Cultural citizenship in France and le Bled among teens of pan-southern immigrant heritage

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Abstract

This article addresses discourse among French teenagers of pan-immigrant, peripheral, and specifically southern descent that evokes the widely circulating spatial concept called le bled, a French word of Arabic origin. Drawing upon theories of cultural citizenship, this paper explores the connections that teens broker through le bled in two, divergent discourses that link French citizenship with modernity and race. The first discourse is one that conceptualizes le bled as less modern than France, which is ultimately a racially exclusive model of French citizenship because it typically treats le bled as a racialized and inferior place. The second discourse involves the conceptualization of France as a modern and racially inclusive place, seeking to assimilate people from various places (even though in reality, many of these policies that claim inclusiveness are exclusive).

1. Introduction

Among French-born teenagers of immigrant descent living in low-income housing projects outside Paris, le bled evokes a shared, but shifting southern-ness and peripheral-ness, configured alternately as one’s village, as Algeria, as North Africa, or the “underdeveloped” edges of Europe. In Classical Arabic, bld means “country,” but in colloquial dialect the term often means “village”; in the current French context, the derivative term le bled is often used to mean “homeland” or “home country” and usually refers to Algeria. Within the diasporic context of les cités (housing projects), where many French-born inhabitants actively identify with their immigrant origins, le bled provides ideologically rich fodder to create and reimagine national models of Frenchness and French citizenship.

I argue that teens use the ideological concept of le bled to broker connections among French citizenship, modernity, and race in two, divergent ways. The first way conceptualizes le bled as less modern than France, which is ultimately a racially exclusive model of French citizenship because it casts le bled as a racialized and inferior place. The second way involves the conceptualization of France as a modern and racially inclusive place, seeking to assimilate people from various places (although in reality, many of these policies that claim inclusiveness are exclusive). These mobilizations of le bled roughly map onto two broadly circulating discourses that are in tension in France, each of which link French citizenship with notions of modernity and racial identity.

Each of these discourses can be traced historically to the contemporary period in France. In the first, modern France, Frenchness, and French citizenship are the political, economic, and discursive products of colonial power relations. Historically, this set of discourses emanates from political texts created to theorize and justify France’s imperial role, in order to posit France and French citizenry as superior to colonized places and peoples. In this model, colonies and colonized subjects are cast as needing the “civilizing” presence of French people and the French polity in order to become modern. In these
discourses, colonial subjects and *le bled* are cast as racially and culturally inferior and French citizenship is envisioned as exclusionary to supposedly “non-modern” influences. For example, during the colonial period, French citizenship by colonial African subjects could often only be obtained when individuals renounced Islam, indicating a bias against religious and racialized difference.

Although these discourses have largely been renounced in the French political mainstream today, they live on in the anti-immigrant and racially exclusive models of citizenship proposed by national politicians such as Jean-Marie Le Pen and his daughter Marine Le Pen, both recent candidates for President. Their rhetoric posits that a culturally, economically, and politically strong France is dependent upon excluding the physical, cultural, and religious (particularly Muslim) presence of immigrants from former French colonies, as seen in the political slogan, “France for the French,” coined by Jean-Marie Le Pen for his political party *Le Front National* (“The National Front”). Ironically, the racially exclusionary discourses that established and justified France as a colonial power, and thus its relationship with the colonized, are now wielded in favor of severing ties with previously colonized peoples and places. These discourses can also be said to exist in corollary discourses that articulate France’s responsibility to “help” post-colonial African countries “develop”, that sometimes serve to perpetuate the notion that previous colonies are politically, culturally, and even racially inferior.

In the second set of discourses, France and French citizenship is born out of a Republican model that posits no preceding cultural, racial, or religious requirement to citizenship or to belonging in the French state other than a legalistic requirement. France’s modern identity is linked to an inclusive model for citizenship and its supposed open tolerance for racial, cultural, and religious difference. This model draws upon discourses from the French Revolution that established that no “special interest groups” (namely, nobility and the clergy) would interfere with French sovereignty or come between individuals’ rights and obligations in the French state. These discourses have been born out in legal definitions of French citizenship as being exclusively based in *jus soli* (law of the soil; being born in France) rather than *jus sanguinis* (law of blood, being French by parentage and/or ethnicity). Such discourses also live on in popular Socialist party political rhetoric that champions cultural, racial, and religious diversity as contributing to France’s strength and to its role as a leader in the modern political world.

Drawing upon Bauman’s (1991) discussion of the tensions inherent to modernity, Paul Silverstein notes the “ambivalent character of a postcolonial France vacillating between republican logics of universalist citizenship and localizing concerns over the demise of national particularly” (2004, p. 5). I argue that these divergent discourses underpin teens’ shifting ways of imagining their own cultural citizenship within France. Using a concept of cultural citizenship that owes its intellectual heritage to both Rosaldo (1994) and Ong (1996), this article theorizes the connections that teens broker through *le bled* as both a way to resist dominant racialized power structures (after Rosaldo) and as a way that teens re-negotiate hierarchical race relations through hegemonic forms (after Ong). I show how such negotiations are achieved through the flexible meanings of place and identity that these teens associate with *le bled*. Thus, rather than merely a place or static signifier, *le bled* is a *shifter* (Silverstein, 1976) that French teens of immigrant descent use to express a constellation of oppositions and associations with regard to modernity.

And yet, *le bled* is not just an ideological construct, but also a specific physical place (parents’ natal village) that many French teens returned to each summer. In these visits, the “real bled” (that is, one’s parents’ overseas hometown) served as a resource for kids from *les cités* to reconfigure and deepen social relationships during school vacations. A large portion of adolescents in this study came from families who had immigrated to France from two towns in Algeria: Magnhnia and El Oued. In addition to valuing it as a conceptual framework for diasporic identities, they experienced *le bled* as an actual place in which to forge intimate relationships.

In teen discourse within the context of diasporic France, however, *le bled* is shifting in that the concept expanded or contracted relative to the identity goals and interactional objectives of participants. For example, shared stances toward *le bled* potentially bring together teens of various backgrounds, including Algerian, Moroccan, and Portuguese. In this way, evoking *le bled* serves often to engage with sets of embedded relationships among modernity, citizenship, ethnicity, and gender.

2. *Theorizing Le Bled*: racializing spaces and spatializing race through pan-southern immigrant heritage

*Le bled* is a French word of Arabic origin that was coined during the colonial period in Algeria. Its coinage and original meaning reveals many of the processes of differentiation and nested fractal recursivity (Irvine and Gal, 2000, p. 38), that are relevant to current adolescent usage in Chemin de l’Ile, a neighborhood of low-income housing projects (*les cités*) located 15 km west of Paris. As mentioned earlier, in Classical Arabic, *bld* means “country,” but in colloquial Arabic dialect the term often means “village.” However, in colonial French and currently in some contexts *le bled*, such as in the expression *le bled perdu* or *paumé* (the ‘lost’ bled), is used to mean a very rural or extremely remote area. For example, in *Tristes Tropiques*, Levi-Strauss compares *le bled* to the concept of *sertao* (roughly, “the bush”) in Brazil. He claims, “Sertao (sic). . . refers to a subjective aspect: bush in relation to man, and in opposition to inhabited and cultivated areas; there are no permanent settlements in the sertao. French colonial slang has perhaps an exact equivalent in the term bled” (Lévi-Strauss, 1961, p. 162).

While the opposition between modern civilization and rural backwater as observed by Levi-Strauss finds echoes in Chemin de l’Ile teens’ uses of this concept, the complex positioning of teens in relation to *le bled* necessarily complicates its possible meanings. In Chemin de l’Ile, adolescents articulate shifting but polarizing sets of relationships regarding ethnicity, gender, citizenship, and modernity through the discursive nexus of *le bled*. In these exchanges, *le bled* comprises and evokes
a creative set of tropes to express divergent stances with respect to these ideologically loaded and interlocking issues. By invoking le bled, French teenagers of immigrant descent may express their identifications with “home” countries as well as distance themselves from these places.

The complex layers of cultural opposition that are expressible through the concept of le bled may be understood as a case of “fractal recursivity” (Irvine and Gal, 2000, p. 38) or the recurrence of an ideological opposition that is transformed in successive contexts. Irvine and Gal (2000) have developed the notion of fractal recursivity to explain the process whereby a metaphorical opposition (such as “public/private”) gets reapplied recursively and thereby ideologically transformed in successive contexts. For example, although the metaphorical spatial distinction “public vs. private” is often used in American political rhetoric to refer to civic vs. domestic spheres, the same distinction may be reapplied at a different scale, such as a home, and thereby transformed in that certain spaces are constructed as more “public” (such as the living room) and more “private” (such as the bedroom). As Gal (2005, p. 27) argues, through their reapplication at different scales, the metaphorical distinctions of “public” and “private” reveal the ideological underpinnings that motivate the metaphor’s repeated application and transformation.

In the case of le bled the process of fractal recursivity is apparent through the reapplication and transformation of the “civilized/uncivilized” distinction that Levi-Strauss first notes in colonial French discourse. For example, le bled is used differently to set up oppositional distinctions of “modern vs. non-modern” in discussions of ethnicity, often constructed as national-affiliation, and in discussions of norms for gender and sexuality. Teens access these widely circulating ideas in the variety of ways that they position themselves in alignment and disalignment with le bled and with France. In the data I analyze below, teens alternately cast le bled as (1) racialized and, in the process, less modern than France, (2) as more modern than their own French cité with respect to gender norms. In the process, France is alternately constructed as modern, due to a model for citizenship that is racially inclusive, and at other times, non-modern, due to a model for citizenship that is racist and exclusionary.

In teen discourse that I collected in cités outside Paris, speakers create differential stances when they engage differently with these nested concepts, for example, in favor of “tradition” or when constructing Algeria as supposedly more civilized than other countries. Some of the potential uses of these discursive practices included not only acknowledging diverse origins but also regimenting them, even though peripheral-ness is often constructed by teens as shared. Furthermore, such oppositional recursion was nested in that the French-born teens who created this discourse were not disputing their belonging to France, but rather imagining competing models of citizenship in France.

The nested quality to discursive interpretations of le bled and the ways that they transpose spatial distinctions onto shifting sets of social groups and individuals is reminiscent of Mendoza-Denton’s (2008) hemispheric localism. As she argues, in the context of Chicana and Latina gang girls in Northern California, “hemispheric localism is a projection onto the hemispheric political stage of processes that began locally in the history of groups of Latinos in California, and that through processes of symbolic analogy and metonymy this meaning system becomes projected as a wider political analysis” (p. 87). Although in some ways I am looking at a reverse process, that is, global geo-political distinctions (such as ‘north’ and ‘south’) mapped onto local entities such as neighborhood peer groups and even individuals, Mendoza-Denton’s consultants, like my own, were imagining and enacting local forms of social differentiation and belonging that invoked larger political entities.

Citizenship has often been imagined in Western democracies as a universal category that is intended to supersede other identifications such as ethnicity, kin, or religion, which were constructed as destabilizing to national sovereignty. This is currently how the French Republic is constructed in dominant political rhetoric and law, as I demonstrate in the ethnographic section that follows here. And yet as Ong (1996) notes, in practice, race, class, and immigrant origins continue to be a barrier in most Western democratic states in terms of the level and degree of participation and acceptance that some citizens enjoy above others, a point of particular importance in current France that I return to in the next section.

I argue that discursive practices surrounding le bled are a way that teens imagine and produce alliances and forms of identity production that belie the universal ideal of French citizenship. That is, although the teens included in this study do not deny or revoke their belonging to France through these practices—in many instances I observed teens affirm their right to be included as French—they also make clear the importance of the cultural aspect to citizenship (Rosaldo, 1994). Through discursive enactments of le bled, French teens of pan-immigrant descent collaboratively perform their cultural differences, while also not denying their belonging to France.

3. Ethnographic contexts for performing le bled

The May 6, 2012 ousting of incumbent President Nicolas Sarkozy and election of Socialist Party leader François Hollande demonstrates that France continues to struggle over how to define the Republic, and through it, national citizenship, “Frenchness”, and the sovereignty of France itself. Although the Republic has undoubtedly never been completely ideologically stable, current tensions over how to define and maintain a shared, imagined national community seem to be building, with multiple challenges both external—through EU austerity measures and the global capitalist market—and internal, through immigration, widespread racial discrimination, and mounting dissatisfaction by a growing underclass in cités (‘low-income housing projects’). In the words of François Bayrou, another Presidential hopeful who admitted he planned to vote for Hollande, Sarkozy was guilty of “trampling the values of Gaullism and the French Republic” with his supposed embrace of an “American” model of free-market business and zero-tolerance rhetoric regarding civil unrest by disenfranchised, poor youth, typically of migrant heritage (Lichfield, 2012).
And yet, Sarkozy had originally been elected because he was considered to be “tough” on l'insecurité (“insecurity”), which alludes to domestic threats of violence and terrorism, and is often used to criminalize brown French youth and for his intransigent denial that France had abandoned many of its poor and particularly immigrant-origin citizens. At a November 19, 2005 rally for the conservative party UMP and in an apparent bid for the Presidency in 2007, Interior Minister Sarkozy renewed his previous public threat to “pressure wash” la racaille (roughly, ‘street trash’) from cités, claiming that “the central cause of unemployment, of despair, of violence in the suburbs, is not discrimination or the failure of schools... it is drug traffic, the law of bands, the dictatorship of fear and the resignation of the Republic” (Ridet, 2005, p. 3).¹

Successful President candidate Hollande most recently championed himself as a “militant for progress” and publicly rejected German-led austerity measures that overwhelmingly hurt France’s poor and public institutions. Hollande won the election despite his earlier reputation for being “soft” and having been routinely publicly emasculated as “Madame Royal” in reference to his long term relationship with the first female leader of the Socialist Party and presidential candidate who lost to Sarkozy in 2007. Meanwhile, receiving more than 18 percent of first-round votes, 2012 pro-nationalist Presidential hopeful Marine Le Pen publicly cast herself and her anti-immigrant, pro-nationalist position as “the center of the universe” in a recent photo shoot next to a Joan of Arc statue (Willsher, 2012). Marine Le Pen is the current head of the National Front party and daughter of party founder Jean-Marie Le Pen; their claim to a French nationalist “center” casts immigration and cultural diversity in France as a threat to national sovereignty and to Frenchness itself.

In contrast, more centrist “Republican” values, represented by both Hollande and Sarkozy, claim that sovereignty is guaranteed as an individual contract between each citizen and the state, and generally work within an assimilationist model that is brokered through a national language and public education system starting at 3 years of age. In this model, the values of liberté, égalité, fraternité in addition to laïcité (“secularism”) ensure a continued shared adherence to the Republic. As scholars of French national identity remind us (Brubaker, 1992; Noiriel, 1988), France is a Republic built upon the principles of the 1789 revolution, and therefore is ideologically constructed as a political body whose power resides in its individual citizens, rather than the “special interest groups” which controlled the country previously (i.e. clergy and nobility). Thus many politicians and academics have directly or indirectly argued that immigration and immigrant communities pose a “challenge” to the basis of membership in the French Republic in that they too might act as special interest groups politically and culturally.

Over the past 30 years, immigration (‘immigration’) has defined French political and cultural landscapes in the popular imagination of citizenship and in scholarly and political production (Bonafous, 1991; Brubaker, 1992; Hargreaves and McKinney, 1997; Noiriel, 1988). Political, journalistic, and scholarly constructions of immigration as a social “problem” in France reveal the complexity of ideologies of cultural, religious, and racialized difference as they pertain to the imagined national community. Characterized by frequent and often drastic changes in immigration legislation, each successive wave of policy and political fashion has consistently figured in tandem with another topic of intense political debate: the status of the French Republic and perceived threats to its sovereignty.

Further, challenges to the inclusive ideology of French citizenship over the past 20 years demonstrate how colonial history, ideologies of bounded culture, and high political stakes contribute to making “nation building” an ongoing and contentious process. For example, in 1994, les lois Pasqua (‘Pasqua laws’) withdrew the right to automatic citizenship of second-generation residents at eighteen by requiring their application for French citizenship, a process that often took months to years of waiting.² And prior to the current fanfare about “immigration” in politics, scholarship, and journalism, up until the late 1960s and early 1970s migration to France basically consisted of a system of “guest workers” not overly distinct from the German gastarbeiter system. Under the French system, a migrant’s visa or national identity card was, literally, his or her work permit, since this document allowed migrants to enter the country and remain there (MacMaster, 1997).

In these examples among many others, the “inclusiveness” of the French nation is tempered by France’s historical role as a colonial and imperial power, able to change laws governing the flow of people according to the political and economic needs of the day. To over emphasize the inclusive nature of French citizenship is to foreground French political theory and rhetoric that champion an idealized humanist and universalist République and overlook actual political, social, and legal practices that create and maintain social exclusion and discrimination. Even historians such as Brubaker, who tends to emphasize French versus German characteristics of nationhood as either all-inclusive or all-exclusive respectively, acknowledges an ongoing “striving for cultural unity” in the French case: “Political inclusion [in France] has entailed cultural assimilation, for regional cultural minorities and immigrants alike” (Brubaker, 1992, p. 1). Indeed, the inclusive French model of universal, secular, and humanist citizenship is not anathema to cultural assimilationist practices since the expansiveness of French citizenship is predicated, logistically and symbolically upon state institutions such as public school and a national language, in order to achieve the cultural unity of its citizens.

Frequently touted as the solution to the “problem” of immigration, intégration³ consists of a set of political discourses and state institutions that ensure the individual incorporation of immigrants, and especially their children into French civil society

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¹ In my translation of Sarkozy’s words, I have conserved the term “bands” (les bandes) in order to preserve a crucial distinction between it and the American term “gangs.” “Bands” (les bandes) is used in France to refer to groups of (usually) young men who may or may not be involved in drug trade, in which membership is informal and unstructured such that these groups are not organized into nameable entities.

² Although Lionel Jospin rescinded the Pasqua laws upon arriving in office as Prime Minister, some of the roadblocks to migration remained, including an increased waiting period for reuniting individuals married to French citizens in France.

³ Intégration is a concept and institutional formation particular to France that should not be confused with the American term “integration.” For this reason, I retain the French term. An abbreviated definition of intégration might be a blend of cultural assimilation (through formal education, language, and intermarriage) and social participation (through employment, citizenship, political representation, and social mobility) (after Tribalat (1995)).
through participation in educational, economic, and political institutions. Traditionally in France, \textit{intégration} occurred through the process whereby individuals of distinct regional, religious, and linguistic backgrounds came to participate in the national community through their participation in French institutions such as school, the workplace, and citizenship. Notably in the 19th century, this process is said to have created culturally French men and women within the culturally and linguistically distinct regions of France and, equally, among religiously distinct communities of Jewish inhabitants. And yet, in recent years, these traditional institutions have purportedly failed under the “threat” of new cultural diversity, and assimilating institutions, such as the Ministry of \textit{Intégration} in 1994, have been inaugurated to successfully manage and incorporate foreign groups and individuals.

Based historically upon a universalist (or Humanist) construction of the French citizen, the French state has addressed questions of diversity (i.e. differing French regional cultures, religious practice, and ethnic identity) largely by inculcating a common language and culture through the federal French school system. While the process of inculcating immigrants and their children with “French values” is thus often framed as operating at the level of the individual and regardless of cultural background, current applications of \textit{intégration} show that certain immigrant groups are singled out for legislation. Initially designed to incorporate individual subjects from France’s many regions into the national community, \textit{intégration} (i.e. schools, training programs, and the state’s program of social aid) has newly been reconfigured to “integrate” whole groups of foreign individuals, for example, through anti-veiling laws (2004, 2010). The shift indicates a change in focus from an archetypal, universal subject-as-citizen to an archetypal étranger (‘foreigner’).

The ethnographic context and data analyzed within this article intersect directly with the above political, legal, and ideological landscapes. The data explored here were collected during the course of a larger ethnographic project on language practices and social identity among adolescents of primarily Algerian descent in Chemin de l’Ile, a neighborhood located west of Paris in Nanterre. Central to France’s industrial boom in the 1950s and 1960s, Nanterre has had a long history with immigration generally and with Algerian immigration in particular. Male Algerian workers, among them several grandfathers of adolescents in this study, were recruited by factories in Nanterre and lived in bidonvilles (‘shantytowns’) located about a mile away from Chemin de l’Ile. This neighborhood is today predominated by clusters of low-income housing projects called les cités, and consequently the neighborhood is itself often referred to as les cités. The label les cités invokes for most French listeners a few infamous low-income housing projects that the media has repeatedly represented as breeding grounds for crime and drugs, often positing immigration as the cause of the former two problems (Bonnafous, 1991).

The intertwined histories of North African migration and public housing have produced new French citizens through shared experiences of community in diaspora as well as through experiences of racial and spatial marginalization. Second- and third- generation descendants of North African immigrants today call themselves that reflects their French and Arab cultural origins, although evidence of it as a literary device exists as early as the 12th century (Lefkowitz, 1991, pp. 50–51). Currently, however, its use is popularly depicted as an emblematic of young people living in cités.

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4 Verlan refers to French slang that is composed by inverting the syllables or sounds of words; indeed, the term verlan derives from \textit{verre}, which means ‘inverted’. Verlan did not originate in cités and is a very old French word game that can be verified as a form of spoken jargon as early as the late 19th century, although evidence of it as a literary device exists as early as the 12th century (Lefkowitz, 1991, pp. 50–51). Currently, however, its use is popularly depicted as emblematic of young people living in cités.

5 In some cases, adolescents spoke Arabic at home. According to my observations in these contexts, girls tended to be more fluent speakers than boys, sometimes seemingly due to a comparatively larger amount of time spent with female relatives in domestic settings.
French citizenship that evokes modern notions of inclusivity. The first example analyzed below looks at an initial bid by a younger girl, Naima (12), to consolidate an alignment with les bleds (‘home countries’) of her peers, which she positions as more modern than so-called “black” (sub-Saharan African) countries. This position is rejected by Brigitte (13), who evokes a non-modern and stigmatized Portugal supposedly replete with gypsies and caravans, including her own cousin who purportedly dresses like a gypsy.

In contrast to Naima’s stance, Brigitte overtly devalues of her own bled Portugal as a non-modern place, and thus contests the idea that modernity is defined by race as Mounia attempts to establish, following dominant discourses. However, Brigitte still covertly reproduces the idea that le bled, often racialized as non-white, is less modern, showing the complexity of teens’ discursive positions. Brigitte, the teenaged girl who figures centrally in both exchanges below was a demographic outlier in the neighborhood because she identified as Portuguese. Brigitte’s mother was born and raised in France and her father had immigrated to France as an adult from Germany; only Brigitte’s maternal grandmother was originally from Portugal. Yet Brigitte’s self-identification as “une portos” (derogatory slang that she used to describe herself as Portuguese) granted her claims to a peripheral, southern bled, particularly useful since her friends were almost without exception of Algerian descent.

On the day that the following excerpt was recorded, five girls ranging from 12 to 15 sat with me in the small playground near their house. With the exception of Brigitte, all girls present were French of Algerian descent, with family mostly originating from the western Algerian town Maghnia, situated between Tlemcen and Oujda. Discussion had turned to politics and Naima, the youngest girl of 12, was making an argument about her preference for Jacques Chirac over other past French leaders, despite the older girls’ insistence that Mitterrand and Jospin were preferable. In her argument below, Naima claims to prefer Chirac due to his supposed commitment to the welfare of “blacks” and “Africa.” In doing so, Naima distinguishes sub-Saharan “countries where there’s not a lot” (of material wealth) from the girls’ “own countries,” that is, “Arab countries” and “Portuguese countries,” where there are “not a lot of problems.” Sarah, an older girl who is also present, accordingly gives a plug for her own bled with the claims that there are especially not a lot of problems in Maghnia, the town from which her mother had immigrated to France.

Naima’s inclusion of “Portuguese countries” involves a clear reference to Brigitte’s background. In response, as soon as Naima completes her statement about Chirac, Brigitte launches into a humorous narrative in stylized voicing about her experiences in Portugal. Her description serves as a counter example to Naima’s claim that in “their countries” there are not a lot of problems, in that it focuses on the supposed preponderance of gypsy caravans and her own cousin’s supposed habit of dressing like a gypsy.

**Example 1: Arab and Portuguese Countries**

Naima

parce que t’sais toujours il va sauver les noirs et tout,

Because you know he [Chirac] always goes to save blacks and everything,

la vérité t’sais bon, nous, dans nos pays les les pays arabes, portugais et tout

the truth you know, us, in our countries the the Arab countries, Portuguese and everything

y a pas ce- beaucoup de problèmes

there are not the- a lot of problems

Sarah

surtout pour euh surtout pour Maghnia [Sarah’s mother is from Maghnia, Algeria]

Especially for uh especially for Maghnia

Naima

mais toujours euh le président il va dans les p-

But always uh the president goes in the c-

en Afrique, chez les noirs

in Africa, where the blacks live

parce que dans les pays où y a pas beaucoup et tout

because in the countries where there isn’t a lot [of material wealth] and everything

il va leur rendre visite, il nous montre à la télê

he goes to visit them, he shows us on the TV

Chantal

ah c’est bien

Oh that’s good

Brigitte

au Portugal comment c’est blindé en gitans

in Portugal it is so chock full of gypsies

partout t’vois de l’herbe, tu vois qu’il y a des caravanes

everywhere you see grass, you see there are caravans

des sales caravanes rouges en plus

those dirty red ones even

Chantal [laughs]

Brigitte

hè j’étais en sang, j’arrive là bas, j’vois ma cousin

hey, I flipped out. I got down there, I see my cousin

elle a un tablier jaune, avec une robe violette et des chausettes rouges

she’s wearing a yellow apron, with a purple dress, and red socks

faut le faire!

Gotta love it! [ironically]

Chantal and Naima laugh
Brigitte’s performance of Portugal enacted her ties to a particular ‘bled’ and thus created a mutual affiliation shared by the other girls’ present with respect to having ties to le bled. However, in the process, Naima’s depiction of North African countries and Portugal as more “modern” than countries in sub-Saharan Africa is rejected by Brigitte. Instead, Brigitte’s dis-alignment with her ‘home country’ serves to create an inclusive and progressive vision of French citizenship that is implicitly critical of Naima’s bid to broker shared, quasi-ethnic ties to le bled among her peers. That is, Brigitte’s rejection of her ‘bled’ as non-modern serves to broker a French citizenship among her peers that is not aligned with ‘home country’ but distinct from it.

The above excerpt demonstrates the complexity of the ways that competing notions of le bled intersect with discourses surrounding modernity, progress, and (under)development, and racialization. This complexity is demonstrated by the contrast between younger Naima’s pro-“bled” argument, indicating her belief that “their countries” are not under-developed like sub-Saharan African countries, and older Brigitte’s humorous performance indicating a contrary perspective, with outrageous claims that all the grass in Portugal is covered with gypsy caravans.

Inasmuch as the two girls’ descriptions of le bled differ so also do their own stances toward themselves and to the racialized identities they construct through their talk. In Naima’s scenario, Arabs and Portuguese are unlike “blacks” from Africa and are similar to the extent that they (she and her French-born peers) are “from” countries without many problems. In this way, Naima positions herself and her peers as more modern and as racially distinct from black Africans who need “saving.” In Brigitte’s formulation, she and other Portuguese are racially marked by affiliation with “gypsies” (Roma), perhaps the most uniformly reviled group in Europe, and their “dirty” red caravans as well as gypsy-like behavior such as her cousin’s loud, coarse style of clothing.

These public and performative identifications and dis-identifications with le bled indicate that markers of the ‘home country’ are seen to be in spatial and symbolic circulation, such that teens may embody le bled in France through ancestry, kinship, and their racialized, gendered selves. Although positive and negative associations with le bled compete in the above exchange, the construction of this symbolic space and attendant behaviors exist in contradistinction to France and the North. For example, Naima constructs le bled as an entity composed of “Arab” and “Portuguese” countries that is distinct from but similar to France, in the position of extending aid rather than receiving it, and “black” or sub-Saharan Africa in the position of receiving it. Whether exhibiting or lacking “development”, both Naima and Brigitte formulate le bled as a pan-southern, peripheral homeland that is available as a resource for a shared cultural citizenship by French teenagers in ethnically mixed and racially stigmatized cités. In these ways, teens of stigmatized immigrant backgrounds actively engage in racializing themselves and their peers by co-creating the circulating signifier of le bled through their bodies, talk, and behaviors within contemporary France.

However, in rejecting the distinction that Naima tries to broker between North Africa and Portugal (in supposed contrast to “black” Africa), Brigitte rejects the racialized hierarchy of ‘home countries’ that Naima proposes. Instead she forwards a shared affiliation to non-modern identities through her depiction of her “bled” as non-modern and her own cousin as similar to a “gypsy” in terms of her style of dress. In this way, Brigitte can be seen as doing two things simultaneously that, while seemingly in conflict, serve to broker her affiliation with her ‘bled’ and with France. On the one hand, Brigitte forwards an image of Portugal (her ‘bled’) as non-modern. On the other, her rejection of the notion that her ‘bled’ is more modern than “black countries” serves as a more inclusive model for shared racialized difference among French citizens than what Naima proposed.

5. Using le bled to reject non-modern identities

In the next example, too close an affiliation with le bled is forwarded as the obstacle to a modern citizenship and fully realized French identity. The excerpt below is a section of a larger collaborative performance in which teens used my microphone to construct personas as a French television journalist who was authorized to ask audience members (their peers) questions. In these mocking exchanges, oblique references to present peers were achieved through posing interview questions that served to single out particular individuals not only through addressee specification but also conversational implicature.

To this end, speakers posed referentially loaded questions to each other, using my microphone and the guise of the public opinion interview to achieve the discursive authority of the French “interviewer.” For example, earlier in this exchange Salim asked a girl Jennifer “What do you think about Thailand?” (“Que pensez-vous de la Thaïlande?”). Although seemingly an innocent question, it served to racialize and sexualize Jennifer, who is, in fact half Cambodian, a fact that Salim later revealed that he knew. By thus obliquely and incorrectly assigning Thailand as her bled (“home country”) to stand in for Jennifer herself, Salim insinuated a sexualized and racialized persona for her linked to the country’s “exotic” reputation for widespread prostitution, a discourse that circulates widely throughout France. In her defense, a nearby female teen responded to Salim by asking aloud “What do you think about Biskra?” (“Que pensez-vous de Biskra?”) in a mocking reference to the poor, provincial desert town that Salim’s family is from in Algeria. In response, and as an apparent means to criticize Salim, Jennifer embedded her opinion in yet another semantically loaded question: “What do you think of the desert, yeah!” (“Que pensez-vous du désert, ouais?”). In so doing, Jennifer reinforced the negative stereotype of the impoverished, non-modern desert town, Biskra, from which Salim’s parents had immigrated.

In the below instance, and in other exchanges that I observed, Salim’s Algerian ‘hometown’, Biskra, served as a nick-name for him. Elsewhere (Tetreault, 2009), I have analyzed naming practices to explore how youth in Chemin de l’Ile use such
practices to both evoke connection and create social distance between themselves and their immigrant parents. In verbal exchanges that I call “parental name calling” (Tetreault, 2009), teens might ironically refer to a peer by his or her parent’s first name or, more frequently, create elaborate linguistic contexts in which to embed a peer’s parent’s first name that involve playful but derisive rhyming, songs, and rapping. In the exchange below, a teenage girl also of Arab descent, nicknamed “Baguette” for her skinny physique, calls Salim “Biskra” as a means to dis-align from le bled and align with my own depiction of French citizenship as inclusive. Whereas Salim’s nickname among his peers conjures up his supposed over-identification with his roots, Baguette’s own nickname not only alludes to her thinness, but also evokes Frenchness.

Example 2

1 Salim (uses “jerky” voice: pompous tone, nasality, and lowered voice)
Que pensez-vous de la France? Que pensez-vous de la France?
What do you think about France? What do you think about France?

2 Chantal (mimics “jerky” voice, nasality, lowered tone, crisp enunciation)
C’est très très bien. J’aime la France. Ils sont-
It’s very very nice. I love France. They are-

3 Baguette (laughingly to Salim, addressing him as “Biskra”)
On aime la France, oui, Biskra.
We love France, yes, Biskra.

4 Bilal  Y’a des racistes!
There are racists!

5 Jennifer  Y’a trop de racistes!
There are too many racists!

6 Salim  C’est interdit de dire ça. C’est pour France 2
It’s forbidden to say that. This [interview] is for France 2

7 Bilal  Y’a trop de coups d’haleine!
There’s too much bad breath!

8 Jennifer  Il y a trop de Pen!
There’s too much [Le] Pen!

9 Chantal  Ils sont très accueillant, les français, surtout les français de Chemin de l’Ile
They are very welcoming, the French, especially the French of Chemin de l’Ile

10 Baguette (smiling, to Chantal)
Ouais

11 Salim  Que pensez-vous de Cerise s’il vous plaît?
What do you think about Cerise, please?
[Cerise is a local association where I conducted research]

12 Chantal  De Cerise?
About Cerise?

13 Bilal  [[Que des gamins. Que des sales arabes.
[[Just kids. Just dirty Arabs.

Chantal  [[C’est très très bien euh. Pffff!
[[It’s very very nice uh. Pffff!
(exhales air out of tight lips, in response to “dirty Arabs” comment)

14 Salim  (to Bilal)
S’il vous plaît, hein? C’est pour France 2, hein?
Please, huh? It’s for France 2, huh?

In example 2 above, the critique of Salim’s attachment to his parents’ hometown Biskra initially serves to construct an inclusive France, with loyalties defined by French citizenship and shared membership to France as opposed to connection to le bled. At the same time, Baguette and Jennifer’s critique of Salim establishes the notion that, in order to “love” France, and by extension, to attain full citizenship status, one must sever ties with le bled, a stance that serves to covertly depict French citizenship as non-inclusive, a move that echoes Rosaldo’s (1994) discussion of cultural citizenship. Adding further complexity to the above exchange, in response to Baguette’s and my depiction of France as tolerant and inclusive, Hamed and Jennifer overtly critique France as racist, illustrated by Hamed’s (who is himself Arab) parodic engagement in racist discourse: “nothing but dirty Arabs.” Thus participants contest the idea that France is as progressive as popular political and media rhetoric would have it, and yet still presupposing an ideal France as racially inclusive.

The above complexity demonstrates that, insofar as personal and social stances (Du Bois and Kärkkäinen, 2009; Jaffe, 2009; Kiesling, 2009; Ochs, 1992) are instantiated by evoking a teen’s bled, they may be adopted to fulfill a variety of

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6 Naming practices have been widely viewed in linguistic anthropology as central to processes of identity formation including the consolidation of social groups (Rymes, 1996).
affiliations and dis-associations. In some cases, the affiliation that is brokered by calling out a peer's \textit{bled} might consist of an insinuation of being “too” traditional or even non-modern. For example, Baguette evokes “Biskra” as both Salim himself (through his nickname) and as his \textit{bled} or ‘hometown’ when she says smilingly and looking directly at Salim: “We love France, yes, Biskra.” (\textit{On aime la France, oui, Biskra.}) Here, Baguette marks her affiliation with my opinion (that the French are welcoming) and in favor of an inclusive France. Furthermore, by directly addressing Salim as “Biskra” (his \textit{bled}) and affirming her own love of France through her use of “we” (\textit{on}), Baguette, who is also of Algerian heritage, seems to cast Salim as overly attached to his “roots” and thus non-modern.

More generally, in this exchange teens are working out how to read and interpret “France”—it is alternately interpreted as a site of inclusion, counterposed against \textit{le bled}, and also characterized itself as non-modern due to “too many racists” and “Le Pen,” the founder of the anti-immigrant political party “The National Front.” Initially, “Biskra” (Salim) is characterized as “backward” for seemingly affiliating with his ‘home country’ more than his ‘real country’, as evidenced by the way that Baguette collapses his personal identity with that of his ‘bled’. Counter arguments are made: France is then posed as non-inclusive at the national level, due to ‘racism’ and ‘le Pen’. I attempt to apply the inclusive model of Frenchness to the local level, by invoking “the (welcoming) French people of Chemin de l’Ile,” meaning the teens with whom I worked. However, the local space in question is reframed as Cerise (the local association where I conducted research), at which point, ageist and racist discourse regarding ‘kids’ and ‘dirty Arabs’ is invoked to reject my depiction of an inclusive France. The important point here, is that ‘home country’ (\textit{bled}) aka “Biskra” is evoked here to reject supposedly anti-modern regionalism and to shore up the image of France as inclusive, a position that gets drowned out when what is invoked at the local level is racism and exclusion.

I often heard claims that Chemin de l’Ile was “full of Arabs” by young Arab people themselves. They would ask me, “Do you like Arabs, Chantal?” When I would answer “yes”, the Arab teens with whom I worked would say laughingly, “Good! Because here there is nothing else, there’s only Arabs!” In local constructions of citizenship and belonging within \textit{les cités}, the rhetoric of an inclusive France often breaks down due to the stigmatizing conditions within housing projects and young cité dwellers’ understandings of economic, social, racial, and spatial injustice on the part of the French system against them. Thus a central issue with respect to constructions of an inclusive or exclusive model of French citizenship is that inclusive models for belonging seem to break down when considered in relation to the local spaces of \textit{les cités}. Similarly, in the next section, I discuss how \textit{le bled} is presented as a space in which to express a “modern” feminine identity in contrast to \textit{les cités}, which are considered to be more “backward.”

6. \textit{Les cités} as spaces of exclusion, impediment to modern female identity

Above, we have seen inclusive French Republican discourse break down in the face of re-voicings of rhetoric that implicate the “French” as racist and local spaces (\textit{les cités}) as the target of racialized exclusion and discrimination. Similarly, in the below example, the stigmatized spaces of \textit{les cités} are posed as an obstacle to a modern, self-realized femininity. Running counter to instances above in which an affiliation with \textit{le bled} is rejected in favor of constructing an expansive and more broadly conceived citizenship and allegiance to France, below \textit{le bled} is proposed as the space that provides Fatima the opportunity for an actualized female sexuality.

In the excerpted narrative below, Samia expressed in a longing tone her excitement about having spent time at the Algerian home of Fatima, an older girl who, like Samia, normally lived in Chemin de l’Ile, a neighborhood of \textit{cités}. As well, Samia praised Fatima’s behavior \textit{au bled} (“in the home country”), indicating her approval of Fatima’s apparently normative feminine behavior there—attending weddings, wearing makeup and form fitting clothing—behaviors that Fatima avoided in her \textit{cité}, due to her wish to foster a tough, masculine-styled identity and to avoid appearing sexualized before her peers. Just prior to this exchange, Samia had criticized Fatima for her masculine style of dress to their two adult male tutors, of Moroccan and Tunisian descent, respectively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 3</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Samia</td>
<td>je suis partie au bled chez elle</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>\textit{I went to her [Fatima’s] house in the ‘home country’ [Algeria]}</td>
<td>tu sais j’ai vu sa maison</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>\textit{you know I saw her house}</td>
<td>et comment son père, il me fait, dukhl-i, dukhl-i</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>\textit{and how her father went to me ‘come in, come in’ [Arabic]}</td>
<td>avec les cheveux lâchés avec une robe moulante</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Chantal</td>
<td>[she had] her hair down with a form-fitting dress</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Samia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>\textit{She was going to a wedding}</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

In contrast to Samia’s previous criticism of Fatima as having a masculine style, this narrative seems to position Fatima as sharing a type of nostalgic traditionalism that is grounded \textit{au bled} (“in the home country”). For example, Samia appreciatively uses quotative speech to reproduce the Arabic words of Fatima’s father (\textit{dukhl-i} or ‘come in’ in line 3) and, in line 6, notes that
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Fatima was dressed up in preparation to attend a wedding, perhaps the most central cultural activity during which North African traditions are practiced and preserved, including henna, traditional Arabic songs, blessings, Qur'an readings, and traditional cuisine.

However, the nostalgic traditionalism that seems to be communicated by Samia’s narrative above clashes with her description of Fatima’s sexualized appearance: hair down with a form-fitting dress (line 4). This narrative is not atypical of others that I heard about teenagers from Chemin de l’Ile who, although they avoided “modern” sexualized Western-styled clothing and wearing their hair down in the cité, felt encouraged and justified to do so ou bled.

In example 3, both Fatima, through her behavior, and Samia, through her narrative, construct le bled as more modern and progressive in terms of gender norms than les cités. In so doing, they contest France (or at least some spaces within it) as necessarily a place of modern values. At the same time, one could argue that la cité is understood as a space that has preserved the “original” values of le bled, such that le bled is constructed as backward at some level. Nonetheless, to the extent that Fatima and Samia both positively imagine le bled as modern, they are engaging in an inclusive ideology of cultural citizenship that values places other than France.

In this and other narratives that I was told during fieldwork, tensions and disagreements often arose about whether le bled should be constructed as a backward place, akin to Levi-Strauss’s understanding of it as non-civilized, or as a forward thinking place with respect to development and gender roles. For example, in an ethnographic interview, Zohra, an woman in her twenties of Algerian descent, explained to me that her own cousins in Algeria were less “traditional” than she and her friends in France; she deemed her Algerian cousins more “modern” because they wore miniskirts and walked around town at night to meet guys whereas Zohra claimed she would never do so in Chemin de l’Ile. Furthermore, she confided, she and her boyfriend, who were both from the neighborhood, would take separate RER trains to Paris to meet for clandestine dates there out of “respect” (le respect) for their families.

In short, Chemin de l’Ile, a neighborhood of eleven thousand people, with its high rise apartments providing birds’ eye views, its single road entrance, and dense migration patterns from mostly two towns in Algeria had created an intense village-like spatial environment with cascading effects for notions of gendered propriety. It was, at times, more village-like than le bled. As Zohra put it, whereas their own families in France had remained ‘stuck’ in the conservative mentalité du bled (or ‘village mindset’), folks in the actual bled had become more “modern” than their French cousins. In these discourses, it is France, and particularly the harsh urban spaces of the cité, that are envisioned as the impediment to a fully realized and modern femininity and not le bled, a pattern also seen in Samia’s narrative about Fatima above.

Thus adolescents’ everyday discourses about le bled are tied not only to diasporic longings for “home” but also comparisons of which place, France or Algeria (or another “home” country), is more likely to require adherence to la mentalité du bled. This expression was often used to describe a backward, old fashioned, or overly traditional practice, for example, with respect to prohibitions against dating or the active practice of early or arranged marriages. Teenagers and young people such as Zohra often adopted a critical stance toward the “bled mentality” as an embedded way to criticize parents or older relatives that they consider to be ringard (‘old fashioned’) and overly prescriptive regarding their behavior. In addition, as in the case of Samia’s narrative, le bled may also be conjured up to criticize or valorize behaviors of peers, such as evoking normative and competing notions of “feminine” styles and behaviors.

7. Conclusion

This article has explored how two broadly circulating discourses exist in tension in France that link French citizenship with modernity and race as well as gender. I have argued that both circulating discourses are reproduced and challenged in teen interactions within Chemin de l’Ile. As noted above, the first discourse conceptualizes le bled as less modern than France, which posits a racially exclusive model of French citizenship because it attempts to establish le bled as a racialized and inferior place. The second discourse involves the conceptualization of France as a modern and racially inclusive place, based upon claims that France incorporates and assimilates people from diverse places.

As my data and analysis show, teens explore, reveal, and contest the tensions between these widely circulating discourses in their everyday talk. In particular, teens take on a variety of stances toward and against le bled and France as they imagine and reimagine shifting relationships among citizenship, modernity, race, and gender. As I explored in examples 1 and 2, teens sometimes create discursive stances to dis-align from le bled as non-modern, under-developed, and racialized. In examples 2 and 3, teens create discursive stances in order to align toward le bled as more modern than French cités. At other moments, however, teens create discourse that allows them to dis-align with France as being purportedly racist and non-modern, as seen in examples 2 and 3.

In these ways, the dichotomy of “modern” and “non-modern” is recursively reproduced through the multiple discourses evoked by le bled in teens’ everyday talk. At times, multiple discourses and contrasting stances toward models for French citizenship, race, and modernity are present within the same person’s talk and in the same interaction. The following analysis of an interview will serve to illustrate this point. In follow up research dealing with state workers as cultural brokers in 2011, I interviewed a consultant from my earlier study, Mina, who had grown up to become a social worker. I asked her whether her identity as a person of Algerian descent influenced the work that she did with her clients, many of whom were from similar backgrounds. Mina answered unequivocally, “no”, her work with her clients had nothing to do with her immigrant origins; she also noted that she worked for the state, not her clients, and that she found it unfortunate that other social
workers sometimes forgot that. In answering thus, Mina established that an over-emphasis on her “origins” (an affiliation with ‘home country’ or *le bled*) would infringe upon her ability to do her job well and to act as a “modern,” impartial citizen and worker for the French state.

A few minutes later, however, I asked about Mina’s younger brother, Bilal. I had heard that he was in prison and was quite surprised since he was a very mild-mannered and shy young man. Mina told me the story: 3 years previously Bilal had, as an eighteen year old, been pulled over driving without a license. He had gone to court and been ordered to do 100 hours of community service work. However, at that time Bilal had also just been hired in his first temporary job and the judge told him that he should complete his community service at a later date so that he could begin working. Two years later with no warning, Bilal received a summons to serve 4 months of prison time for missing community service work. Fulfilling his community service was no longer an option granted by the courts.

His arrest was especially bad timing because Bilal had recently secured a full-time, permanent contract of employment and had also secured a lease to his first apartment, usually very difficult to obtain due to the high demand for housing and landlords’ requirements for financial guarantors that make a certain income. Bilal then also had a girlfriend with whom he was planning to live in the apartment. In sum, Bilal was realizing the French “modern” dream of personal autonomy as a man and a worker. All of it, the lease, job contract, and live-in girlfriend, were suddenly threatened when Bilal was imprisoned for 4 months. Mina, in fact, had begun actively running interference with the employer and landlord so that Bilal could try to resume his life seamlessly after serving his sentence.

In describing this very difficult situation, Mina said to me, “Do you see how they treat us? How they prevent us, the people from *les cités*, from succeeding?” Mina’s discussion of her own and her brother’s relationship to the French state and to realizing a modern citizenship was flipped when put into context of the young man *de la cité* trying to broker a legitimate and modern (productive) identity. Whereas Mina had previously posited a modern citizenship and productive work-life as dependent upon assimilation to a generic “French” identity that subsumed ethnic, cultural, economic, and spatial difference in the service of professional impartiality, here Mina criticized local actors of the state—the police officers, judges, and court officials—as preventing such an identity from being realized by her brother. As a state worker herself who takes enormous pride that she had succeeded in becoming a social worker despite terrible odds, Mina acknowledges that “they” (the “French”, the state) had temporarily prevented her brother from doing the same. When talking about her brother as *de la cité*, Mina’s earlier pro-republicanist and official state discourse broke down to account for the obvious bias of the system. Had Bilal been a white, middle-class kid, perhaps community service work would have been enforced, but imprisonment would likely never have been the outcome. The unresolved tensions that reside at a widely-circulating discursive level between depictions of France as a racially inclusive, modern place and France as an exclusionary, racist, and backward place are played out in everyday, real experiences for young people from *les cités* with a connection to *le bled*.

**References**


