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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Analyzing the Performance of Youth Identities in French Cités

Review by Anton Vogel

Transcultural Teens: Performing Youth Identities in French Cités

by Chantal Tetreault

Wiley-Blackwell, 2015

In *Transnational Teens*, Tetreault's most powerful claim is that in French politics and media "'French' and 'Arab Muslim' are constructed as mutually exclusive" and are in many ways seen as incompatible (p. 2). This is shown in the ways that North African descendant teens communicate and how their discursive practices differ internally and externally in the community of Chemin del l'Ile, a government regulated zone and one of many of *les cités* (state-subsidized housing projects). The main support for this claim is evidence of transculturality that shows how teens do not aim (nor are there avenues available) to construct social identities as exclusively *le français ordinaire* (ordinary French) or community oriented *le bled* (home country), *le respect* (respect), and *la recaille* (street toughs) but are rather forced to critically negotiate group membership and balance acceptance and rejection of traditional cultural norms. Tetreault describes this transculturality as "how French teens of North African descent experience and express migration and diaspora in ways that are related to the experiences of their parents, but that are also innovative, bifurcated, and differential" (p. 4). Through ethnographic research, Tetreault analyzes such points of communication and negotiation as "*self* and *other*, *here* and *there*, *feminine* and *masculine*, *French* and *immigrant*, as well as *teen* and *parent*." Internally, these subjects are ideologically constructed and expressed differently by North African descendant teens from older generations because of conflicting ideas about "home," traditional ideas of how females are expected to interact with men, dress, and use public space, and how a hybrid of *le français ordinaire* and *le respect* is created with "parental name-calling." Externally, these subjects are ideologically constructed and expressed by North African descendant teens from *le français ordinaire*

in how teens negotiate membership to different groups (stigmatized *la racaille* and/or *français ordinaire*) and express “others” through the performative discourse of French social personas and the revoicing of stereotypes about *les cités* and les Arabes (the Arabs). In short, what Tetrault’s analysis shows by presenting this ethnographic data is a vivid picture of how minorities in post-colonial contexts must critically negotiate membership and ownership. And, because it is found that “racialized and stigmatizing narratives that highlight *la racaille* and criminality have come to dominate public French discourse regarding les cites,” strong support for the thesis is found (p. 195).

Transcultural Teens begins by meticulously detailing the spatiotemporal context where the ethnographic data had been collected. The spatial setting, Chemin del l’Ile, is a city slapped with stigmatizing labels such as ZEP (priority education zone), HLM (rent-subsidized apartment complexes), and ZUP (precarious urban zone) that covertly and overtly effect it and other *les cités*. These labels overtly mark *les cités* as low-income immigrant communities in-need of social aid while covertly maintaining stigmatized status of immigrant members within *les cités* and more broadly North African descendant French citizens (as well as reiterating *l’insécurité*, “insecurity,” often mistakenly associated with *les cités*). Within this community, Tetreault collected ethnographic data from students and tutors in the state-supported educational association, Cerise, where she regularly taught and maintained rapport. The data included audio recordings and notes of students’ and tutors’ discursive practices in school, on field-trips, at parks, festivals, and in private one-on-one interviews. Not existing in a vacuum, the temporal reality of Chemin del l’Ile and *les cités* and the many consequences of colonialization and short-sighted labor initiatives are made clear to further develop the research context. These case studies are further framed in social theory. A theoretical context is built with concepts such as imagined communities (Anderson 1991), discursive racism (Van Dijk 2009), transpolitics (Sliverstein 2004), reflexive sociology and theories of capital (Bourdieu et al. 1999), and research on youth practices of social identity creation (Bucholtz 2002).

Each chapter presents a specific subject for analysis. These points begin broadly by analyzing the style of speech in *les cités* and Chemin del l’Ile that are distinct from *le français ordinaire* and how external stereotypes of *les cités* are revoiced internally by youth. However, the analyses quickly become much more specifically relevant to Chemin del l’Ile by focusing on how discourse regarding *le bled*, *le respect*, and *la racaille* and how North African descendant and modern French gender expectations are negotiated and expressed, how parental name-calling shows evidence of hybridity in social identity creation, and how youth performative discourse of French social personas to revoice stereotypes about

les Arabes provides evidence of youth's critical reflection of dominant racism and stigma. Ultimately, each chapter successfully analyzes how youth's perceived membership and ownership of *le bled*, *le respect*, *la racaille*, and *le français ordinaire* is actively and critically negotiated and expressed through discourse.

Overall, the relevance and deep theoretical underpinnings of *Transcultural Teens* offers social researchers robust case studies and strong practical examples of discourse analysis at work. As this review is being written, Donald Trump is gaining social backing for his Republican political standing through anti-Muslim (and anti-immigration) rhetoric in the U.S. while native social problems are being scapegoated to stigmatized minorities, and in France Jean-Marie le Pen's daughter, Marine le Pen, is actively gaining social support for the National Front based on the same short-sighted rhetoric. The discourse that these individuals rely on focuses on a romantic idea of a nation while violently ignoring the reality of the population, a very common pathology of perceived threat which Tetreault often points to (Raijman, Davidov, Schmidt, and Hochman). Because *Transcultural Teens* has been so painstakingly framed in the theoretical field of social research and because the research context has been so well defined, it offers researchers reliable case studies for future comparison especially due to the broad range of subjects covered in the analyses. Furthermore, researchers involved or interested in discourse analysis will find practical examples of its use. Readers will also find the discourse analyses organized, easy to reference, and very well in-line with the field's goals making this text both a reliable reference and practical case study (Van Dijk 2009; Fairclough 1995).

With this said the limitations of any research project must be transparent. Because this text is part of a book series of topic focused case studies, the focus here is potentially more limited than it would be otherwise. Also, in the ethnographic tradition, *Transcultural Teens* pulls case studies from a small sample of the population, youth within Chemin del l'Ile. Although the research sample is transparent and well detailed in the text (as the title remains representative), it does provide a spatial limitation. How the conclusions found in *Transcultural Teens* are representative of other French cities, *les cités*, and similarly stigmatized populations is not memorably highlighted and rather left open. However, because what is presented within these case studies is robust and relevant, a very necessary foundation for future research is provided among a number of the subject points highlighted earlier. Furthermore, although a very strong background is provided, a deeper description of any other relevant policy at the time of data collection could have been provided (if it existed). However, that is not to say that there is a gap in successfully building a spatiotemporal context. Rather, an additional section was likely

impossible to include while a focus on youth in *Chemin del l'Ile* is very successfully accomplished. Lastly, if the reader is looking for a specific case study, they may be initially careful to preview the text to find relevant subjects. Although the range of topics analyzed are extremely relevant, not all researchers may find them immediately useful for their own work as they are cases from very a specific population.

Overall, *Transcultural Teens* is a very relevant book that has been very well developed and organized. Tetreault's well-constructed ethnographic research collection methods and discourse analyses provide not only a very clear picture but further frame this active and increasingly important context in deep social theory.

Anton Vogel holds and MA and BA in foreign language education from Kent State University. Anton is currently an independent researcher and language educator focusing on active and engaged learning methods as well as more critical and socially inclusive systems of education. Anton has also published projects investigating nation-building/maintenance, literacy, discourse, and language policy while currently investigating the importance of family in foreign language education.



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