar reading may be made of Borel. He too perceives himself as the problem rather than the social structure in which he lives as a man. As a man of Algerian decent his seems inured to the racial stereotypes levelled at him, the macro aggressions which become associated with everyday interactions, and vulnerable to nerd stereotypes offered in relation to negative perceptions of his hegemonic masculinity.

We are aware that Borel cannot physically overcome Milo; he is too weak and scared, traits which we can accept within the nerd stereotype. Borel's experience is a deep one which resonates within his character in later episodes emphasising his lonely state, as he has no team mates in which to confide his fears. Such concerns seem not to trouble other characters who are placed into similarly perilous situations. Such impact speaks to weakness within Borel, rather than a human quality. This characterization once more confirming a lonely status for the more cerebral Borel, his thoughtfulness seen as introversion, inaction and weakness against the physically extrovert and risk taking Caïn, as Adi Robertson attests 'In fiction, being "nerdy" is shorthand for being an underdog...' (**2012**). The underdog within this scenario being one who is constantly thwarted rather than positioned to realise their eventual worth.

Borel is harassed by his team, until his knowledge and ability become useful and he is afforded some acknowledgement. In *Caïn* there is a fine line between the reading of this treatment as simply the behaviour of much more forceful characters towards a younger and less confident colleague, or whether at times, there are allusions to negative attitudes towards those of Algerian descent - that they are a second-class citizen and undeserving of equal treatment or respect. It is important to note that there is no overt racism directed towards Borel; however, it is possible to read disdain in the interactions with Borel and other characters of Algerian ethnicity within the show. This is offered clearly through a young woman who references the difference in treatment of white and Arab suspects in

investigations. She rejects the concept of assimilation and her father's placatory attitude towards the police, Ep 6 Se1. In this interaction it is important to note that Caïn and Lucie are polite and conciliatory. However, the contrast offered is between Borel's efforts to be accepted and the young woman's wish to be herself, embracing her Algerian heritage, by rejecting the assimilation that Borel (and her father) have actively pursued. Borel's decision to subsume himself to the mainstream enforcing a loneliness more commonly associated with a wish to assert difference.

Borel's outsider status is clearly identified when he is instructed to tamper with a van Ep 9 Se 2 00:17:08. Caïn states he will appear to arrest Borel if he is seen with the inference that as a French-Algerian he 'looks the part' of a thief, an everyday micro aggression, confirming embedded reactions to race and cultural expectations of transgression. Likewise, Lucie's identification of Borel as Caïn's 'slave' (**Caïn, Series 2, Episode 7**) offers another example of potential racism and clear placement of his French Algerian heritage as being perceived as less than that of someone of white French descent. The pejorative is on first regard designed to position Borel as a 'lackey', a micro aggression which places Borel as a subordinate undertaking Caïn's functional tasks, such as research. Although an important supportive element, research is not the 'sexy' aspect of physical police work with which Caïn associates himself and to which Borel aspires. Borel does not question the actions he is required to take and because of this attitude, will never be the police officer Lucie is. Lucie is action orientated and given the latitude to enter the field and act independently, therefore again she is aligned to the concept of policing that Caïn follows and will never deal in the detail orientated specifics and administration that Borel is assigned. The assertion that willingness is a negative personality attribute solidifies Borel's loneliness, his attempts to garner worth dismissed. Borel's willingness is countered by Lucie's intractability. Such single mindedness is an attribute which aligns Lucie to Caïn, her positioning in the narrative as a flirty combatant to the male lead, a will they won't they scenario which is carried through seasons 1 and 2 of the show. She can be seen as a 'female Caïn', able to hold her own verbally, physically, and sexually against her detective partner, a situation which '...reinforces the idea that masculinity is tied to dominance, control, and heterosexuality' (**Chard, 2020:58**). She is more powerful and confident than Borel can ever be and therefore may be perceived as more masculine in her approach, as Chard identifies qualities of dominance are linked to such displays of authority both physical and sexual. However, given the elements of bullying which can be discerned in Lucie's derogatory approach to Borel, the earlier comment takes on deeper meanings when considered in relation to Borel's ethnic heritage and sociological placement as French-Algerian. The resulting subordination of Borel, is then

key to Lucie's and Caïn's dominance within the show. His exclusion and loneliness in the team where he should be integral given his ability to research and use IT, elements neither of the other lead characters engage with for fear of a lessening of their hip statuses. Nevertheless, it presents a problematic discourse as it underscores covert racism and institutionalised notions of power, masculinity and exclusion. Borel's lonely status underscores this concept, his enforced isolation from the group contributing to his treatment as lesser masculine figure.

Borel's loneliness offers another exploration of power and masculinity using nerd stereotypes of sexual inhibition or inexperience. A speed dating sting in Ep 4 Se 1 offers the frame to explore sexuality and confidence in the show. Both Lucie and Caïn enter into proceedings with flirty confidence, while Borel presents only shy uncertainty. When Borel matches with a woman, Elise, Caïn admires Borel's skills as he and Lucie watch him make-out with his new date, a fact which initially counters the concept of the nerd. The following morning, Borel is caught by Caïn in the office changing into fresh clothes and is asked 'Does your mum know you stayed out all night?' (**Caïn, Series 1, Episode 4**) to which Borel grins broadly. Although not stereotypical for a nerd, this is a stand out occurrence in the first two seasons. It is also important to acknowledge that the encounter and its incongruity is treated as a joke by Caïn and that Caïn himself resisted similar offers during the operation. After the one-night stand, Borel appears momentarily in the office space without a tie, his sexual liberation connecting to his personal one. However, the encounter means that Borel begins to be 'sexted' by Elise, his one-night stand, something with which he is unfamiliar and which Caïn must explain to him, highlighting Borel's naivety. When Borel receives nude pictures from Elise, he is visibly embarrassed (**Ibid**). Borel's sincerity and implied loneliness is underscored when he asserts 'when I sleep with a woman, I fall in love with her', a sentiment not shared by the more sexually confident Caïn and Lucie. Borel's sincerity about relationships is at odds with the more sexually at ease and successful Caïn and Lucie. We may also read into Borel's hesitancy with the opposite sex a wish to be in a long-term relationship, a status which is not embraced by his colleagues and so might be seen as a nerdy aspiration. The fact that Borel's encounter goes wrong is also of importance, he cannot simply meet a 'normal' woman, one who wants to get to know him and date. Instead, Elise is immediately obsessed, a woman much too sexually aggressive and masculine in her approach for a character as sincere as him. The nude photos immediately sent reminiscent of the male focus upon the 'dick-pic' as a way of soliciting reciprocal nude images – reversed in this case by Elise offering nude snaps immediately. Borel's love life then is a point of humour for the other characters and highlights his loneliness, his only early foray into romance

becoming a difficult and embarrassing situation. In contrast the sexual confidence of his fellow officers and their 'will they won't they' status as a possible couple highlights his inability to find an appropriate partner or handle a relationship.

The exclusion of Borel from office romance increases the aspect of the loneliness of the character, his private life little to non-existent and his status in the team lowly and disregarded. He has no one to confide in within the team and no moments of revelation to be shared with other significant characters. We can refer back to his slight connection with Capitaine Émile Allard only to be used and discarded. A situation which is repeated, Borel is wanted when his skills are of use and dumped when he has served his purpose. The size of the team and Borel's outsider status mean that there is no space for him to form a significant relationship within the team. Caïn has Lucie, their shared confidences and conversations, an ongoing B plot in the seasons, with Borel as the literal and figurative third-wheel is left to his own devices. This exclusion is reflected in Borel being constantly left in the office whilst the others go into the field, the small team not offering a fourth member with whom he might connect.

Borel clearly represents the lonely nerd within *Caïn*, offering a naïve sensibility which contrasts the larger and more gregarious personalities and attitudes of his immediate colleagues. As such he is positioned as an outsider both within the police force and his own community of French-Algerians, a lonely figure in the halls of the white middle-classes. As identified this juxtaposition of approach and experience through the character of Borel acts to also reinforce the reading of Caïn, providing a lonely beta male against which Caïn's fun-loving alpha may play. Borel's positioning as a weaker looking and also sexually inferior male, offers a needy nerd to bully but he also becomes the non-threatening face of the French-Algerian man, a person lonely in their own country. In offering a representative of the largest immigrant population in France and in Marseilles in particular the show offers a confirmation of France as an integrated country. However, through micro and macro aggressions identified earlier within this work it is clear that being of Algerian descent is still a marker of outsider status within France and more so within or in interaction with the establishment of the police. As I argue, Borel might be seen as a victim of his own success, as are many of immigrant heritage; integration is a hard-won prize but those not in receipt of such acceptance may begrudge that success as with it comes ostracization and the associated loneliness of never quite fitting in. The two aspects strongly intermingle within the character with aspects of the bullying observed, focussed on both his nerd traits and also his ethnicity. Society and culture place him at the bottom of the pile using either of these elements,

combined they increase his outsider status and so loneliness as he represents the many facets of the under-represented and marginalised.

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Endnotes

ⁱ See **Media Bibliography** for details of films and television programmes referenced in this article.

ⁱⁱ For Bertrand Arthuys' career details, see: <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0037868/>

ⁱⁱⁱ For Alexis Le Sec's career details, see: <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm2978041/>