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# Echoes of Postfeminism in American Students’ Narratives of Study Abroad in France

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In qualitative research on Americans in study abroad contexts, female gender often emerges as problematic, with young women portrayed as hapless victims of sexual harassment. The assumption underlying interpretation of these studies appears to maintain that female students are victimized because they find themselves in places where inherently superior American discourses of gender equity do not prevail. Meanwhile, however, scrutiny of participants’ stories reveals deeper mysteries, to do with gender trouble from home that students bring to their experiences abroad. This paper adopts a narrative approach to interview and journal data from a previous study in which American students, both male and female, recount their experiences in France. Their accounts are linked to the sociocultural history and popular ideology of Franco-American relations and to images of study abroad in the American media. Students’ stories draw upon and contest an amalgam of images related to social class, gender, and national identity, which are embedded in perennial American representations of French language learning as social class transcendence. In the early decades of the twenty-first century, this phenomenon has morphed into a contemporary postfeminist self-help literature for would-be Frenchwomen, which celebrates anachronistic images of women as accomplished homemakers and objects of sexual desire who nevertheless control their destinies through artful styling of self and navigation of the global marketplace. “Frenchness,” with or without corresponding language ability, symbolizes membership in the mobilized, global elite. Thus, while a second language offers potentially new resources for the performance of gendered identity, this study shows how the relationship between such resources and learners’ desires is mediated by previous participation in specific discourses of gender and social class, which may or may not prioritize language learning *per se*.

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Sabrina Fairchild: Maybe you should go to Paris, Linus. It helped me. Have you ever been there?

Linus Larrabee: Oh yes. Once. I was there for 35 minutes. Changing planes on my way to Iraq on an oil deal.

Sabrina Fairchild: Oh, but Paris isn’t for changing planes. It’s for changing your outlook. For throwing open the windows and letting in ... letting in *la vie en rose*.

From *Sabrina* (1954), directed by Billy Wilder

## INTRODUCTION

In the literature on language learning in study abroad, many publications relate to the experiences of American learners whose achievements are variable and often quite modest. Over the past several decades, qualitative portrayals of experiences abroad have repeatedly

focused on the alienation expressed by American female college students when encountering practices interpreted as harassment. A classic example is the statistically robust “Predictors” study by Brecht, Davidson, and Ginsburg (1995), wherein male gender, understood as one of many factors in learner profiles, emerged as a significant predictor of gains in Russian speaking ability. To explain this finding, the researchers turned to a narrative analysis of student journals (Polanyi, 1995) and showed that male learners benefited from frequent prolepsis (i.e., assisted performance) in a variety of settings, whereas women were victims of sexual harassment and occupied reduced roles in communication involving both men and women. Since 1995, a number of other qualitative studies have reported that American women studying abroad, be it in Spain (Talbur & Stewart, 1999), Costa Rica (Twombly, 1998), France (Kingingger, 2008; Kline, 1998) or Argentina (Isabelli-Garcia, 2006) must endure practices that they interpret as sexual harassment. These reports seem to assume that, in the United States, feminism has prevailed and gender equity has become the norm, at least in the sense that overt discrimination is widely condemned. It is implied that the rest of the world has yet to arrive at this level of enlightenment concerning gender.<sup>1</sup> With the understanding that we cannot change the world, we must change the strategies that American female students adopt, so that they can participate and learn alongside their male counterparts, just as they presumably would at home (Matthews, 2001).

What is often missing from these accounts, however, is consideration of the deeper meaning of study abroad experiences for participants: what they think they can achieve and why, and the extent to which language learning figures prominently among their aspirations. More recently, applied linguistics researchers have begun to explore these themes in light of such issues as social class and globalization and the worldwide triumph of neoliberalism, in particular. It has been evident for some time that study abroad is a gendered experience for American students (Gore, 2005), but it is now clear that it can also be interpreted as a largely middle-class activity involving neoliberal ideals of surface-level self-determination and fantasies of belonging to the global consumer elite—both of which are also associated with contemporary postfeminist sensibilities. In the case of Americans in France, these ideals and fantasies align with, perpetuate, and reinforce perennial images of travel to France as a form of social class transcendence.

As part of a larger attempt to understand why study abroad students do or do not choose to immerse themselves in language learning opportunities, this paper explores the gender-related stances adopted by American students of French while abroad. Data are extracted from journals and interviews provided by a cohort of 23 participants who went to France in the spring of 2003 and participated in a hybrid qualitative/quantitative study of language development in social context (Kingingger, 2008). The interval since the preparation of that

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<sup>1</sup> In terms of real achievements related to gender equity, the U.S. actually compares quite unfavorably with other high-income nations. To offer just one example, the impact of family law on the lives of working mothers in France versus the United States is radically different. In the U.S., the Family and Medical Leave Act (1993) mandates 12 weeks of unpaid maternity leave, but with a variety of restrictions involving previous length of service and company or institution size. A survey of parental leave in 21 high-income countries by the Center for Economic and Policy Research (Gornick, Ray, & Schmitt, 2008) found that the U.S. was one of only two such countries guaranteeing no paid leave to new parents, the other being Oman. France, on the other hand, requires employers to provide a minimum of 16 weeks of fully paid leave to new mothers. The Act for Real Equality for Women and Men (2014) further aims to close employment-related gender gaps and to distribute parental responsibility evenly by implementing an equal share of leave to both parents (European Union, 2016).

study has seen the rise of feminist scholarship focused on a phenomenon known as *postfeminism*, along with an intensification of postfeminist representations in the American media in general as well as in portrayals of French gender roles. While performing the earlier analysis, I was aware that gender-related themes in the data were influenced by broader discourses. However, I had yet to discover or to investigate postfeminism and its thematic links to neoliberalism and subjectivity, and I had not appreciated the relevance of these phenomena for the study. In this paper, I therefore return to these data in order to reanalyze them from the perspective of postfeminism, showing how students' stories are told on a backdrop of global, neoliberal ideologies and translated into specifically American images of study abroad and of French versus American femininity. In these discourses, study abroad becomes a pursuit of decorative leisure, while "Frenchness" functions as both a commodity and a strategy for self-improvement.

## POSTFEMINISM, NEOLIBERALISM, & SUBJECTIVITY

In *New Femininities*, Gill and Scharff (2011) offer an overview of postfeminism and neoliberalism, exploring their commonalities as well as their influence on contemporary subjectivities. While postfeminism has become a key term in recent feminist cultural analysis, its meaning is widely contested. For some, postfeminism aligns with other "posts" (e.g., postmodernism or poststructuralism), signifying an epistemological break with earlier, hegemonic Anglo-American feminist stances. Others focus on a set of assumptions circulating in the popular media, in which feminism itself is defined as the highly visible activism of the 1970s, now considered extreme and unpleasant, and therefore relegated to the past. Still others use the term to refer to a backlash against feminism in which political correctness is framed as a new form of tyranny, white men are interpreted as the real victims of sexism, and women are encouraged to accept and even to celebrate their traditional roles in society. Backlash discourses can be characterized by *retrosexism* (Gill & Scharff, 2011, p. 3), celebrating nostalgic images of women who, freed at last from the burden of strident feminist grievances, cheerfully cultivate traditional feminine wiles, charms, or homemaking skills.

Having set forth these three definitions, Gill and Scharff (2011) argue that understanding postfeminism as a theoretical position, new historical moment, or backlash does not suffice to describe what is new about contemporary depictions of gender. Rather, they follow McRobbie (2004) in suggesting that postfeminism constitutes a sensibility that is characterized by an entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas. Specifically, certain aspects of feminism are simultaneously taken into account and repudiated as women are offered the power and choice in consumerist self-making to replace political activism promoting societal transformation. Postfeminism thus becomes an "object of critical analysis" (Gill & Scharff, 2011, p. 4) whose nature and content must be specified. Gill and Scharff have discerned postfeminist notions, which include: 1) the idea that femininity is a bodily property that must be cultivated through rigorous self-surveillance and discipline; 2) the dominance of the "makeover" model (see also Negra, 2009); 3) a resurgence of notions about natural sexual differences in behavior and cognition (see also Cameron, 2009); 4) an emphasis on individualism, choice, and empowerment; and 5) a focus on consumerism and the commodification of abstract values. All of these views are emerging in an environment shaped by "stark and continuing inequalities and exclusion that relate to race and ethnicity, class, age, sexuality, and disability, as well as gender" (Gill & Scharff, 2011, p. 4). This reality



is underscored by the fact that postfeminist sensibilities circulate almost exclusively in media descriptions of the lives of middle or upper-middle class, white, Anglophone or European women.

Gill and Scharff (2011) characterize neoliberalism as an ever-expanding, transnational mode of economic rationality characterized by privatization, deregulation, and the withdrawal of nation states' responsibility for social well-being. Neoliberalism "sees market exchange as an ethic unto itself, and it holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions" (Gill & Scharff, 2011, p. 5). Further, it represents a "mobile, calculated technology for governing subjects who are constituted as self-managing, autonomous, and enterprising" (Gill & Scharff, 2011, p. 5). As Gill & Scharff (2011) contend, the neoliberal subject bears a strong resemblance to the postfeminist ideal, and both ideologies can be linked at three levels. First, neoliberalism and postfeminism privilege the individual over the social or the political and efface any notion that individuals may be constrained or influenced by sociopolitical forces beyond their control. Secondly, the self-management, autonomy, and enterprise characteristic of neoliberalism are reflected in the empowered consumerism of postfeminism. Finally, throughout the media discourses scrutinized in *New Femininities* (2011), it is women rather than men who are called upon to self-discipline, regulate their conduct, and interpret these activities as freely chosen. Thus, the authors suggest that neoliberalism may be, to some extent, a gendered phenomenon, with privileged women as its ideal subjects.

In contrast to other "posts," postfeminism may be an academic construct, but it is above all an ideology circulating in the popular media (Tasker & Negra, 2007). Like neoliberalism and contemporary modes of power in general, per Foucault (e.g., 1995) postfeminism exercises its governing force through the reshaping of common sense, and thus, of subjectivities. To take just one example, Tyler (2011) observes the increasingly common representation of "pregnant beauty," which is reconfiguring the experience of motherhood along neoliberal lines, signaling the commodification of maternal pulchritude, while also reinforcing the necessity for self-management and control at all times. As we shall see, postfeminist and neoliberal ideals are also in plain evidence in American media discourses surrounding gender and Francophilia. In the following sections, I first examine the gendered nature of study abroad in general and then consider how postfeminist imagery circulates through American self-help literature and other popular genres. I then outline the methodology of the study and present the findings.

## **STUDY ABROAD AS A GENDERED EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE**

Gore (2005) noted that historically, study abroad has been a feminized educational experience, generally associated with Europe, especially with France. From the inception of study abroad programs in the United States in the 1950s, between two thirds and three fourths of the participants have been female, and, in the early days, most of these women went to France. In an attempt to uncover the ideological and historical roots of beliefs surrounding study abroad, Gore analyzed policy and promotional documents in American education, exploring how "a constellation of dominant beliefs has coalesced to form an episteme held by the U.S. higher education community" (p. 23).

The dominant discourse suggests that "study abroad programs are perceived as attracting wealthy women to academically weak European programs established in a frivolous Grand Tour tradition" (Gore, 2005, p. 24). The Grand Tour was a practice of the British gentry

beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in which well-to-do young men were sent to the Continent to complete their education through first-hand exposure to prestigious cultural traditions and artifacts. At the same time, these young men were expected to return home with suitable souvenirs for the family collections, ready to settle into a life of respectability, having satisfied any youthful penchants for inappropriate behavior far from home. The Grand Tour tradition thus ties study abroad to leisure and general cultural edification rather than to productivity or focused learning. In its contemporary instantiations, meanwhile, and particularly since the mid-twentieth century, as noted above, study abroad has involved a constant majority of female participants. According to Gore (2005), the feminization of study abroad further serves to associate overseas education with lack of academic rigor and professional purpose. Gore traces the presence of this attitude to the history of women's struggle to enter the academy and to then be admitted to programs of professional development. The purported academic weakness of study abroad is further associated with underlying prejudicial attitudes that view the United States as the only source of true quality higher education and dissociate the liberal arts curriculum from vocational goals.

Alongside these dominant beliefs, Gore (2005) writes, there is now, and has always been, a countercurrent of alternative voices in which participants express very different opinions of study abroad. These participants are willing to take risks and to undergo hardships in a quest for an educational experience unavailable at home, emphasizing the connections between the liberal arts curriculum and the skills and knowledge needed for their future careers. Study abroad is conceived as an important and academically strong resource for professional development *by way of the liberal arts curriculum*, particularly for the disenfranchised female majority. Program sponsors believe that, through education abroad, students “become effective citizens able to contribute to the nation's development and the world's peace efforts, having enhanced their own international knowledge” (Gore, 2005, p. 136). The relatively minor importance of these perspectives is often overlooked by language educators.

## AMERICAN IMAGES OF FRENCH FEMININITY

If, in the dominant discourses, study abroad is associated with leisure and disregard for focused learning in professionally relevant domains, what does the learning of French, in particular, imply for American women? Over the past several decades, American images of “Frenchness” have taken on a distinctly postfeminist twist in the construction of an inferior, if salvageable, femininity for white, middle- or upper-middle class American women. Like their Australian counterparts (De Nooy, 2014), American women are shown to become empowered consumers both *of* “Frenchness” and *via* “Frenchness.” Such images are promulgated, for example, in the popular genre of self-help literature, in publications that aim to instruct women on attaining “that je ne sais quoi” of French femininity, with regard to beauty, self-possession, discretion, respect for history, and the ability to shop with quality and authenticity in mind. Among the most popular titles are the runaway bestseller *French Women Don't Get Fat* (Guiliano, 2005), which opens with an anecdote directly associating life in the U.S. with female obesity: Upon her return from a sojourn in the U.S., Ms. Guiliano is informed by her father that she looks “like a sack of potatoes” (p. 18). Since 2005, Guiliano has also published *The French Women Don't Get Fat Cookbook* (Guiliano, 2011) and *French Women Don't Get Facelifts* (Guiliano, 2013). In addition to avoiding excess weight and cosmetic surgery, American women of any age can be improved by association with things

French. They can find their inner French girl with Debra Ollivier (2003) (*Entre Nous: A Woman's Guide to Finding Her Inner French Girl*), hone their skills at seduction with Edith Kunz (2000) (*Fatale: How French Women Do It*), and survive the crises of middle age and add a tinge of the exotic to their new life of sex and shopping with either Suzy Gershman (2004) (*C'est la Vie*, Gershman) or Jamie Callan (2013) (*Ooh La La: French Women's Secrets to Feeling Beautiful Every Day*). They can also shed their Midwestern, middle-aged blahs and join the French bourgeoisie with Harriet Rochefort (1997) (*French Toast: An American in Paris Celebrates the Maddening Mysteries of the French*). And when, at last, they grow weary of style and seduction, they can comfortably settle into their authentic identity, taking hints on homemaking from Madame Chic (Scott, 2014: *At Home with Madame Chic: Becoming a Connoisseur of Daily Life*) or from a fictionalized French grandmother (Fronty & Duronsoy, 2015: *A Well-Kept Home: Household Traditions and Simple Secrets from a French Grandmother*).

The implied paradox of these works is that a range of positive attributes somehow occurs naturally and effortlessly in French women yet American women who purchase and study these self-help books can acquire these features. These women, who in addition to insolent thinness, are lacking in “je ne sais quoi,” require tutelage in order to measure up to the French model. Thus, American popular images of French femininity confine their representation to an idealized upper-middle class, placing American women in a position of inferiority in terms of body image, style, and general savoir-faire, regardless of their social class origins. The basic message here appears to be that, by failing to cultivate French women's techniques of seduction and pleasurable self-discipline, these women are sabotaging their own value on the “heterosexual marketplace” (Thorne, 1993, p. 170), which will eventually determine their future choices in life.<sup>2</sup> The overall postfeminist character of these works becomes further highlighted as the anachronism of these images is explicitly celebrated, as if “Frenchness” constitutes a license to celebrate women's lesser role in society, including all that is retrograde in the portrayal of women as objects of contemplation, devoted to the pleasure of others. The covers of both Ollivier's (2003) and Rochefort's (1997) books, for example, feature stylized drawings of headless, high-heeled, shapely-legged female bodies, each accompanied by a freshly groomed poodle. The design of the Ollivier volume expressly echoes a 1950s era aesthetic, while Kunz's (2000) cover design features François Boucher's (1952) rosy and voluptuous *Nude on a Sofa*.

At the movies and on television, we find a curious amalgam of imagery combining the reputation of study abroad as a decorative pursuit with the portrayal of French as a means toward social class transcendence. According to historian Harvey Levenstein (2004), one of the most effective advertisements for the transformative effect of a trip to Paris on American women was the 1954 film *Sabrina*. In this film, Audrey Hepburn plays Sabrina Fairchild, the ugly duckling daughter of the chauffeur on the Long Island estate of the wealthy Larrabee family. Humphrey Bogart plays the workaholic head of the family's vast business empire. Upon coming of age for entry into domestic service, Sabrina is sent to Paris

<sup>2</sup> The term *heterosexual marketplace* appears in Thorne's (1993) ethnography examining the social construction of gender in two elementary schools in Michigan and California. According to Thorne, gender-related socialization is a life-long process. One crucial phase occurs as girls enter adolescence and begin to move into the heterosexualized gender system of teenagers and adults. It is at this point when they encounter forces *overtly* inscribing their subordination on the basis of gender. Specifically, girls are “pressured to make themselves ‘attractive,’ to get a boyfriend, to define themselves and other girls in terms of their positions in the heterosexual market. Although boys also enter into this market, it is less defining of their status and presumed futures, and, given the structuring of heterosexuality, it is they who tend to have the upper hand” (p. 170).

for a two-year cooking course. She is befriended by an aging French baron who instructs her in fashion, horse racing, and other elite, potentially risqué pursuits. To the tune of “La Vie en Rose,” Sabrina writes to her father, “I have learned how to live . . . And I shall never run away from life, and love.” When she returns to Long Island, Sabina will be the most sophisticated woman in the Glen Cove train station. Indeed, arriving home, Sabrina sports a chic short haircut, perfect makeup, and ultra-fashionable clothing. She speaks flawless French and regularly displays her knowledge of good taste. Ultimately, she uses her newfound feminine wiles—and her implied wisdom in matters of sexuality—to seduce Humphrey Bogart’s character, whisking him away at the last minute on a ship called *Liberté*.

The film reaffirmed long-standing and gender-specific American images of France and was, in fact, remade in the same mold in 1995 (Pollack, Rudin, & Pollack, 1995). More recently, in the final episode of *Sex and The City* (King, 2004), it is Carrie Bradshaw’s crinolined flight to Paris that ultimately confirms her destiny as the chosen mate of Mr. Big. For American women, postfeminist discourses translate France into a place whose style, culture, and sophistication can enhance one’s attractiveness and the likelihood of transcending social class boundaries. Equipped with signs of “Frenchness,” a girl might even marry the Lord of the Manor. Meanwhile, for nose-to-the-grindstone American men like Mr. Big or the work-obsessed Captain of Industry, Linus Larrabee, a trip to France implies temporary, sensual release from the tyranny of a life devoted to effectiveness.

As documented by Levenstein (2004), images of this type have enjoyed remarkable longevity and are closely associated with the history of social class in the U.S. In the post-World War II era, France was associated with escape from the strict propriety of public culture at home to sexual freedom. But, by the 1960’s, travel abroad had become the hallmark of elite status among aspiring Americans, and France was by far the preferred destination, a source of cultural uplift and general edification. Levenstein also points out, however, that changes in the political landscape since the 1970s have eroded American Francophilia in specific ways. The old eastern Republican elite, and the liberal Democratic intellectual elite continue to celebrate the “wine, women, and song” image of France. However, the rise of populism and conservatism in the new Republican South and Southwest have empowered a new elite for whom Europe, and the culture it represents, are irrelevant at best. Franco-American conflict, such as the clash over the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, generates vitriolic commentary and jokes about the cowardice and uncertain gender identity of French men (e.g., Going to war without the French is like going deer hunting without your accordion). Meanwhile, in the popular media, the white, middle- or upper-class French woman is increasingly cast as the ideal postfeminist object of emulation for her exquisitely decorative mastery of style and sensuality, paradoxically pleasurable control of her body, and sophisticated consumer choices.

## METHODOLOGY

To what extent do contemporary study abroad students of French take up postfeminist discourses as they attempt to make sense of their experiences? This study follows Pavlenko’s (2007) recommendations for narrative study with attention to the social and rhetorical forces shaping autobiographical accounts. Specifically, I draw on Wertsch’s (2002) interpretation of Bahktin’s statements on the dialogicality of texts. The adopted approach relies on the assumption that the narrative and rhetorical tools people use are provided by the historical, cultural, and institutional settings where they live; they are part of the cultural toolkit that

characterizes a particular sociocultural setting. To speak of gender, or of any other topic, we rely on the “repeatable aspects of texts” (Wertsch, 2002, p. 15) or the voices and perspectives of speakers who came before us. Cultural toolkits, including postfeminist discourses, serve to create, recognize, and reproduce communities and identities within these communities. They include specific narrative templates and social representations of others and of their cultural resources (Moore, 2004; Zarate, 1993). These toolkits uphold the values and ideologies of communities, but they are not readily available to conscious scrutiny. While they are impervious to rational argumentation and negotiation, they are dynamic and subject to manipulation. The textual resources that people use to make sense of complex experiences may be relatively homogeneous, especially in cases where state-sponsored official histories are imposed in an effort to create strong collective allegiances and identities. They may also be organized as a distributed system of pieces that complement one another. In cases where alternative texts are accessible, they may also give rise to contestation, as would be reflected, for example, in some of today’s progressive elementary school curricula where Christopher Columbus has been stripped of his status as the Discoverer of America, replaced by a varied, mixed-gender, and multicultural group of alternate candidates.

A key analytic construct involved in this approach is *intertextuality*, or the idea that, in the process of analysis, textual resources used by individual speakers (or writers) may be linked to related discourses circulating in the wider world. Therefore, the approach used here involves the tracing of intertextual links between postfeminist representations of French femininities and American femininities, and of study abroad in both popular or educational media sources and in the self-presentation of study participants. We have examined how the relevant phenomena are portrayed in various popular media and how these images reflect the sociocultural history of French language learning and study abroad in the United States. We subsequently scrutinize texts in which the students present themselves and their rationale for adopting particular stances toward French language learning, seeking to grasp the nature of the textual resources in play. In this case, it would appear that whether students adopt or contest them, the textual resources in question emerge from the same configuration of cultural and historical circumstances.

As noted above, data for this article are extracted from journal entries and interviews provided by a cohort of 23 U.S.-based undergraduate students who studied in France during the spring semester of 2003. The larger project is a hybrid study examining the development of academic and informal French language competence in light of the reported qualities of the study abroad experience (Kingingier, 2008). All of the students were interviewed a minimum of two times, for approximately one hour, prior to and immediately after their sojourn abroad. Potential focal students were also interviewed halfway through the program. The interviews were semi-structured to include a number of preselected themes but also to allow for flexibility in the emergence of topics chosen by the participants. Initial interviews focused on the students’ histories of language learning and motives for study abroad. Midterm interviews elicited information about the nature of the experience to date and comments about social networks. In the final interviews, the students were invited to evaluate the experience in its entirety and to characterize their French language development. In their journals, the students were asked to write a minimum of two entries per week regarding any events they judged relevant to their language learning. The topic of gender identities emerged without prompting in many instances, in both interviews and journal entries. This topic was also explicitly addressed in the final interviews, when the participants were asked to comment on their perceptions of gender and its performance/role in the

settings they had frequented.

## FINDINGS

In initial attempts to understand the stances that students adopted toward language learning in study abroad, it seemed quite obvious that they were employing a cultural or rhetorical toolkit, borrowing elements from broader interpretations of study abroad and of France as they made sense of their own experiences (Wertsch, 2002). When asked, in pre-departure interviews, to relate their motives for undertaking study abroad in France, the students cited a wide variety of rationales, including self-discovery, desire for worldliness, and, to a lesser extent, language learning. Often, focused learning of the language, other academic pursuits, or interaction with local people and culture, seemed to play a relatively minor role in comparison with the role of study abroad in the development of self-sufficiency or independence, as illustrated by the following interview excerpt:

I think it'll make me a more independent kind of person + uh ++ not that I'm really a dependent person right now + but I think it'll make me a little bit more comfortable with uh doing things on my own and really give me a sense of + I don't know + like uh ++ that I can do anything + if I can do that I can really do anything on my own + like I don't need to worry about anything + like if my friends are going to be there + or something like that so it'll give me a whole new sense of independence. (Olivia, pre-departure interview)

In many cases, study abroad in France was also linked to a life of leisure in the students' accounts: sitting in cafés, soaking up culture, roaming the countryside. For another student, a sojourn in Paris was about "just sitting there," reminiscent of the 1995 version of the movie character Sabrina:

have you seen the movie 'Sabrina' with (Harrison Ford?) + and she just goes into one of the parks and finds her favorite bridge + and + I don't know + I think that will be cool + I want to find my favorite bridge + and I want to sit out in front of the Eiffel tower and just + I don't know + just sit there + and maybe bring a sketch pad. (Blythe, pre-departure interview)

That is, initially, many of the students saw study abroad as an elite activity conveying cultural capital but requiring little or no effort or initiative on their part. Just being there as an observer, perhaps indulging in a vaguely bohemian activity, such as making sketches of the Eiffel Tower, would suffice; engagement with local people, or attempting to learn their language, was not really necessary. Of course, this approach to study abroad might result in the *discovery* that language learning represents a long-term investment of time, work, and, occasionally, struggle, a worthwhile realization even when, for many, it comes late in the students' academic careers.

An examination of the stances that students adopted later in their study abroad experience revealed some cases where the experience served to intensify motives for language learning, and other cases where the students actively sought justification for

rejecting competence in French. For female students who maintained a strong desire to achieve competence in French, such as Jada, interpretation of French gender roles was a major source of confusion. Jada devoted considerable airtime in her journal and interviews to description of her efforts to develop a French social network. Early on, she found herself surrounded by eager male interlocutors who challenged her views on gender related norms, such as the importance of avoiding explicit critique of women's appearance. Jada interpreted these challenges as signs that postfeminist images of France reflect reality. Becoming more "French" was a matter of reshaping her body and accepting women's fundamental role as a sex object, as she articulated in an interview late in the semester:

I'm like ya know I'm not really skinny like the French girls. and they're like nope not at all. a little bit on the chubby side. and I'm like don't hold back now. why don't you just tell me everything you hate about me + ya know? (...) and I'm like culture shock! hold on a second here. and they say things like + ya know + women have to + ya know + make themselves up and dress in tight clothes + so that we can see everything. and I'm like ok so basically they have to prance around for you to look at them. and they're like um-hum. and I'm like do they know that? and they're like well yeah. look at them. and I'm like wow. they do know that because look at them. like it's really just staring you in the face and I almost feel like it's the 1950s + in America. (Final interview)

Jada's comments exhibit very clear echoes of postfeminist discourses about French femininity as involving bodily discipline and techniques to enhance one's heterosexual market value. At the same time, however, she makes an explicit statement about the retrograde nature of these practices, claiming superiority in the evolution of gender equity for herself and for her country. She seems to assume that no qualitative variation is possible, and that all societies are on the same trajectory toward social justice in this regard, with the United States in the lead by more than half a century. The main consequence of this interpretation, for Jada, was a good deal of time devoted to working out how to develop a French-mediated identity she could live with, and how to attract the attention of potential interlocutors while fending off unwanted sexual advances. Ultimately, her efforts were rewarded as her chance encounters eventually assisted her in developing a social network, which included a helpful female friend, toward the end of her semester-long stay.

While Jada succeeded in forming a French social network, other students became withdrawn from social interaction with locals. Deidre represents a dramatic example of the latter circumstance, opting to spend most of her spare time in Internet-mediated activities with friends and family at home almost immediately upon her arrival, instead of seeking to pursue face-to-face relations in her new environment. Lonely, homesick, and overwhelmed by the practical challenges involved in caring for herself in a foreign country, Deirdre limited her engagement in the local environment to observation from a distance. She positioned herself as a victimized consumer of goods, services, and even of the study abroad program. She described constant sexual harassment on the street, which she ascribed to lack of respect for women. Repeated encounters that she perceived as harassment, coupled with the images of women in advertising, made her "hate to go outside":

I've noticed there's no respect to women + I'm not a feminist by any means + but I feel like again with the guys and the way they just talk to girls when they're going down the

street. I mean + I just think that there's no respect for them at all + there's naked women pictured in ads everywhere just half naked in their lingerie + um and I guess I mean the French are more comfortable with women being naked. you see it on the beach all the time + but I mean it's just everywhere I go I feel like there's some sort of harassment that I can expect. no matter how I'm dressed + or no matter what I look like that day + no matter how I'm presenting myself + like if I'm coming back from the beach + or I'm coming back from class. I just—I expect it. (Final interview)

Furthermore, Deirdre could not project herself into the gender roles that she perceived as typically French, citing a fundamental difference in the behavior of French versus American women. Deirdre ventriloquized comments regarding French women to be found in the American postfeminist self-help literature, but described these women as excessively concerned with their dress and general appearance, calling them “snotty”:

um I think women are—I think they can be kinda snotty + I think they stare a lot. everyone's noticed that. and I think they're stylish + I think they're very concerned about the way they look. um their bodies as well as their fashion ++ Monday morning rolls around and the girls dress up like they're going out Friday night + and it just—it looks ridiculous to me. (Final interview)

Deirdre viewed American women, on the other hand, as relaxed about their dress, more involved in athletic activities, and interested in “having a good time with whatever they are doing”:

um I think American women are a lot more athletic. definitely. you don't see any girls running here + you don't see any girls in sweat pants or anything like that + I think American women are often more laid back + and just worried about their- having a good time with whatever they're doing. um I think that for example at Midatlantic State + you'll see girls just walking to class in their sweat pants + or even in their pjs. (Final interview)

Thus, Deirdre's rationale for withdrawal from interactions contributing to learning French was related to alienation from gender images that she perceived. This perception was based in considerable part on transposition of postfeminist gender ideologies to her distanced and judgmental observation of the French. In other words, Deirdre described French women, and their images, in the same terms we see in the postfeminist self-help literature, but did not accept the fundamental value of superior self-discipline. Rather, she lamented the objectification of women's bodies, and the women's contribution to their own social subordination, contrasting this to the relative freedom, athleticism, and relaxation that American women can enjoy. Perhaps Deirdre really is “not a feminist by any means.” However, although they are filtered through postfeminist discourses and therefore de-emphasize broader social activism, her comments certainly do recall the demands for personal liberation issued by feminists of earlier eras.

Deirdre's experience may be usefully contrasted with that of Bill, one of the most successful language learners in the cohort. Bill also recruited postfeminist ideologies of



French gender in relating his story, but the overall effect of this strategy was quite positive in his case. In commenting on issues of gender during the final interview, Bill expressed a distinct preference for French women over American women, and for American men over French men. American women, according to Bill, are passive, “have absolutely no opinion about anything,” and waste their time chatting about “crap.” French women, on the other hand, act assertively in the presence of men and are not fearful of challenging them in discussions. His additional comments on French femininity might have been directly lifted from the pages of a self-help book:

uh most French women have this incredible sense of style + um and ++ they appreciate them for what they are. and there’s not like + as far as their body type is concerned + and I think they they even the older women + they look great all the time. like not trashy or anything like that but I think they make a genuine a genuine effort + as for whether it’s conscious or subconscious they just do a great job and I think that’s- that shows a lot for their character not that they want- well I guess they want to impress people + but in the sense that like I’m proud of who—like I mean I dunno I think it’s a good thing + I don’t think it’s a bad + I don’t think it’s being superficial. (Final interview)

Bill’s appreciation of French femininity aligns closely with the desiderata for ultimate effectiveness among male heterosexual observers outlined in the self-help literature. Although both Deirdre and Bill perceive that effort is involved in bodily discipline and in developing a sense of style, only Bill views this effort as “genuine,” that is, as a fundamentally natural, even potentially “subconscious,” aspect of French culture and as a source of French national pride. French feminine beauty is, according to Bill, “not trashy,” but instead serves, presumably, as an index of relatively high social class. Furthermore, French women of all ages participate in, and benefit from this aspect of their cultural heritage; even if *French Women Don’t Get Facelifts* (Guiliano, 2013), beauty, and efforts to maintain it, are not reserved for the young.

Although Bill met French men who were “cool” and with whom he could associate, he generally condemned them for their lack of subtlety in interactions with women, and for harassing young women in public, in particular. According to Bill, to be a woman in France is to be obliged to cope with constant unwanted advances:

[To be a French woman is] to have incredible tolerance with men. and to be able to say no over and over again. and to not think twice about it and to not let it affect you + and just to keep saying no no no no no no not to look at them + not to talk at them + with them. I find that incredible. (Final interview)

In comparable situations, in fact, Bill framed himself as a hero who defended the honor of harassment victims by intervening in various ways, either by indirectly implying that particular women were unavailable (because they are dancing with him), or by directly challenging the offending party:

I can’t say how many times I have like been so forward + when like French guys come up to French girls and I have to—with American friends. like they’ve said no a couple of

times + like annoyed them. and I can see it in their face + and so I take it upon myself like look like first—I'll literally dance with them + literally like I have no no problem + I mean + I would dance with them and if they don't get the point I'll start yelling at them like go away + like you're not wanted here. and I just don't- like what's wrong + like what don't you understand here. (Final interview)

This concert of circumstances therefore permitted Bill to celebrate images of French femininity in ways that directly reflect images of “Frenchness” promoted in the American self-help literature. Meanwhile, he could also celebrate his own virtue in resisting the sexist and unenlightened practices he associates with normative French masculinity. As seen in this extract, he posits the superiority not only of avoiding sexual harassment and of honoring gender equity, but also of his own role as defender of French women. The story, in brief, casts Bill in a very favorable light.

## CONCLUSION

In the American literature on language learning in study abroad, there is a baseline assumption that program participants may be defined as language learners. When gender-related problems emerge, these are interpreted in terms of gender-related norms of interaction that do not match American ideals of gender equity in the public arena. Blame for the difficulties that young women report is thereby conveniently assigned to the norms governing interaction in foreign host countries. In the data discussed here, the stories students tell *themselves* about gender have little to do with French societal norms of gender equity. These stories may be consistent with Gore's (2005) dominant discourses of study abroad as a non-professional and leisure-oriented activity, or with specific postfeminist ideologies of gender that play out on a backdrop of collective fantasy about the French. In the first instance, the students' self-portrayal in their study abroad accounts show that they cannot always be interpreted primarily as language learners engaged in a prolonged and durable effort to achieve competence in French (see also Wolcott, 2013). Instead, they may construct the experience as a search for a new and more independent persona, or as an opportunity to enjoy culturally enriched free time that they may then exchange for symbolic capital and other advantages related to social class once they return home. Meanwhile, postfeminist portrayals of French femininity prime young women to assume that, although achievement of a French-mediated identity may be desirable, it requires intensification of efforts toward bodily self-mastery and acceptance of the notion that ones' primary function in society is decorative. It requires coming to terms with the idea that feminist leanings may be morally upstanding, but they are not necessarily attractive. These initial and very superficial interpretations can serve to challenge students toward further exploration and learning, or they can provide a strong rationale for abandonment of language learning goals. For the male participants in the study, no such challenges were present. Bill, for example, appeared to be perfectly at ease in accepting his definition of heterosexual masculinity as a baseline default preference. This understanding allowed him to construct himself as an admiring consumer of feminine charm and as a defender of French women's honor against the surface-level practices of their own society, which he deemed unjust. Thus, ironically, discourses of American gender equity might in some cases help to valorize young American men, rather than women, when they are overseas. It is worth noting that comments such as these do not appear in the narratives of non-white, non-middle class students, such as the

account of the only African-American participant in Kinginger (2008), or those of “Alice” (Kinging, 2004), a white student from a working-class background.

In applied linguistics and language education, it is quite rare for scholars to revisit data from earlier work in order to reinterpret them with new insights. Such work does, however, exist, as exemplified by Scollon’s (2001) *Mediated discourse: The nexus of practice*. In this case, the author developed a fully ontogenetic and embodied view of social practice relying on data collected in the mid-1970s for a dissertation on the “conversational and discursive genesis of sentence-level grammatical structure” (p. 29). This example illustrates Scollon’s own ontogenesis as a scholar whose active engagement in intellectual inquiry over a lifetime yielded evolving and increasingly sophisticated insights on the same phenomena.

While I certainly cannot claim such achievements, I do believe that reconsidering one’s data from new perspectives can be worthwhile. In this case, I initially read the research on gender trouble and sexual harassment in study abroad from the perspective of an avowed feminist who came of age in the 1970s, the era of activism now deemed obnoxious and disposable. It seemed reasonable to agree that American women’s righteous indignation at the practices of their host communities was well founded. However, over time and in concert with discovery of other ways in which American students abroad tend to claim national superiority when challenged (e.g., when they defend their right to remain ignorant of political issues), I began to suspect that there was something amiss and vaguely ethnocentric in my own thinking on this issue. My first step, illustrated in Kinginger (2008), was to invoke the notion of narrative and cultural toolkits, as described above, in order to disentangle my analysis from my own political leanings to some extent. At the time, I was aware that anti-feminist sensibilities were influencing my participants’ stories, and had begun to explore the popular French-themed self-help literature. This allowed me to critique the students’ orientation to their gender-related experiences. However, since I had not yet discovered the scholarly literature on postfeminism, I did not know how to name these sensibilities, nor did I see how they are linked with neoliberalism in order to exert covert influence on subjectivity. Participants in studies such as this deserve more than mere critique; they deserve understanding of the ways in which their orientations to language learning and to education in general are subtly yet powerfully manipulated, not always to their benefit.

There are many ways to comment on the implications of findings such as these, not the least of which would be to say that study abroad does not necessarily lead students beyond their own perceptual biases and that helpful guidance may be in order. According to the statistics published by the Institute for International Education’s *Open Doors Report* (2015), the typical American study abroad sojourn is now one semester or less in length, as was the case for the participants in this study. They rarely have time for extensive engagement in local communities, let alone expansion of their perceptions. But the purpose of this paper is to discuss how postfeminist, neoliberal ideologies and images of international education are influencing the subjective evaluation of study abroad in France, complicating and often trivializing the learning of languages, particularly in the case of the young American women who constitute the majority in this case. These women are commonly portrayed as victims of otherness, raised in a just society to anticipate respect and equal treatment, and sorely disappointed at the clash of their values with those of the others they meet when they travel abroad. What we find when we examine the way they talk about the experience, however, is that—even before they set foot in a foreign country—they have been influenced by postfeminist discourses in wide and very contemporary circulation at home.

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