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Dubreil, Sebastien

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Rebels with a Cause: (Re)defining Identities and Culture in Contemporary French Cinema

SÉBASTIEN DUBREIL

University of Tennessee, Knoxville
E-mail: sdubreil@gmail.com

In Fall 2005, widespread riots shook France. Was Paris really burning? What actually did happen in France that fall? If the “social unrest,” as it was called, was symptomatic of serious social and political issues in France, it was largely misconstrued in some American media outlets. As a corollary, American students of French at times seem to have an inaccurate perception of the period. All the issues underlying the 2005 riots are at the forefront of today’s French socio-political debate, especially since a central political figure at the time, Nicolas Sarkozy, was since elected president. These issues revolve around questions of integration of an increasingly diverse population, social justice, unemployment and poverty. After addressing some of the reasons for the divergence in French and American media discourse, the paper examines in depth France’s contemporary social climate, as portrayed in recent French films, from *La Haine* to *Entre les murs*. These films, which represent a fragmented French youth in the midst of redefining its identities, oscillating between revolt and desire for integration in a changing culture, constitute effective entry points to present FL students with contemporary cultural contexts and content. Using the framework of multiliteracies, pedagogical techniques are presented to help guide learners explore difficult, yet critically important topics to improve their understanding of French – and American – culture(s).

*“Moi pour comprendre l’existence
un peu plus vite et un peu mieux
j’ai choisi le cours d’enfance en ville
et j’ai même pris l’option banlieue”*
-Grand Corps Malade, “À l’école de la vie” on *3ème Temps*.

INTRODUCTION

October 27, 2005: In the midst of Ramadan, riots are shaking the Parisian suburbs of Clichy-sous-Bois following the death of two teenagers, Bouna Traoré and Zyed Benna, ages 15 and 17 respectively. A few hours earlier, Zyed and Bouna are hanging out in a vacant lot near a funeral home with a larger group of teenagers with whom they have just finished playing soccer. Inside, an employee alerts the police that “something bizarre is going on” (Laske, 2010). Two minutes later, officers of the BAC (the anti-criminality brigade) arrive on the scene. While they perform an ID check on one of the teenagers, the others run. The police chase them, and three of the teenagers seek refuge in an electric transformer station. Zyed and Bouna are electrocuted and die; the third teenager, Muhittin Altun, is severely burned but survives. Now the middle of the night, youths and police clash. The rioters throw Molotov cocktails, burn cars, vandalize buildings, and the police respond with tear gas. The *banlieues* are burning. *Banlieues* are neighborhoods located on the outskirts of large French cities (although the term is generic and

originally designated all types of such geographical areas, in recent years, it has come to designate poor, working-class areas where a large part of the population is of immigrant descent).

The circumstances surrounding the tragedy remain unclear. Nicolas Sarkozy, then Interior Minister, denies that the police ever chased the three teenagers, an account contradicted by eyewitnesses. Subsequently, it is reported that the three teenagers had been spotted attempting to rob a private construction site, also false. *In fine*, Zyed and Bouna are not thieves, they are two teenagers with no history of previous run-ins with the law. Consternation. Frustration. Anger. A month and 9,193 burned cars later (see Mucchielli, 2006a, cited in Koff, 2006), the situation is back to “normal” (i.e., 90 burned cars per night) according to a police report on the France 2 evening newscast on November 18, 2005.

The story floods the media, especially in France, but also in Europe and in the United States. However, the coverage varies greatly on each side of the Atlantic. While the French media focuses on the death of the two young men, the ensuing riots, and the subsequent judicial procedure to determine the responsibilities of both parties in the accident, the American media focuses primarily on the fact that both Zyed and Bouna are Muslim, “evidently” a sure sign of France’s problems with its predominantly Muslim immigrant population. What is the source of this discrepancy? More importantly, what kind of consequences do these discrepancies have for the foreign language (FL) classroom in today’s geopolitical situation? This paper examines how cinema can be used to (re)situate events in their cultural-historical context, to lead students on a path to transcultural exploration (and, ultimately, cultural learning), to engage film as a cultural artifact, and to work on students’ language development.

Historical Context

Before delving further into the heart of the argument, it is important to reestablish the aforementioned events in their respective contexts in the hope of better understanding how they relate to the FL teaching context in general and, more specifically, to the films that I will be discussing in this paper to explore this historical context further in a French language and culture classroom. Incoming first-year students were in elementary school when the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center were perpetrated, and in junior high school at the time “freedom fries” appeared on American restaurant menus (as per the directive issued by Representatives Ney and Jones), and when Zyed and Bouna lost their lives. They have grown up with a particular view of the world, in which the political rhetoric and media discourse have reached intimate aspects of their lives, including how to protect their security, what they eat, and how they engage the world and difference. During a class I taught in Fall 2006 at a large public institution in the United States, my students and I paused to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the September 11 attacks. During the following conversation, one of my students made comments about France having deserted the Americans after said attacks. As further discussion ensued, I realized that even though these students had grown up in the midst of these events, they had missed critical aspects of them, and that these gaps were both impeding comprehension of the situation and creating prejudice against certain cultural and ethnic groups. For example, they did not know (or remember) that on September 12, 2001, the first page of the daily newspaper *Le Monde* read “Nous sommes tous Américains” [We are all Americans – my translation] (Colombani, 2005). Nor did they know that a month later the same newspaper, in response to the American government’s intention to turn its attention to Iraq, was questioning how far one should follow the United States (the use of the pronoun “on” in

the French original – “jusqu’où doit-on suivre les Américains?” – seems to invite a general call – including world leaders in countries other than France – to exert some critical judgment in their decision to answer America’s call to deploy troops in Iraq). Most students also did not know that France had actually assisted the United States and the coalition forces in Afghanistan by sending just under 4,000 troops, thereby contributing to Operation Enduring Freedom and NATO’s International Security and Assistance Force.

Students’ apparent lack of multiple perspectives about the development of the events in the Middle East was compounded by the difficult situation the American administration was facing on the home front in 2005. On May 1, 2005, the *Sunday Times* released the “Downing Street Report” revealing President Bush’s longstanding interest in Iraq as well as his intention to justify the war at all costs. On August 31, 2005, in Coronado, CA, President Bush had to answer to the growing sentiment of disapproval (Loven, 2005) against a war nearly half of the American people thought that he was just as responsible for starting as Saddam Hussein (*Rasmussen Reports*, 2005). An October 2005 poll conducted by CBS (Roberts, 2005; CBS 2005) confirmed the American people’s discontent with the Iraq war. Thus, it is possible that the rampant rhetoric that attributed the responsibilities of the October 2005 riots in France to the Muslim population may in part have been an attempt to rally some support for the Iraq war and to point out the danger posed by Islam throughout the globe. As eager as the American media was to report the fading support for the war in Iraq, some parts of the media were just as eager to point out France’s problems with its immigrant population of Muslim origin, describing the events as “intifada in France” (New York Sun Editorial, 2005) or blaming “Muslim rioters” (Spencer, 2005). In the same *Frontpage Magazine*, Spencer (2005) claims that:

rioting caused by economic inequalities [does not] explain why Catholics and others who are poor in France have not joined the Muslims who are rioting. Of course, all the news agencies have either omitted or mentioned only in passing that the rioters are Muslims at all. The casual reader would not be able to escape the impression that what is happening in France is all about economics. (fifth paragraph)

This assessment exemplifies the kind of rhetoric that has contributed to the ethnicization of the *banlieue* (Grewal, 2007) because, whereas the rioters themselves tended to privilege economic and social inequalities as the explanation for their discontent, some commentators chose to focus on different elements such as ethnic origin.

European press agencies indeed failed to report the rioters as being Muslim or immigrants primarily because the rioters themselves omitted both of these characteristics. One of the only times that the issue of religion and the riots overlapped was on November 1, 2005 when police fired a tear-gas grenade into a mosque. For the most part, during the rest of these events, the issue of religion was not evoked as such. Simultaneously, all leaders from various constituencies such as Dalil Boubakeur, head of the Paris mosque, and various other associations were very vocal at the time in trying to appease the conflicts and to instigate dialogue. They failed in their efforts, however, which may have given the issue of religion a place in the media, particularly the American media, it may not otherwise have had.

The issue of immigration, too, was only indirectly present in France and in the French media (as opposed to the United States where it was given central focus), such as in the demonstrations in which young people were seen marching with their French identity cards pinned to their shirts, thus claiming their French identity. In the wake of the 2005 riots, several

associations were vocal on this issue of French identity. One such association was “les Indigènes de la République¹.” Expanding on Strieff’s (2007) reading of the association’s name as anchored in the immigrant experience, I believe that the members of this association, through its name, partly attempt to reclaim their roots as former colonized people or immigrants. More importantly, this association forcefully indicts the ways in which these youths are treated in France, despite being de facto French nationals, in an effort to fight current inequalities (which emerge, at least in part, from former colonial inequalities). So, despite Spencer’s dismissal of the role of economic factors in the riots it appears as though a lot of what was happening in France in 2005 *was*, in fact, related to economics, or at least inequality, most of which was linked to social and economic factors. This was a recurring theme in the aforementioned 2005 demonstrations.

At the very least, these perspectives demonstrate that the situation was certainly more complex than it initially appeared to my students. As such, it was worth exploring in greater details and I decided to do so through the films discussed below. These films served as the primary sources for classroom activities and discussions as they portrayed and engaged similar themes to those that emerged around the 2005 riots. Indeed, these riots took place in various French *banlieues*, the very geographical area wherein these news events (the riots) interfaced with a number of critical issues in French culture, namely identity formation, language use, the organization and appropriation of urban space, equality and inequalities, social justice, etc.

My primary objective was thus to explore multiple perspectives related to these current issues in French culture – as examined through the prism of cinematographic representations of the *banlieues*. As illustrated above, the contexts of reception around these issues are quite multifaceted and divergent, and, as such, present ample opportunities for (trans)cultural misunderstandings. Thus it is important to find a terrain where these various perspectives can be explored and discussed in order to arrive at a deeper and more informed comprehension of such complex phenomena. Cinema can provide such a terrain. Full-feature films indeed offer an interesting platform upon which to locate culture and language learning activities by opening a window onto a culture. First, a film provides an affordable way to give students access to the culture that they are learning (in comparison to travel). Second, a film is a cultural representation marked by the director’s choices. In other words, it offers one perspective on the culture that it represents without any claim of serving as an objective depiction of reality. Third, thus, as a cultural representation, it affords students the opportunity to try to reconstitute and to understand an alternative perspective, that of the artist (the director), and through it, the foreign culture. The responsibility of the teacher is to equip their eyes to do so².

(RE)EXAMINING FRENCH CULTURE THROUGH FILM

Rationale

Cinema can be a versatile and powerful medium through which to explore contemporary culture as it allows for a wide variety of language and culture learning activities. Indeed, films can help students engage with various forms of discourse, a multimodal discourse constructed through visual images, sounds, etc. – culturally marked codes that mediate students’ access to the foreign culture. Gee (1996) defines Discourse as “ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles (or ‘types of people’) by specific groups of people” (p. viii). Thus the idea of

language and culture learning is far more than a process of rule learning (although this is a part of it); rather, it is a process of understanding how these two dimensions interact within discourse communities and how to decipher the symbols around which members of discourse communities construct identities, social roles, and, ultimately, their lifeworld (Kramsch, 2009). “In order to understand others, we have to understand what they remember from the past, what they imagine and project onto the future, and how they position themselves in the present. And we have to understand the same thing about ourselves” (Kramsch, 2006, p. 251). Through the narratives that it presents, cinema offers examples of language as culturally situated semiotic practice as it reflects cultural values and beliefs, worldviews and daily behaviors. Teachers can guide their students through the reading of these “texts” and a deeper cultural understanding. This can in turn lead students to develop more refined Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC – as elaborated by Byram, 1997), which describes the ability to navigate multiple cultural identities and multiple cultural contexts or multicultural contexts, and to see how different cultures relate to each other. Thus, acting interculturally involves the ability to interact with others and it starts with an introspective gesture, namely “being able to take an external perspective on oneself” (Byram, 2008, p. 68).

Selection of Materials

I have used five very different (yet related) full-feature films to explore dimensions of contemporary French culture: *La Haine* (Kassovitz, 1995), *Salut Cousin!* (Allouache, 1996), *Petits Frères* (Doillon, 1999), *L'Esquive* (Kechiche, 2003), and *Exils* (Gatlif, 2004). This list is by no means prescriptive and countless others could have been legitimately included. I chose films that have garnered a certain amount of recognition,³ come from a variety of horizons, and that offer complementary views on the *banlieues*, so as to provide a more complex – and complete – window onto important contemporary cultural issues in France. The five films span the entire decade from 1995-2005. Below is a brief description of the films and why they were chosen (see film synopses in Appendix for further details).

Film	Director	Plot	Reason for inclusion
<i>La Haine</i>	Mathieu Kassovitz is the descendant of a Catholic French mother and a Hungarian Jewish father, both of whom work in cinema.	The spectator follows the peregrinations of three friends in the wake of riots in their <i>banlieue</i> , in which one of their friends has been beaten by the police.	It is one of the films that brought the representation of <i>banlieues</i> to the forefront of the cinematic landscape in the 1990's (see Tarr, 1999).
<i>Salut Cousin!</i>	Merzak Allouache is an Algerian filmmaker who grew up during the Algerian independence war.	Focuses on the disconnect between a French man of Algerian descent and his Algerian cousin.	It includes an interesting historical context as a backdrop to the characters' story (Loi Pasqua); and an interesting leitmotiv about the fables of la Fontaine.

<i>Petits Frères</i>	Jacques Doillon is French from a modest background.	A teenage girl from Pantin discovers the <i>banlieue</i> while looking for her dog.	Focuses on younger generations (10-14 years old) and provides good insights on language use.
<i>L'Esquive</i>	Abdellatif Kechiche is Tunisian and passionate about theater and literature.	A teenage boy is trying to impress one of his classmates via a Marivaux play.	This film in particular offers high potential for discussions on intertextuality and literacy.
<i>Exils</i>	Tony Gatlif is also Algerian but with a Kabyle father and a Romani mother.	Two young adults decide to travel to Algeria to recapture their origins.	It is a powerful film that connects various themes linking the <i>banlieues</i> to Africa.

These film choices and the variety of perspectives that they represent were driven by the desire to have students engage with texts all revolving around the same themes while coming from widely differing ideological, aesthetic, cultural, and narrative standpoints⁴. The fact that these texts have all garnered recognition is not necessarily a quality label but it legitimizes, in the eyes of the students, the fact that these films are popular both with the public and the cinematic establishment⁵.

Given the geographical locations where these films take place, they sometimes have been gathered under the umbrella term “*cinéma de banlieue*.” These films were produced in the aftermath of the wave of films (the new “New Wave”?) that came out in 1995 (including *La Haine*) that represent or engage socio-cultural issues of these areas of the French urban landscape (see, for example, Jousse, 1995). Tarr (1999) takes issue with the term New Wave as it inscribes these films in a rhetoric of power centered around dominant French culture in which these films/directors are included but rendered invisible, or at least muffled, by a dominant discourse that denies any perspective “generated by the hybrid status of people whose double culture makes them both insiders and outsiders to dominant French culture” (Tarr, 1999, p. 172). Even though the production of the so-classified *banlieue-films* still represent a minority portion of total French film production (5% between 1995 and 2002; see Chibane & Chibane, 2003), some of these films have evidently garnered prestigious popular and critical success, which optimistically can be considered an encouraging sign that their impact on (French) society exceeds the mere production numbers.

Indeed, it seems as though these films bear relevance to France’s national community-building project in a manner that speaks to both the increasingly visible multicultural realities of France’s contemporary society and the demands of global citizenship. They do this in at least two ways. First they offer representations of the realities of multicultural encounters in various contexts in French urban settings. Second, these films offer a salient representation of how the notion of place can be constitutive of the construction of self (Paquot, 2008). To film in a *banlieue* is not equivalent to filming the *banlieue*. In other words, the choice of location is not only significant: it signifies. It signifies through the interplay between a socio-historically determined place and the people who inhabit it or travel through it, in shaping their actions, their values, their language use, etc. And in this sense, these films offer an especially apt entry point into the greater issues of contemporary French culture: from the margins looking in, from local narratives to global perspectives.

Cultural Topics

I extracted four major themes from these films, which culminate in a fifth, more general one, and these themes were subsequently examined, analyzed, and discussed:

1. Relationship of the individuals to authority
2. Need for justice
3. Need for equality
4. Quest for identity
5. Quest for a voice in the community-building project

These five themes seem to capture or at least help to frame the issues at the core of the situation in the *banlieues*, which ultimately are issues that France has to face as they continue to shape contemporary culture. I believe that France finds itself at a pivotal moment in its history and the way in which it negotiates these issues will define the way it evolves in the 21st Century. Let me briefly examine how the five films chosen here represent and engage these five themes.

Relationship of the Individuals to Authority

In all of these films, the relationship to authority figures (police, parents, teachers, media, etc.) is (1) either almost exclusively conflictual and based on power relationships or (2) the context is marked by an absence of authority markers. Indeed, *La Haine* uses the riots that arose when a young man, Abdel is beaten by the police, as its starting point. One of the reasons that Kassovitz's film resonated with the public is that it is reminiscent of an event that occurred in Paris ten years earlier (1985) when a group of *voltigeurs*⁶ beat a twenty-two year old student named Malik Oussekiné to death. Throughout the film, wherever the three main characters Hubert, Saïd, and Vinz go, they enter into conflict with the police: at the hospital, in downtown Paris – although these officers are polite to them, something of a surprise for Saïd-, and in the neighborhood where the riots took place during police patrols. Even when the three friends crash an art exhibit opening, they manage to enter into an argument and end up thrown out of the event.

In the case of *Salut Cousin!*, the film's historical context is the change in France's immigration law (la loi Pasqua) toward stricter, harsher measures. In the film's last scene the main character, Mokrane, is arrested and subsequently expelled from France back to Algeria for having failed to file his paperwork. Of course, as a second-generation immigrant and aspiring artist/socialite, he speaks no Arabic and has very little inclination to live anywhere but in Paris. In similar fashion, *Petits Frères* shows the faceless, sometimes almost arbitrary nature of police work in the *banlieues*. The officers are never shown close-up, nor does the spectator ever see their faces. They repeatedly irrupt into the neighborhood and chase and/or grab someone – or fail to do so in two cases. In *L'Esquive* there is a scene depicting an ID check in which the tension escalates and the encounter becomes more physical than necessary, showing a certain aspect of the interaction between the police and the youth from the *banlieues*, namely tension and/or violence, even in times when no riots are taking place. Here the police officers are not as sadistic as the ones holding Hubert and Saïd in *La Haine* but the violence is prolonged beyond necessary and the officers are the ones that use vulgar language and violent gestures whereas the teenagers show more restraint in the midst of their fear (tears) and frustration.

Overall, these films show a police-youth relationship that, at the outset, is established on the terrain of conflict, distrust, and lack of mutual respect.

These tumultuous relationships, however, are not just artistic visions on the part of the directors and they are not without empirical foundations. A 2009 study by Goris, Jobard, and Lévy showed that police controls have more to do with people's appearance than their actions. In fact, in five random locations, researchers found that Blacks and North-Africans were respectively 5.5 times and 7 times more likely to be asked for their ID than Whites. Furthermore, people wearing clothes associated with some form of youth culture (rap, hip-hop, tecktonik, punk, etc.), though comprising 10% of the total population, accounted for half of the police controls. One can envision how this dynamic would place a certain burden or tension on the relationship between these young people and the authorities because individuals are associated with a collective identity (in this case, one associated with their ethnicity or their social/geographical origin) which suggests that they are violent criminals even though this collective identity is actually founded on clichés. In reality these particular individuals may or may not share or even claim these traits, outside of their physical appearance or their names.

Even though these issues are not always an easy issue to tackle with students in the classroom (very few of the issues that this class engaged really were), one effective way I have found to start the conversation is through word associations. By asking students to write down the first three words that come to mind when given the prompts such as "police" or "authority" they have a basis from which to begin their reflections. After this initial step, I refer them to MIT's [Cultura archives](#) (see for example Furstenberg, Levet, English & Maillet, 2001) where both French and American students have already done the same exercise. Subsequently, in small groups of three or four, students reflect on the similarities and differences between their answers and the ones that they have found on the Cultura website. Based on this group discussion, followed by a class discussion of their comparisons, students go back to their groups. They formulate hypotheses for the discrepancies, if there is any, and they identify the factors that could explain the relationships between youths and police based on all of the data that they have at their disposal (films, Cultura archives, class discussion) both in France and in the United States.

Parental authority does not fare much better in these films. Parents appear as either non-entities with more or less acknowledged influence (e.g., Hubert's mother in *La Haine*), they are completely absent (*Petits Frères*), or they are in prison (Krimo's father in *L'Esquive*). In *Petits Frères*, it almost appears as though thirteen-year-old Talia is the voice of reason for a mother that never appears on screen. The only character that represents a substantial parental figure in the film is Talia's abusive, pedophile stepfather whom Talia tries to encourage her mother to leave. Throughout the film, the viewers follow a group of "petits" (age 10-14) and their "big brothers" who seem to live their lives without any parental supervision. The only exception to this grim depiction of parental authority comes from *L'Esquive* in which the final sequence shows the school performance of Marivaux's play, *Le jeu de l'amour et du hasard*, in front of a capacity crowd of parents, friends, and families, a gathering that suggests that this occasion is a strong community event. *L'Esquive* is also the film that provides the most representations of family life, although it ultimately appears to be an aspect of the protagonists' lives that is secondary to their lives outside of the home.

The difficult relationship between the young protagonists and authority, while prominently featured vis-à-vis police and parents, is also represented as permeating all aspects of the characters' lives as they struggle with the rules and conventions of the dominant culture. For

example, in *La Haine*, Saïd, Hubert, and Vinz enter into an argument with a journalist that comes to the *banlieue* to interview the locals and film the premises. The scene is filmed with a tilt-up shot and the three young men look at the journalist who stands in her car on an overpass and addresses them without leaving the vehicle. The railing that borders the overpass acts as a barrier giving the illusion that she is looking at animals in a zoo. Indeed, Hubert yells at her “on n’est pas à Thoiry ici,” [We are not in Thoiry, here – my translation] referencing a nearby zoo. The scene reads both as a conflict with the establishment (embodied by the journalist) on the one hand, and, on the other, it represents the voyeuristic fascination that the mainstream culture has with the *banlieue* as a socio-historical and cultural phenomenon.

All of these films depict the countless ways that these young people use to transgress the rules of the establishment or dominant society. These range from incessant trafficking, “business” as Alilo calls it in *Salut Cousin!*, to a wide variety of other clandestine activities and delinquency: drug consumption (usually soft drugs, such as marijuana) and drug trafficking (sometimes hard drugs); clandestine boxing fights (*Salut Cousin!*) or underground dogfighting rings (*Petits Frères*), counterfeiting (*Salut Cousin!*), handling of stolen goods (*La Haine*), pick pocketing or theft (*Petits Frères*) and random acts of vandalism. These commonplace events give the sense of a rough existence at a very practical level, but at a more symbolic level, they represent the *banlieue* as “a site of conflict between dominant French hegemonic order and marginalised communities” (Grewal, 2007, p. 63). However, taken at face value, these films demonstrate the risk of accepting the stereotype of the *banlieue* as the source of fear, a fear directed at predominantly (North-)African, Muslim male delinquents (Rosello, 1997).

The struggles and tumultuous relation to authority present the *banlieue* as a locus of violence. From its very origin the *banlieue* has been conceived of as a potential threat to French society and social order (Rey, 1996), leading to the conflation of *banlieue* with violence in certain areas of the collective memory of French culture. This violence is legitimized in the eyes of the youths who perceive it as the only mode of acting in/on the world (e.g., Kherfi, 2007). The atmosphere of violence is sometimes manufactured and reinforced by forms of institutional discourse (media, politicians – see Le Goaziou, 2007). For example, in June 2005, Sidi-Ahmed, an eleven-year-old boy, was killed by a stray bullet in a neighborhood known as “La Cité des 4000” in “La Courneuve,” a racially diverse working-class *banlieue* of Paris (in Seine Saint-Denis). During a surprise nocturnal visit, Mr. Sarkozy, then minister of interior, expressed his intention to powerwash (the infamous Kärcher metaphor) the *banlieues* to cleanse them of their scum (“racaille”). In addition to being considered mostly as a political operation by the residents, his words exerted incredible violence on the social fabric of the *banlieues*, not only by insulting these youths, but also by de facto referencing old colonial imagery of blackness or darkness of skin as something that could be washed. Dawny (2008), referring to Francis Bacon’s aphorism “hurl your calumnies boldly; something is sure to stick,” argues that amalgamating the *banlieue* and its inhabitants in such broad-stroke rhetoric generates a simplistic imagery in mainstream culture that does not reflect the realities of these youths in all of their complexities, their experiences, and their diversity. Thus the process of creating and disseminating such a discourse about the *banlieue* and its inhabitants comforts the distant middle class citizens in their interpretive framework, one often fomented by media and politicians, through which they can no longer see their compatriots but rather a “wild bunch ready to destroy [them]” (Dawny, 2008).

Need for Justice

As always when discussing a cultural construct, issues are inextricably linked to each other. The first aspect to be discussed with respect to the demand for justice is linked to the relationship of the youth to the police. From the discriminatory frequency of ID checks to numerous accounts of police brutality to provocation by the police (see the tragic ending of *La Haine* where an encounter between Vinz and a police officer started with verbal aggression from the latter and ended with the accidental deadly shooting of the former), it appears clear, without legitimizing or even endorsing all types of behaviors of youths in the *banlieues*, that the terrain on which the authorities establish the relationship with the youth has increasingly become almost exclusively that of repression and contempt at the expense of prevention work or the opening of dialogues (Mucchielli, 2006b). Police raids, however, do not tackle the root of the existing problems (Ben Jelloun, 2010) and the police violence is often justified or at least downplayed by the government (Charles Pasqua in 1986; Nicolas Sarkozy in 2005 – see Mucchielli, 2007), leaving the inhabitants of the *banlieues* screaming for justice. The modus operandi of the police is well depicted in all of these films in ways that leave little to the imagination. It has been a longstanding trope in French popular culture.

Additionally, the feeling of injustice is reinforced in part by the public rhetoric of government officials. I have mentioned the events of June 2005 when Mr. Sarkozy indicated his intention to powerwash “La Courneuve.” He reiterated his rhetoric on October 26, 2005 in Argenteuil, the day before Bouna Traoré and Zyed Benna died. Autain (2006) has denounced these dismissive gestures on the part of Mr. Sarkozy as they connote what she deems to be a lack of integration in contemporary French society *on the part of politicians* [emphasis mine]. Indeed, according to Autain, it is not the suburban youths who have a problem with integration into French society. Rather it is the politicians, because they actively exclude these youths, thereby de facto damaging the social contract and the recognition of the *banlieue* youth as legitimate participants in the community-building project and, therefore, the nation-building project.

This lack of recognition by the political world is represented in the films I chose by the astonishing absence of relations between the characters and the institutional powers. Even in the rare cases when such relationships do take place (e.g. in *La Haine*, the mayor’s visit to the *cité*), they give way to stilted and artificial interactions. The exception, once again, comes from *L’Esquive*, in which the interactions between the young characters and the school institution, though sometimes uncertain, have a positive impact and can possibly be read as a source of hope because it shows schools’ propensity to teach students skills to navigate various social contexts, including deciphering the expectations of the dominant culture. It is important to mention that schools did burn during the 2005 riots (see Ott, 2007), a phenomenon that can be a source of intensely productive conversations in class because students are trying to understand why rioters – especially youths – would want to destroy schools.

The demand for justice is rooted in the perceived racism and discrimination that the population in the *banlieues* feels and experiences. Indeed, in these neighborhoods, people sometimes have the feeling that “they were born guilty before they even lived” (Dawny, 2008). Despite their French nationality, they are often considered outsiders “not just because of institutionalized state racism and the racism of those who target ‘Arabs’ and Islam as the scapegoats for France’s socio-economic difficulties, but also because of the republican definition of integration,” which “is to assume that ethnic minority Others must assimilate to

the dominant culture rather than acknowledging and accepting minority cultures within a multicultural society” (Tarr, 1999, p. 172). Autain (2006) argues that France’s project of “one republic” will only be viable if it embraces its aspirations to universalism by respecting the conditions of possibility for multiple identities to be constitutive of this republic. All of these films show the discriminatory aspects of French society but they also show young people as they are trying to find a place in contemporary French culture, a place that they have to carve themselves because nobody saved them a seat. The outcome in *La Haine* is bleak as there is very little encouragement that the situation will ever get better. In *Salut Cousin!* the situation deteriorates even further for Mokrane as he is actually expelled from France. But in *Petits Frères*, Talia goes to the police to seek justice against her stepfather for his lewd behavior toward her friend Ludmilla and, she suspects, her little sister. In *L’Esquive*, by contrast, the teacher makes every effort to use literary texts and performance to help her students take ownership of their voice, discourse, and place in society in an attempt to equip them with the means to fight for social justice and recognition. On December 20, 2005 Jamel Debbouze, the French comedian and actor, said to a young crowd in Clichy-sous-Bois: “Nous sommes d’ici, nous sommes des Iciens” [We are from here, we are ‘Hereans’] – my translation] (cited in Bertho, 2006, p. 41). Accompanying this call for the recognition of the inhabitants of the *banlieues* as “indigenous” to the French Republic is the demand for the recognition of the *banlieues* and its inhabitants as more than just being a social issue involving minorities. Instead, it is a request for the recognition of everyone’s rights and for the respect of individual differences.

These aspects of the films can yield delicate class discussions because they are dealing with issues of belonging and exclusion, both at the local level (one’s neighborhood, one’s social group) and at the macro-level (one’s city or one’s country). Naturally, it also brings into question the criteria that preside over these phenomena of inclusion and exclusion. For American students, these issues often bring up notions of race and ethnicity as well as, increasingly, sexual orientation. While French culture has often focused on socio-economic inequalities, this has also changed in recent years and the issue of racial discrimination is now present in various genres of artistic production (see for example, Abd Al Malik, *Grand Corps Malade in slam*; Thomté Ryam or the collective “Que fait la France?” in literature, in addition to the films studied in class). While exploring these issues in class as they relate to French culture, I have found students to be divided in their opinion about discrimination in the United States. While most of them are prone to recognize and to engage the issue head on in an open and frank discussion as based on their personal experiences and/or observations, a few others, after having been presented with the problems that exist in France, become reluctant to cross back over to American culture and are prone to defend the point of view that the United States is far better off than France on the issue. In doing so, they fall back on the fatal flaw of cultural comparisons (i.e., formulating them in terms of “better” or “worse”) instead of trying to understand in a nuanced way the circumstances and differences proper to each country. Generally, however, discussions go relatively well and we have even been able to broach such topics as affirmative action and the current discussions around it in France (around the terms of “immigration choisie” and “discrimination positive,” two expressions that, in and of themselves, warrant discussion).

Need for Equality

The condition of possibility for this process of social justice to start involves addressing the question of equality. All five films depict precarious and unenviable living conditions. The

banlieue is represented as an oppressive, worn-out environment of nature-less concrete. The viewer can barely see a piece of sky at any point in time, even in *L'Esquive* where Kechiche shoots a few rehearsal scenes with a tilt-up, Krimo and Lydia appear dwarfed by their surroundings as the angle of the camera does not allow the viewer to see over the towers and high-rises. On the one hand, by limiting or constraining the gaze of the spectator, Kechiche forces us to focus on the protagonists and on the scene at hand. On the other hand, doing so also shows how isolated the *banlieues* are from the rest of society. Only in *Petits Frères*, by contrast, can one note the presence of a secluded island of vegetation where Iliès will bury Kim, Talia's dog, and where the impromptu wedding ceremony will take place.

The oppressive and precarious living conditions in the *banlieues* fragments France's urban and social landscapes to a point where Mucchielli (2007) argues that it is legitimate to talk about a process of ghettoization. Hargreaves (1995) expresses an interesting caveat, however, when he says that the process is very different from a comparable phenomenon in North America in that the latter falls along racial and ethnic lines whereas in France, the division often falls along economic lines:

In the US, it is not uncommon for large neighbourhoods to be almost entirely mono-ethnic.
 (...) There are very few sizeable estates in France where French nationals are in a minority.
 (...) Areas containing relatively large concentrations of foreign residents are almost always multi-ethnic. (p. 74)

For example, Vieillard-Baron (1996) cites a study conducted in Sarcelles in 1990 that described a very diverse and heterogeneous demographic of around 80 different nationalities. Consequently, Konstantarakos (1999) argues, "the mapping of the city is not racial, it is social: poor whites and second-generation immigrants are excluded from the capitalist circulation of money/work/consumption" (p. 166). This ghettoization process has two dimensions: on the one hand, it poses problems of socio-economic integration and, on the other hand, it generates a feeling of exclusion and helplessness and has a negative impact on the inhabitants' self-image and self-worth.

In order to approach this topic with students, I usually start with the perspective of urban geography. Indeed, French geographers use the term "the inverted city" ("la ville inversée") to describe American cities. At first students reflect on what they think this expression means. Then they look at maps using the Internet or Google Earth to try to get a sense of the organization of French cities. Finally comparisons are drawn with the way in which American cities are organized. Through these comparisons, we engage issues of equality and inequality and the tensions that may exist based on where people live (both within their own neighborhood and inasmuch as their neighborhood relates – or not – to others and how). An interesting exercise, also inspired by *Cultura* (Furstenberg et al., 2001), is to have students identify different parts of a city (downtown, suburbs, commercial district, etc.) and have them look for pictures representing these areas in both French and American culture. The results students obtain looking for pictures of "suburbs" as opposed to "*banlieue*" are quite telling as regards cultural differences and students are able to formulate interesting hypotheses about the influence of geography on cultural identity as portrayed in the films they watch.

The daily life of numerous protagonists in the films is marked by a sense of economic poverty and a constant struggle for money. In *L'Esquive*, on the roof of the building where the men congregate, Saïd asks an elder who is grilling sausages to give him one on credit, saying

that he will pay him later (a request that is turned down). Lydia tries to bargain down the price of the dress that she had made by a local tailor for the performance of *Le jeu de l'amour et du hasard*. Mokrane tries to get in for free everywhere he goes and he even begs for money to gamble on a boxing fight. In *Exils* the lack of funds frequently leads Zano and Naïma to accept rudimentary accommodations during their travels. They even pick fruit in Spain for a while, so as not to have to turn around and return to Paris. Money is at the center of many interactions in *Petits Frères* where the younger boys will do anything for their elder “brothers” in exchange for money.

Some of the characters explicitly voice their desire to get out of their state of social inequality and economic poverty. To this effect, Tarr (1999) argues that a large number of the so-called “*banlieue-films*” portray this situation as fatalistic because it only has two potential outcomes: either leave the *banlieue* or sink into violence. Even the name of a bar frequented by North Africans in *Douce France* (Chibane, 1995) is called “l’Impasse” (the dead-end street). In *La Haine*, Hubert repeatedly mentions that he needs to leave because the situation has taken a turn for the worse. In *Salut Cousin!*, Mokrane is making every effort to leave his past behind, having moved to la Goutte d’Or⁷ neighborhood of Paris. He paints a portrait of his family who stayed behind in the *banlieue* that represents all of the stereotypes of the immigrant family (unemployed father, unstable mother, imprisoned brother, and prostitute sister). Of course, the film eventually shows the counterpoint to that story as Mokrane’s family actually embodies the story of the immigrants’ successful integration into French society, to make the point more pertinently that the appearances of a situation weigh heavily in the way one perceives it. In this case, the perception of the situation of Mokrane’s family symbolically represents both the outsider (here the spectator) and the insider (the youths in the *banlieues*). The former through mainstream representations of what an immigrant family looks like – in other words one should not be surprised if these (immigrant) youths lived the way Mokrane describes them; the latter via the existing lack of prospects – real or perceived – of the youths in *banlieues*. Mokrane’s reward for trying to integrate and to pursue his dream (albeit clumsily): deportation.

The lack of prospects is represented symbolically in *Petits Frères* when two of the young boys discuss their “projects” for their future. Not only are these projects questionable (sell drugs, buy a BMW), but as they are discussing these projects, both boys try to walk upward on a downward escalator, thus not making any progress. The tragedy of this situation is that as they keep on walking, the best that they can achieve is to maintain the status quo. The moment they stop trying, however, leads to an inexorable downward spiral. (This scene makes a good platform for a classroom analysis.) A similar fate awaits the three protagonists in *La Haine*. Saïd, Hubert, and Vinz spend the day in downtown Paris, to which they are connected solely by public transportation, because Saïd is supposed to collect some money. At the end of the day, after sunset, the three friends are on a promontory looking at the Eiffel Tower and talking. Saïd has two interesting gestures: (1) he pretends to be able to command the lighting of the Eiffel Tower by snapping his fingers, which of course does not work, the lights going off seconds after he quit trying; (2) as they leave their observatory, when passing a billboard carrying an ad with a slogan that reads “le monde est à vous” [the world is yours], Saïd uses spray paint to cross out the “v” and replace it with an “n,” thus writing “le monde est à nous” [the world is ours]. These two gestures, which symbolize both the desire for control and a glimpse of hope, eventually fail as Saïd finds himself back in the *banlieue* at the end of the film, where he witnesses one of his friends (Vinz) being shot by the police, leaving the fate of the other one (Hubert) very much in the balance.

Quest for Identity

Let me now turn to the last theme that the students and I examined in these five films: the question of identity. What is truly at stake for all of the characters in these five films revolves around the notion of identity. Most of the protagonists are young, between the ages of 12 and 20-25. In other words, as spectators, we see them in their formative years. They are all questioning the world around them, looking for answers and a place to fit in. Hubert wanted to box and to open a gym to educate young people through sports. Mokrane, though perhaps deluded about his own talent, wishes to be an artist (singing la Fontaine, no less). Through most of *Petits Frères* Talia runs around trying to find her dog while in the process adapting to a new world (a different neighborhood with its own particular practices and conventions) and she eventually gets “married” in an impromptu ceremony. She is a Jewish girl marrying a Muslim boy (Iliès), “two kids ahead of their time” [my translation], as slam artist Grand Corps Malade rhymes about in his song “Roméo kiffe Juliette” (2010) about the type of multicultural realities that are increasingly constitutive of contemporary French culture. Iliès is very much in transition between being one of the little brothers and aspiring to grow up. One can hope that this encounter will guide him to make good choices. In *L’Esquive*, Lydia and Krimo tiptoe around each other in a pas-de-deux through a fragmented mosaic of scenes as they refine their values, their sense of selves, and their trajectories. Zano and Naïma (*Exils*) have to embark on a journey to Algeria in order to find where they belong, if anywhere. All of these identities are presented as very much in flux and as works in progress. This construction work is expressed through a wide variety of elements (e.g., music, place of religion, re-appropriation of space, etc.) at work in the five films.

First, and I am presenting these in no particular order, identity is expressed through music. Music is omnipresent in most of the films analyzed as it plays an important role in the culture of the *banlieues*. Films aside, numerous artists from various ethnic backgrounds have used their music as a platform not only for entertainment but also to convey a social and political message. Among countless others, I could cite as influential artists in France’s cultural landscape Faudel, Khaled, and Rachid Taha for Raï, Magic System, Youssou N’Dour, and Salif Keïta for West African music, Abd Al Malik and Grand Corps Malade for slam, MC Solaar, NTM, and Diam’s for rap or hip-hop. Music is astonishingly absent from *Petits Frères* and *L’Esquive* for reasons that I will develop below, namely the importance of language.

The second element is related to the place of religion. As I mentioned in the introduction to this article, religion was largely a non-factor in the 2005 riots because for the most part, French Muslims have practiced until now a much more secular form of Islam than most of their European counterparts (Grewal, 2007). By the same token, Islam and religion in general does not play a large role in dictating the protagonists’ behaviors in the five films where Muslims, Jews, and Christians coexist in the same *banlieues*. This does not mean to say that there is a complete absence of religious references. In *La Haine*, for example, Vinz’ grandmother bemoans the fact that he no longer goes to the synagogue. In their verbal interaction, the protagonists of *L’Esquive*, regardless of whether they are Muslim or not, mention the Quran repeatedly, mostly as something they swear on, an accepted criterion of honesty. Although the end of *Exils* presents a Sufi ritual, the objective is certainly not proselytism. The problem with religion in this case is that after decades of contempt, indifference, exclusion, frustration, and anger, a certain sense of resignation has settled on the *banlieues* (Kherfi, 2007). This has created a situation where the *banlieues* are on the brink of becoming prime recruiting grounds for Islamist fundamentalists (Ben Jelloun, 2010; Dawny, 2008; Grewal, 2007).

The third element is the phenomenon of the re-appropriation of space. The young people in the films make use of the space surrounding them in their own personal fashion, for example, by using the building lobbies and staircases or public benches for gatherings and by shaping the physical space by adding graffiti or even destroying it (as in *La Haine*). This appropriation of the physical space allows them to retain some sort of mastery over it (e.g. in *La Haine* and in *Petits Frères*, several instances of foot races between police and youth turn to the advantage of the latter owing to their superior knowledge of the terrain). But the reconfiguration is also subjected to rules and conventions. In *L'Esquive*, the protagonists decide on the gendered division of space by having spaces where all of the boys meet, or all of the girls, or a mixed group. Of course, the reconfiguration of the physical space often goes hand in hand with the characters' reconfiguration of their mental space. In *Exils*, for example, Zano and Naïma eventually acquire a new sense of self-identity through the geographical displacement of going to Algeria. On a more general level, discussions about the importance of space can be linked to other cultural phenomena that have pervaded French contemporary culture, such as parkour and tecktonik, both featuring a certain appropriation and reconfiguration of space through movement.

In a similar dynamic, there is also a phenomenon of re-appropriation or repurposing of cultural products, brand names among others. For example, in *La Haine*, Hubert, Saïd, and Vinz visit a local handler of stolen goods who goes by the name of "Darty," also the name of a French distributor of electric and electronic appliances. Mokrane (*Salut Cousin!*) is an extreme case of how someone can craft his appearance for (re)presentation to the outside world, a stark counterpoint to his cousin Alilo in this respect. He has to have a complete look for every activity of which he is a part. For example, when he goes rollerblading, he displays all of the appropriate gear, the Walkman, etc. An even deeper example of such appropriation of products can be found in *Petits Frères*, when Talia is looking for some young boys with whom she had an altercation. She asks her group of "friends" (the little brothers with whom she has been hanging out) and as they try to find out some information about the troublemakers they ask questions such as "did they have any brand on?" In other words, by identifying not only the kind of clothes that a group of kids was wearing, but also by identifying the brand of these clothes, Talia's friends would be able to tell her in what *cit * they live. When Talia answers that she did not pay attention, their reaction is "you're no help," indicating that paying attention to such details is a given for them. These examples abound in all five films and they are not without evoking, of course, Goffman's (1959) work on symbolic interactionism, the performative aspect of social life, and the notion of face. As such these moments in the various films have deep social, linguistic, and cultural repercussions in the identity-construction processes for these young people.

One of the prime tools that the youth from the *banlieue* use to create their own sense of identity is language. Calvet (1994) has worked extensively on linguistic phenomena in the French *banlieues*, showing how language is shaped when a wide variety of popular spoken languages meet French. He also shows how heavily coded such phenomena as *verlan* and slang are in the daily uses of young speakers. Characters in all of the films usually display an undeniable verbal verve but it is particularly prevalent in *L'Esquive* and *Petits Frères* where verbal jousting occupies a large part of daily living. In both cases, the directors made ample use of close-ups to create a connection between the viewer and the characters' emotions. The language used is also proper to each individual and to each neighborhood, in this sense it is very much a verbal fingerprint. Generally speaking, the language deviates quite a bit from "standard French" on which it has an undeniable impact, owing to the paradoxical prestige that a stigmatized

dialect can have in such circumstances (Calvet, 1994). Language is thus an instrument of subversion and resistance. In *L'Esquive*, the young protagonists work, under the guidance of their teacher, to master a second dialect of French: that of mainstream culture, an exercise in multiple literacies.

Finally, another important element of identity construction comes from the re-appropriation of cultural symbols, generally defined, such as artistic production, monuments, etc. For example, I have already mentioned Saïd's attempt to control the lighting of the Eiffel Tower. In addition, *La Haine* is marked by countless references to comic book characters, such as Astérix, the quintessential French hero ("nos ancêtres les Gaulois," as goes the adage). Ironically in the film Astérix is a drug addict who crashes and lives large in the apartment of one of his friends in downtown Paris, owes Saïd money, and somehow finds a way not to pay him. Mokrane's rap act, in *Salut Cousin!*, is in fact an adaptation of fables by Jean de la Fontaine.

This clever move by Allouache unfolds multiple levels dealing with the identity of the character. First, France has a long tradition of songwriting ("chanson à texte") with illustrious representatives such as Jacques Brel, Georges Brassens, Léo Ferré, Boris Vian, etc., all authors that numerous contemporary hip-hop and slam artists (MC Solaar, Abd Al Malik among others) have claimed as spiritual fathers. Thus borrowing from an established author is not new. The fact that in this case it is la Fontaine that is adapted opens new levels of interpretation. First of all Mokrane is adapting fables to rap, calling attention here to the literary genre. Second, la Fontaine himself was inspired not only by Greek (Aesop) and Roman (Horace) authors, but also by Indian literature, the former being a heritage that is very much present in French culture and history, the latter being an early sign of multiculturalism. Third, la Fontaine is the quintessential author that is read in all elementary schools in France, a sign both of the cultural interaction between (old) canonical culture and contemporary (marginal) culture, and of how the culture of the *banlieue*, incarnated by Mokrane, is indeed a part of French culture.

It is an interesting exercise to have students reflect on this use of la Fontaine in order to explore these themes. First, students reflect on a portrait of la Fontaine to try to identify the time frame of his life, and then research what was happening at the time in France. Through this research they find out that despite la Fontaine's ties to the royal authority, he was a fierce social critic. So the notion that a contemporary rap artist would want to adapt his texts is not as far-fetched as it seems. Then I have students reflect on la Fontaine's place in French culture and the educational system to see if they can identify an American artist who plays a similar role. If they are unable to do so, we explore why. Then we consider the effect on youths when this appropriation of past materials in new places (literal and metaphorical) takes place, more specifically we examine what the pros and cons are of having a common ground on which to build, such as a shared cultural heritage. Finally, we discuss what is at stake in the encounter between contemporary youths and canonical culture in this gesture of re-appropriation of a literary text in another medium. To what extent is it a source of tension or conflict? Or to what extent is it a source of hope for dialogue and multiculturalism?

A similar point of interaction between the *banlieue* youth and "high culture" occurs in *L'Esquive*. In this case, it is mediated, among other things, by the school project on which the class works, the staging and performance of *Le jeu de l'amour et du hasard*. The objective here is essentially for the French teacher in the film to find a way to enable her students to make Marivaux's text theirs by making it relevant to their lives. In one scene, this French teacher is seen analyzing a scene with her students in response to a question by Lydia, who plays the lead female role in the play. Through this interaction, the teacher shows the importance of social

and cultural capital (though not in these terms), as well as the (re)presentation and the importance of working to break the vicious circle of confinement in stereotypes.

In order to engage students on the terrain of social identities I ask them to identify criteria that help to define it and I ask them how they identify. Then they play a sort of game where I come up with a series of possible social identities on cards (several on each card; e.g., student, jock, nerd, greek, middle class, black, Christian, etc.) and they form groups according to what identity or identities they privilege at that time. Each group has to explain why they chose their grouping and how they see themselves while others explain the characteristics they associate with the group who just presented. Once again, this is not an easy exercise because students often do not agree with the fact that they perform their identity or identities to others or that they conform to certain external factors in the ways in which they choose to dress for example. They are more ready to admit that they do impose ready-made categories on others based on clothing, socio-economic origins, etc. One interesting result of this exercise is that students are able to apply this type of critical thinking exercise back to other films that they have seen in order to explore how characters are being portrayed by others, and/or how they try to portray themselves to others in various scenes.

These last two examples (the la Fontaine rap and Marivaux's scene analysis) are also symptomatic of a certain level of engagement with the idea or the construct of a particular cultural, historical heritage. But at a more visceral level, these films represent how these young people who have been ostracized geographically, socially, and economically by mainstream society inscribe their history in French history, their identity in national identity. This is a violent gesture (symbolically) that sometimes requires literal and/or metaphorical displacement. This is where the analysis of *Exils*, which I have scarcely discussed up until now, is particularly useful because this metaphorical displacement is achieved, in *Exils*, through an actual geographical displacement of the two main characters who have to go to Algeria and back in order to "find themselves." The ability to engage fully in this type of gesture indeed requires being aware of who and what one is, including one's roots, ancestry, and values.

Pedagogical Considerations

As I have tried to demonstrate, these five films provide robust tools and a rich content to help reframe the discussion on both the 2005 riots (which, despite the passing of time, address questions that are still present today), and, more generally and importantly, on contemporary French culture by engaging issues of (national) identity, exclusion/inclusion, history and geography, political structure, the educational system, language and society, etc. These issues are common in most conversation and composition courses as well as, a fortiori, in culture and civilization courses. What kind of pedagogical activities can be deployed to address these issues? The following activities are meant to be informative more than prescriptive.

As I have already suggested, I come to teaching from a sociocultural framework that emphasizes active, participatory learning mediated by a variety of learning tools, from cultural artifacts to technological tools, under the instructor's guidance. Naturally the framework of a multiliteracies approach (Allen & Paesani, 2010; Kern, 2000; New London Group, 1996) in the teaching of this kind of content has proven particularly useful and robust. Kern and Schulz (2005) argue for an expansion of the notion of literacy, saying, "literacy redefined must encompass complex interactions among language, cognition, society, and culture" (p. 382). I also try to encourage critical thinking, which I conceive of as the ability to ask the right question

before thinking about the answer. In other words, as a student and as a teacher, one has to accept the possibility of being wrong. It also means that as a teacher, I have to accept that my students may be wrong and that it is a part of a heuristic learning process in which students learn to evaluate their hypotheses and to refine their conclusions. Finally, one of the sine qua non conditions to this approach to teaching is that the challenge lies in the possibility, for the students, of engaging in cultural exploration. That is to say, I cannot impose the reading of the relationships between the films, the socio-historical context, and larger French culture *a priori* of the exploratory process.

From a multi-literacy standpoint, I start with the New London Group's (1996) notion of design of meaning, which comprises available design, designing, and the redesigned. Available designs consist of all configurations of knowledge students bring to the learning experience, from their knowledge of French (and English), their knowledge of culture or film, their knowledge of orders of discourse, their skill set, and their "grammars of various semiotic systems" (New London Group, 1996, p. 75). Designing is the process of shaping the meanings that emerge through the activity of reading and listening, as well as, in the present case, seeing. This process goes through a re-presentation and recontextualization of the meaning-making processes at work in the film. Designing, thus "transforms knowledge in producing new constructions and representations of reality" (New London Group, 1995, p. 76). The redesigned is the outcome of the designing process, namely a transformation – or a shift in – the available designs of the students.

These three elements of the learning process – available designs, designing, and the redesigned – are called into play through a pedagogy based on four interrelated components: (1) situated practice, that is to say the contextualization of learning in practices meaningful to the students; (2) overt instruction, which is not based on transmission but rather on guided exploration, discovery, and the mobilization of students' available designs; (3) critical framing, through which students will learn the necessary theoretical and personal distance from what they have learned and evaluate it with a critical eye; and (4) transformed practice, that is to say that the desired outcome is not only transformation and growth in the learner but also the application of what students have learned to new situations and activities. I will now demonstrate concrete examples of this approach with films and/or scenes.

Before delving into a film, students are encouraged to mobilize existing available designs. For an example, I will now turn to the scene in *Salut Cousin!* where Mokrane participates in a talent contest by rapping "Rat des Villes – Rat des Champs" [City Mouse – Country Mouse]. I chose this scene because every element participates in the meaning-making of the scene, from the choice of material to the (hostile) reception by the audience to the ensuing reaction by Mokrane (in *Salut Cousin!*). Before engaging in a closer analysis of the scene, I ask students whether or not they like rap, what they associate with rap, where it comes from, where they think it fits in their or the American cultural system. I also ask about their knowledge of fables as a genre, whether they know Jean de la Fontaine, etc. The initial contact with a film (or a scene in a film) starts with the mobilization of students' knowledge about prominent topics in the story, both in the first and second language/culture. This stage enables the students to explore what kind of linguistic and cultural elements they expect to find in the text that they are about to see. As they watch the entire film for the first time, I encourage students to take notes but rarely on anything specific. I may draw their attention to the general context of the film or to basic elements to which I would like them to pay attention but I make every effort to not provide descriptions or explanations.

Next students move onto the instructional phase, in which they are guided into a more thorough exploration of the way the film or the scene functions, trying to reconstruct the cultural and linguistic elements that preside over the way in which the protagonists interact with each other and the socio-cultural context, how they make and apprehend meaning, and how they interface with their world and exist in it. Certain moments in each film lend themselves to intricate close analysis. As they watch these specific scenes, they usually have something more specific to do. This constitutes the “designing” phase of the activity. For example, in the scene mentioned above, I ask students to describe in writing Mokrane’s attitude before and after the scene, Alilo’s reaction before and after the scene, and public’s reception of Mokrane’s rap (including specific expressions if applicable). After viewing the film (or the scene) the first entry point consists of fairly literal questions (who-where-what-how-etc.) so as to (1) insure comprehension and (2) make sure students have all of the primary ingredients necessary to start their analyses. Such analyses can aid in revealing how discursive practices operate in various contexts, what kind of linguistic, cultural, semiotic resources participants utilize to accomplish their objective, and the characteristics of the textual genre(s) enacted on screen. In this case, they see Mokrane’s attitude transform from one of arrogance and self-confidence to one of defeat and eventually to anger (this anger is also directed toward Alilo, whom he accuses at some point of *not* speaking French well enough). Alilo’s emotions go from excitement to disappointment for his cousin to utter incomprehension of what happened both on stage and after the show when his cousin abuses him verbally. The scene itself reveals the high tension that exists within the community itself that lives in the *banlieue* (they don’t embrace Mokrane as one of theirs) and between his attempt at rap and the material he chose (e.g., one of the audience member tells him to “go back to school”). Through this critical framing of the scene, students are usually able to identify what happens quite well on a literal level. By having them reflect in groups about the reasons for such reactions and the parallel they see between the lyrics Mokrane chose and his vision of himself and of Alilo, students are able to formulate very cogent hypotheses about the trajectories of the various protagonists in the scene. These reflections are usually aided by including discussion questions on a slide and by letting students have access to the scene online (I use an online course management system – CMS – that allows me to place short snippets of the films on password-protected websites) as well as the Internet if they need a reference.

Naturally, students are asked to reflect on parallel or corresponding constructs in their own culture, as part of the transformed practice in which they can apply what they have learned (the “redesigned”). This reflection often relies on a variety of texts from students’ own culture, which can be challenging to their values and beliefs system, especially when the issues explored deal with the very foundation of their culture and complex questions such as inequality, racism, the role of education, and the perceived (lack of) success of the educational system, etc. Such conversations can create tensions. They can also generate opposite reactions: some students who started the class as inveterate Francophiles start questioning their good judgment; some students are comforted in their belief that no problems of the same magnitude exist in the United States; some students, on the contrary, continue to be convinced that the problems are more serious in the United States than in France. Finally, there are students, hopefully a majority, who understand that what is truly at stake is elsewhere because it lies in trying to understand how language and culture function and how they are being shaped by endogenous and exogenous influences, and how to navigate each environment. Activities in which students are asked to demonstrate what they have learned can include a wide variety of tasks. Given the fact that this is a class on culture and film, one example is to ask students to write, script, film,

and edit a short scene that exemplifies a similar social cultural issue in their own culture. Later in the semester, as they have gained more perspective on French culture, students are asked to do a similar exercise where they have to film a scene in which they portray a cultural situation taking place in French culture (using film or media stories as a medium). These activities take planning but they are rewarding for both students and instructors (see Dubreil, 2003).

Finally, I would like to discuss briefly the work on language. As an example of a critical thinking activity, I would like to mention one pertaining to the conception and use of language in French culture. Language occupies a prominent function in the films. But to enhance students' comprehension of the importance of language in French culture, they also need to understand French people's perceptions and conceptions of their language. The activity proceeds as follows: upon entering the classroom at the beginning of class, each student is given a small piece of paper with a sentence (most often a quote from a film, a song, a novel, an essay, etc.) that embodies one aspect of the way French people envision language both as a system and as a social semiotic tool. For example, it could be a quote from a politician ("Que serait la francophonie si personne ne parlait français?" by François Mitterrand ["What would be the Francophone world if nobody spoke French?" – *translation mine*]), from a contemporary writer ("La grammaire, quel régal!" by Cavanna [Grammar, what a delight! – *translation mine*]), from an earlier writer (Ce qui se conçoit bien s'énonce clairement et les mots pour le dire viennent aisément by Nicolas Boileau [What is well conceived can be uttered well and the words to say it will come easily – *translation mine*]), or from popular expressions such as "engager la conversation" or "adresser la parole." Each student is supposed to reflect on his or her quote and draw out as many characteristics of language as possible. Then students walk around the classroom sharing their quotes with other students and trying to form groups based on the citations that share common characteristics. As time passes, the group composition may fluctuate. When a certain equilibrium has been reached, each group has to read their quotes and explain which aspect(s) or conception(s) of language they embody. The penultimate step is to reflect on the conception of language in American culture. Finally, students have to apply their newly acquired knowledge to a scene from a film that they have seen in class (or a different one dealing with similar issues to those explored in class). This is an engaging, widely unpredictable, and productive activity in a format that can be replicated in different contents.

This is an especially eye-opening activity for students and they are then better equipped to pay attention to certain aspects of the films. I already alluded to the argument between Mokrane and Alilo about not speaking French well enough, a sign that speaking French is a powerful medium of integration into French culture, something a student pointed out. Or Saïd's modification of the pronoun "vous" to "nous" as a symbolic, if playful, use of language. Another example is an activity where I edit together all of the aspects of *l'Esquive* in which the Marivaux text comes into play, which includes mostly rehearsal scenes, both in and out of school. As the characters interact with each other, students (in small groups) do a close analysis of several linguistic aspects, namely, in addition to the verbal aspects, tone, body language, pragmatics. The purpose of the activity is to try to show them how the points of contact in the film between the play, the narrative, and the characters mirror the evolution of the relationships between characters in the film. I ask students to make lists of these elements and then represent the characters' relationships visually. From one visual representation to the other, the observer can hopefully see an evolution. Despite the fact that the scenes are short, this activity was difficult because the shifts are subtle. It is, however, productive because even when many students do not feel particularly successful at interpreting these various aspects as they relate to each other, as the class comes together to share the results of their reflections, I try to show

them how the cinematographic semiotic resources (camera angle, shot composition and framing, lighting, editing, etc.) contribute to the film narrative. The exception is perhaps the in-class rehearsal, which is a very didactic moment in the film literally and metaphorically and it is shot in a fairly straightforward manner.

Another aspect of the work on language, evidently, comes from register. The language that students hear in the “*banlieues-films*” they watch in class differs somewhat from what they have been previously taught. Without delving further than necessary into the slang or sometimes colorful language that is used by characters in the film, it is an interesting exercise to analyze what is said and how, to whom and under what circumstances. Alilo, in *Salut Cousin!*, for example, uses language very differently when he speaks to Mokrane, his cousin, his boss, his colleague, and Fatoumata, a woman with whom he starts to develop a romantic interest. Once again with the help of video-editing software (anything free will work, I use iMovie HD, the standard video-editing software on Apple computers), I splice together various scenes in which Alilo is the central protagonist talking to the various parties previously mentioned (one cannot be exhaustive in this case as there are simply too many examples). Based on these scenes, students are asked to identify several aspects of language: first the choice of language (he sometimes speaks in Arabic), the forms of greetings and leave takings, forms of politeness if appropriate, tone, rhythm, intonation, vocabulary (which is then linked to register and semantics), gestures and body language. These are just a few examples among many others and the design of the activities could be modified to tackle various aspects of language. Some of these linguistic aspects are beyond what students will be able to use spontaneously in discourse. However, being able to recognize various registers, to understand how conventional they are (i.e., highly encoded culturally), and finally to see how characters successfully manipulate them (e.g., Lydia in *L'Esquive*) constitutes a valuable lesson for students as they go through their college studies.

Relying on these films as well as other sources, students can work on stylistic as well as phonetic and phonological aspects of language, particularly, but not limited to, spoken language. This work on language can also be realized through writing assignments in which students engage with issues at hand in a variety of textual genres that will call for different linguistic features and will focus on different lexical and grammatical elements. In such a class, these writing assignments can take the form of a film scene, as already mentioned, as well as a critical review or an essay, etc. The writing process is usually constrained by some targeted elements. Students go through an individual phase that consists of planning, followed by writing, and self-evaluation. Then they go through a collective phase that includes a peer-editing process with a detailed rubric in which students are assigned partners with whom they will collaborate to improve their work. Subsequently, they receive feedback from their teacher, and, based on these various feedback loops, they eventually submit a second draft. Time constraints, unfortunately, do not allow the second draft to undergo the same process and it is submitted directly to the teacher.

In closing, I think that it is good to remember that as challenging as the content of these films and this class can be, it is desirable to aim for such a course because it can have a transformative effect on students, under the condition that they be given the means to manage the linguistic and cultural challenges posed by the course. In this respect, it is worth being reminded that one cannot approach this type of content from the posture of advocacy teaching. That is to say, as sensitive as issues such as social justice are, teachers ought not to tell students what to think about the material they are presenting but, on the contrary, ought to let the

material speak for itself and let students, under their guidance, formulate their own hypotheses and draw their own conclusions.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this paper and of the course that it describes was to design a learning environment that would bridge the gap between students' experiences on the one hand, and historical and cultural realities on the other. This course aimed to provide a framework to explore, to analyze, and to discuss a range of issues that are at the forefront of the recent – and seemingly perennial – debate in France on national culture. Taking the 2005 riots as a starting point indeed provided a unique entry point into contemporary French culture. The riots have been largely discredited as playful and void of any political content, justification, or meaning by the French government and in part by French public opinion (Hargreaves, 2006; Le Goaziou 2007; Mucchielli, 1999; Mucchielli & Le Goaziou, 2007). In fact, they show an entire segment of the population that harbors an immense political potential and has just started to voice its need for recognition and for a legitimate voice in the ongoing process of community building. The youths in the French *banlieues* have contested the rhetoric of exclusion that exists in French society. Despite the feelings of resignation, enough members of these communities refuse to surrender and they have started to find ways to be heard through artists, most notably. But more importantly, these communities potentially have in them the keys to challenge notions of citizenship posed by the always more rapid emergence of a global society. Indeed, these communities have embraced a number of values congruent with the harmonious development of multilingual and multicultural societies, the most relevant of which is undoubtedly the notion of “métissage,” and they have started to shape contemporary French culture in noticeable ways. They have done so not by asking to abide by different rules, but by denouncing the symbolic violence to which they are subjected and by asking that the existing rules of “liberté,” “égalité,” and “fraternité” be implemented and respected. In other words, their only request is the opportunity to truly exist in- and contribute fully to the society in which they live. It is only through this full and complete recognition of the inhabitants of the *banlieues* that France will be able to find a way to have a more equal society, better aligned with the democratic principles of a republic in which all of its members have a positive and peaceful voice, rather than one of contestation and revolt, in the construction of their (common) culture.

The realities of our increasingly interconnected world thus demand a certain level of epistemological humility as a condition of possibility – and ultimately of success – of encounters with diverse people and cultures (Ess, 2007). Epistemological humility is the recognition that one's worldview, culture, values, and way of life is not necessarily an absolute or the absolute truth, because “the understanding that ones' best beliefs and views may be *limited*—in part, for example, because they are dependent on a specific context, tradition, etc., for their meaning rather than necessarily shared as universal truths by all peoples” (Ess, 2007, p. 195). In other words, acquiring a sense of epistemological humility requires not so much the recognition that I am wrong but that others may be right as well. Education for intercultural citizenship, thus, “deliberately facilitates or creates experiences where the qualities of being intercultural are developed” and “(...) expects to create change in the individual” (Byram, 2008, p. 187). By being exposed to and understanding other perspectives learners may consider these other perspectives as legitimate and equally constitutive of the community-building project as their own perspectives, a phenomenon Ricœur (1997) calls “co-foundation” (p. 103).

It is my hope that by engaging students in these issues on the path of transcultural exploration, they will gain a better understanding of the complexity of contemporary French culture, they will reflect on their own cultural values and assumptions, and they will gain valuable insights into the conditions of possibility of intercultural dialogue. Perhaps they will catch a glimpse of the fact that global citizenship emerges from the desire for – and active work toward – what Abd Al Malik (2007) calls “le vivre ensemble.”

NOTES:

1. The word “indigène” indeed describes an individual native to a particular place or a phenomenon naturally occurring in an environment. Indigènes de la République thus would seem to indicate that the members of this association want to be identified as full members of society. I agree with Strieff (2007) in that the choice of the word can constitute an interface between this aspiration and the reality in which people are mistreated or marginalized on the basis of their ancestors’ origins. Ben Jelloun (2010) in this respect, points out the flaw in using the term “integration” when people from difficult suburbs of France’s large cities succeed because “one integrates foreigners,” he says, “not indigenous natives. In this case, one ought to talk of promotion or recognition” (p. 5). In their manifesto, the movement “Mouvement des Indigènes de la République,” born out of a call “Nous sommes les Indigènes de la République” [we are the indigenes of the Republic – my translation], state:

“Notre identité est séculière et politique. Nous nous construisons en opposition à celles et ceux qui nient l’existence des discriminations en raison de l’origine (...).” (para. 2)

[Our identity is secular and political. We are building ourselves up in opposition to those who deny the existence of discriminations on the basis of origin (...).] (my translation)
2. On these latter two points see the work of Didi-Huberman (2009, 2010).
3. *La Haine* was awarded the César for best film and Kassovitz received the Best Director award at the Cannes Film Festival. Merzak Allouache received the Tanit d’Or at the Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage for *Salut Cousin!* Jacques Doillon received the Youth Jury Award at the Namur International Festival for *Petits Frères*. Abdellatif Kechiche received the César for Best Director and *L’Esquive* the César for Best Film in 2004. As to Tony Gatlif, he was awarded the Best Director award at the Cannes Film Festival for *Exils*. Finally, *Entre les murs* received the Palme d’Or in at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival.
4. To this list of four films, I have added for the next iteration of the course the more recent *Entre les murs* by Laurent Cantet (2008), which offers interesting parallels with the Hollywood representation of similar characters and situations in *The Freedom Writers* (LaGravenese, 2007) or the somewhat older *Dangerous Minds* (Smith, 1995).
5. It is a strategy that enables me to examine – and compare film-making practices – in France and the United States, something I will not develop here for the sake of space and because I chose to focus on the representation of cultural issues. Such exercises, however, prevent or at least nuance students’ occasional comments on non-American films as being less technologically advanced than American films on the sole basis of their visual aspect, possibly another of many signs of the effects of Hollywood standards on the viewer’s eyes.
6. Voltigeurs were a special squadron of the police mounted on all-terrain motorbikes. Each bike carries two officers: a driver and a second officer armed with a truncheon. They were used to chase demonstrators in case some of them vandalized stores or property. After the death of Malik Oussekin, the squadron was dismantled.
7. La Goutte d’Or is a neighborhood in the 18th arrondissement (district) of Paris where a vast majority of the population is either African or of African descent.

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APPENDIX A – Film Synopses

Film	Synopsis at IMDb and AlloCiné
La Haine	http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0113247/ http://www.allocine.fr/film/fichefilm_gen_cfilm=12551.html
Salut Cousin!	http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0117544/ http://www.allocine.fr/film/fichefilm_gen_cfilm=14773.html
Petits Frères	http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0184819/ http://www.allocine.fr/film/fichefilm_gen_cfilm=9946.html
L'Esquive	http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0338977/ http://www.allocine.fr/film/fichefilm_gen_cfilm=48230.html
Exils	http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0400420/ http://www.allocine.fr/film/fichefilm_gen_cfilm=54123.html
Entre les murs	http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1068646/ http://www.allocine.fr/film/fichefilm_gen_cfilm=58151.html