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   By Chantal Tetreault
TRANSCULTURAL TEENS

Performing Youth Identities in French *Cités*

Chantal Tetreault

WILEY Blackwell
Acknowledgments

This book would not exist without the help of many others, for which I am very grateful.

My thanks first go to the teens, parents, and tutors in Chemin de l’Île who generously let me into their lives and who were so patient with my many questions. Thank you. I hope that I have done justice to your words, stories, and experiences.

My family has been a constant source of emotional, intellectual, and economic support over the many years that I have worked on this project—thank you so much, Elijah, Stuart, Mary Kay, and Marc.

I have been lucky to have many teachers who have believed in this project and in me. My heartfelt thanks go to my advisors, Elizabeth Keating and Joel Sherzer, and to Bob Fernea, Deborah Kapchan, Pauline Turner-Strong, and Keith Walters.

To my editors and series editors at Wiley-Blackwell, Norma Mendoza-Denton and Galey Modan, as well as the anonymous reviewers of the manuscript—I am so fortunate to have worked with you. Your suggestions and generous contributions have very much improved this book.

The list of colleagues who have supported me throughout this process is long. Thank you for help in conceptualizing, writing, and revising this work: Azouz Begag, Brahim Chakrani, Elaine Chun, Susan Frekko, Pilar Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, Erika Hoffmann-Dilloway, Tony Jackson, Michèle Koven, Elizabeth R. Miller, Mindy Morgan, Valentina Pagliai, Jennifer Reynolds, Paul Silverstein, Gregg Starrett, and the Working Group on Gender and Childhood at the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis.

I also owe thanks to the various institutions and entities that have funded my research and writing: the Chateaubriand Fellowship Program, Michigan
State University, Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and the University of Texas at Austin.

To my dear friends who sustained me over many years intellectually, emotionally, and, perhaps most important, gastronomically, I send my love and gratitude: Vânia Cardoso, Scott Head, Liz Lilliott, Dana Maya, Erica Windler, and Elana Zilberg.

Thank you! I could not have done this without you!

The author gratefully acknowledges that permission was granted to include portions of the following journal articles:


INTRODUCTION:
PERFORMING TRANSCULTURAL YOUTH IDENTITIES

Miriam¹: Hashak!
Mohammad: Star Trek!
Miriam: Double-échec!
(Mohammad: epic failure, literally “double failure”)
Mohammad: Bifteck!
(Miriam: steak)
Miriam: Toulouse-Lautrec!

(Miriam, a female teenager, and her 20-something male tutor, Mohammad, break into laughter.)

In the preceding exchange, Miriam and Mohammad, both young French citizens of North African descent, play a word game that is always initiated with the word hashak,² an Arabic politeness formula. Normally used to create deference in North African Arabic, here the term is used to initiate a stream of spontaneously uttered non-sequiturs, ranging from “steak” (bifteck) to the Post-Impressionist French artist Toulouse-Lautrec. Participants play by pairing the word’s Arabic phonology with terms that share the same distinctive sound which is quite rare in French: an ending that sounds to American ears like “ek.” By stringing together odd-sounding terms to rhyme with hashak, opponents create a fun, bizarre-sounding blitz of nonsense; the person uttering the last word ending in “ek” wins the round. The fun of the game lies in its absurdity, in the incongruity of multiple cultural and linguistic references from North Africa, France, and the United States.

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Other than the rhyming endings, what do the American TV show Star Trek, the French Post-Impressionist painter Toulouse-Lautrec, and the Arabic politeness formula hashak have in common? They are all points of reference that are meaningful to these speakers, who share the cultural attachments that they represent. As with the other participants in my study, Miriam and Mohammad share a connection to North African culture and language, especially the rituals of politeness such as hashak that are so important in diaspora. Within Chemin de l’Ile, the largely North African community located 15 kilometers west of Paris where I conducted my research, young people might not actually speak Arabic, but will know the formulaic language of greetings, well-wishing, and politeness, including the usage of hashak. Furthermore, participants in the study were French-born and attending middle school, and thus not only fluent in the French language but also la culture générale—general European culture that encompasses the Post-Impressionist artist Toulouse-Lautrec. In addition, they are young and intimately familiar with American popular culture, including Star Trek, because they watch TV and movies imported from les states, as they call it.

The hashak word game is thus a transcultural moment that demonstrates the multiple connections shared between these participants—they are young, French, and of North African Arab heritage—connections they establish by voicing these incongruous but shared cultural references and by the humor resulting from their juxtaposition. The meaning of the hashak word game is thus found between—between individuals from similar backgrounds sharing an inside joke through word play; between two transculturally situated speakers for whom this seemingly incongruous talk makes perfect sense; and between the gaps created by the cultural and linguistic referents uttered.

Yet, simultaneously occupying these identities—young, French, and Arab of North African descent—is not all fun and games. In addition to their knowledge of la culture générale, French teens of North African background have an intimate understanding of the negative and widely circulating stereotypical discourses regarding them. Within mainstream French politics and media, “French” and “Arab Muslim” are often constructed as mutually exclusive, even incompatible categories. As children of predominantly Algerian Muslim immigrants living in state-subsidized, low-income housing projects called les cités, these adolescents occupy multiple stigmatized positions in relation to dominant French national discourses and cultural ideologies.

To address these issues, I analyze forms of discourse and everyday language practices to examine how Arab French cité teens translate these experiences into communicative displays of social agency. The adolescents who participated in this study were generally located between what the French call second and third generations, in that they tended to have one parent of
North African descent who had grown up in France and another who had migrated as an adult from North Africa, usually Algeria. Because of their varied competence in Arabic—there were very few Kabyle (Algerian Berber or Amazigh) speakers in the neighborhood—adolescents tended to speak French with one another while incorporating Arabic loan words. In their everyday speech, these adolescents used non-standard French grammar and the pronunciation and prosody typical of the working class, or as Gadet (1996) calls it, *le français ordinaire* (“ordinary French”). Rather than code-switching into Arabic, innovative language practices such as the hashak game constitute a primary means for Arab–French teens in Chemin de l’Ile to express their transcultural affiliations.

In general, language practices provide a discerning tool for studying processes of identity construction and their enactment in everyday interactions. In this regard, naming (assigning group names) is one way that language is central to the construction of social difference and identities, both self-ascribed and other-ascribed. Shifting name ascription regarding the North African immigrant community in France is a prime example of both the centrality of language to identity construction and the dynamic relationship between dominant French discourses and discursive practices within North African communities.

During the oil crisis of the 1970s, French media and politicians conducted highly negative coverage of North African immigrants in which the word *arabe* (“Arab”) was repeatedly associated with the growing problem of unemployment in France. Then, in 1983, *le mouvement beur* (“beur movement”) was launched by a protest march across France that began 100,000 strong in Paris, to redress police violence against North Africans and to decry a host of economic and political injustices including job and housing discrimination. Similar to the socially consequential wordplay discussed at the beginning of this chapter, activists’ strategic use of the term *beur* in this political movement demonstrated their attempt to redefine their status in France, not only economically and politically, but also socially and symbolically. Forgoing the stigmatized term *arabe*, activists used the popular vernacular term *beur* to indicate that they were the grown children of North Africans, derived from the French word game *verlan* that inverts syllables or phonemes of words.4

However, in the 1990s, the word *beur* became widely used in mainstream media and political discourse, and often in a stigmatizing way. French people of North African descent once again renamed themselves by performing *verlan* on the word *beur* another time—called *double-verlan*—thus creating the word *rebeu*. This term was preferred among adult informants in this study, most likely because it was both agentive and non-stigmatizing. The
centrality of naming to the process of identity construction and the ways that names take on different meanings in different contexts show the importance of studying these issues through everyday language practices. The case of North African communities in France repeatedly renaming themselves in response and resistance to popular stereotypes demonstrates the dynamic relationship between dominant representations of stigmatized groups and their own collective performances of identity through self-naming, among other practices.

I analyze such creative verbal play and naming strategies along with other emergent language practices of French teenagers of North African descent through a theoretical lens that I call transculturality. Here, “transculturality” refers to 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. Teens’ discursive performances of identity thus hinge upon brokering cultural difference as well as continuity. In this way, Arab French teens’ transcultural experiences are forged in practices that evidence movement and connection between multiple social norms, cultural systems, and linguistic forms. The social and spatial identifications of Arab French youth in les cités are articulated and negotiated across sets of shifting relationships, including self and other, here and there, feminine and masculine, French and immigrant, as well as teen and parent. The experiences of these teens are thus characterized by the negotiation of multiple social identities that are, by turns, disparate, overlapping, and conflicting.

In the chapters to come, I explore these issues through a variety of types of discourse, including that which widely circulates and which involves intimate peer interactions. I pay particular attention to points where these two types of discourse intersect, for the ways that they evidence how everyday performances of social identity are imbued with and sometimes transform large-scale discursive forms. In addition to providing historical and ethnographic background, Chapter 1 analyzes particular patterns and effects of spatial stigmatization in France in order to contextualize teens’ performances and politics of identity within the context of les cités. The centrality of cités to the history of North African immigration and the marginalization of these spaces have contributed to the formation of new communicative styles, including language, dress, and music. Chapter 2 takes a close look at such “cité styles” through analysis of various practices that encompass their cultural and linguistic production in Chemin de l’Ile and other cités across France.

Along with spatial identifications and dis-identifications, racialized and gendered categories constitute a central resource for the creative production
of teenaged identities in Chemin de l’Ile. Chapter 3 considers the ways that adolescents reproduce and subvert dominant French discourses about Arab Muslims by rearticulating and challenging stereotypes in peer interactions. The linguistic and cultural resources by which these teens perform their youth are saturated with larger, hegemonic discourses that they alternately reject, reproduce, and transform. I argue that, through such practices, teens construct and express their emergent identities as simultaneously Arab Muslims and as French citizens.

The relationships that I articulate in this book between processes of stigmatization and identification with respect to gender, “race,” space, and socioeconomic class are symbolically distilled in the image of la racaille (literally, “trash,” or figuratively, “male street toughs”). Chapter 4 analyzes how dominant French discourses that stigmatize la racaille are transformed and re-circulated in adolescent girls’ narratives. Further developing the relationships articulated here between gender and space, Chapter 5 examines girls’ use of “masculine” verbal styles and social behaviors associated with their cité, as a way to identify with the local neighborhood and as an alternative way to gain a positive reputation among their peers. I argue that such gendered style shifting constitutes one way that adolescent girls of Algerian descent perform their transcultural identities as French teenagers living in cités and as Arab Muslims attempting to fulfill the cultural requirements of le respect (“respect”) in their community.

Both teenaged boys and girls in Chemin de l’Ile negotiate transcultural attachments through the verbal performances that I describe in Chapter 6. Adolescents transform a traditional North African Arabic name taboo into the irreverent, peer-based verbal practice “parental name-calling.” I argue that parental name-calling constitutes a particularly important discursive genre for adolescents to articulate cultural ties to both their parents’ North African origins and their own emergent French adolescent subculture. In these performances, personal names and other information about parents and kin are used to evoke these absent persons as foils for the adolescent self, in talk that conflates the voices of parents and children, as well as immigrants and French-born citizens.

Just as adolescents reinterpret North African language practices by subverting a name taboo in Chapter 6, they also reinvent French discursive practices, as I show in Chapter 7. Teens re-imagine French social personas, such as TV hosts, in order to playfully mock their peers in public performances. By adopting the voices of these socially recognizable “Others,” adolescents momentarily de-stabilize recognizable identity categories and thereby create a transcultural discourse in order to negotiate moral and social orders for their peer groups.
The multiple relationships that are evidenced here between widely circulating French and North African discourses and local performances of social identities form the core subject of this book. The ethnographic and linguistic research that I explore here demonstrates the interplay among transnational migration, cultural changes in French cités, and subcultural youth styles. Teens’ communicative practices, including recycling dominant stereotypes, strategic self-naming using verlan, and repurposing the Arabic politeness formula hashak for wordplay, are all evidence of the multiple ways that young people in Chemin de l’Ile are creating continuity and cultural change in their everyday interactions.

Notes

1 All personal names that appear in the book are pseudonyms.
2 In general, I follow Kapchan’s (1996) system for the transliteration of Moroccan Arabic, which is highly similar to the Arabic spoken in Chemin d’Ile. For example, I transiterate short Arabic vowels as a schwa (ə), as Kapchan does. However, my system of transliteration is influenced by the following factors. In cases in which the Arabic word is a common loan word in French and used widely among monolingual French speakers, I tend to use the conventional French spelling, as in, for example, "wallah" (“by God” or “I swear to it”). In cases in which the Arabic word is a common loan word among American English speakers, I tend to use the conventional English spelling, as in “sheikh.” Finally, my transliteration of teens’ use of Arabic words is also influenced by their pronunciation of them, which was highly influenced by French phonology. Many teens in the study were not fluent in Arabic and their pronunciation of Arabic loan words reflects this.
3 Throughout this book, I alternate among teens, adolescents, and, less frequently, youth. In doing so, I recognize adolescence as a life stage and youth as an analytic category, after Bucholtz’s distinction (2002; but see also Amit-Talai 1995: 223–225; Durham 2000). Both notions, adolescence and youth, are important to my research, in that I analyze communicative practices among my consultants as both integral to how they experience adolescence as a life stage in ways typical of other teens and, simultaneously, to how they produce youthful cultural forms contingent upon their positioning as Arab French youth living in a cité.
4 The term verlan is derived from the French word l’envers (“reverse”) by “reversing” the syllables. Verlan is a word game that predates the beur movement and comprises part of “traditional slang” in France (Goudaillier 1997: 18). Many verlan terms are now conventionalized elements of mainstream French, such as meuf, the inverted form of the word femme (“woman”). 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 nineteenth century, although evidence of it as a literary device exists as early as the twelfth century (Lefkowitz 1991: 50–51). Nonetheless, the use of verlan lends a casual, youthful tone to conversation, and has become emblematic of cités in France, and specifically in the Parisian region (ibid: 18).

5 See also Bucholtz (2002: 543) on transcultural youth practices, and Pratt (2008/1992: 7) for a discussion of transculturation as the process whereby subordinated peoples reinvent cultural forms transmitted by a dominant, colonizing culture.

6 By placing the word “race” in quote marks, I follow Gilroy (1991) in thereby indicating that the concept fails to encompass a viable biological model for humans. Rather, as Gilroy asserts, “race” is “socially and politically constructed and elaborate ideological work is done to secure and maintain the different forms of ‘racialization’ which have characterized capitalist development” (ibid: 38).
Stigmatizing Labels: ZEP, HLM, and Cité

My arrival in October 1998 to Chemin de l’Ile occurred just after a decisive communal and political event: the successful strike to retain the neighborhood’s status as a ZEP or zone d’éducation prioritaire (“priority education zone”). Created in 1981 by Minister of Education Alain Savary, the ZEP designation ensured that local schools would be granted additional resources such as higher teacher salaries and smaller class sizes. The strike had mobilized a variety of populations in the neighborhood, all of whom had different interests in whether the neighborhood continued to be classified as such.¹

Teachers at the local middle and grade schools had mobilized in order to keep their salaries at a higher rate as well as to secure the lower student-to-teacher ratio that the ZEP classification guaranteed. Educateurs—French civil servants who combine social work with education—participated because of the higher municipal funding granted to areas designated as ZEPs, ensuring their continued employment at local associations working on a variety of issues such as school retention and anti-criminality among adolescents.² Students were encouraged by their teachers and educators to participate in a march, and local schools posted pro-ZEP slogans. School itself was cancelled for several days in order to persuade local legislators to

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retain the ZEP status and, even though some parents grumbled that students would be behind for the year, many participated in the march as well.

A few days after the strike had ended, I arrived at Cerise (or “Cherry”), the association where I volunteered as an English tutor for middle-school students, only to find that all the educators were off making visits to parents’ houses, and that the children were still in school. I decided to walk the neighborhood to look for remnants of the strike and to get a better sense of the place where I would conduct an initial 18 months of fieldwork, with subsequent visits over the next dozen years. My self-led tour revealed a jumble of buildings, the vast majority of which consisted of various forms of rent-subsidized housing. On the perimeter of the neighborhood were mostly run-down single-family homes or pavillons; farther in were several early-model HLM or habitation à loyer modéré, rent-subsidized apartment complexes standing four stories and built in the early 1970s. Finally, in the core of the neighborhood stood nine buildings built in the 1980s that towered over the rest of the area, over 10 stories high, that included seven cités (state subsidized high-rise apartment complexes) and two foyers d’immigrés or all-male immigrant workers’ apartments, also state-supported.

On my walking tour, I retraced the route of the ZEP protest march, down the now mostly deserted main boulevard. In the local middle school (collège), slogans were painted in the windows, such as Gardons la ZEP! (“Keep the ZEP!”). Graffiti, usually rare in the neighborhood, also commemorated the success of the strike with spray-painted catchphrases on the train station wall: On a gagné! or “We won!” As I walked around the gray and desolate assembly of largely concrete, state-subsidized buildings, I began to wonder seriously about the complicated mix of “winning” and “losing” that such “priority” status would entail for a community such as Chemin de l’Ile. As a newcomer to the neighborhood just before the aforementioned strike, I was surprised at the readiness and enthusiasm that many people displayed in attempting to retain the ZEP classification.

Today, densely populated neighborhoods with a high proportion of such housing that are located outside of major towns are called les cités. In American English, “suburban” has the connotation of a safe, dull, middle-class lifestyle. In France, however, les banlieues or “suburbs” tends to connote economically poor, socially marginalized, and racially stigmatized spaces, consisting often of government-subsidized housing projects called les cités. Moreover, whereas bidonvilles (shantytowns), cités de transit (temporary housing), and early HLMs have historically been located near manufacturing and mining industries—that is, near jobs—France’s current post-industrial economy has left most cités isolated and far from both employers and mass transit.
Often erected in the same or a nearby location as early bidonvilles, les cités are stigmatized, suburban spaces that provide a rich and timely ethnographic site because they reside, culturally and representationally, at the intersection of a number of related and contested French social issues: state-sponsored housing, immigration, emergent ethnic identities, changing gender norms, and youth subcultures. The history of how cités arose in France demonstrates the legacy of exclusion and racism that immigrants and their children still face today.

The strike to maintain ZEP status in Chemin de l’Ile illustrates a complex picture of the ways that cités figure in larger representational, social, and political landscapes of France. Despite their support for the strike, adolescents I worked with often expressed anxiety about the negative reputation of the neighborhood. They feared that using their home address would lessen their chances of getting jobs or internships. Several high school students mentioned that they planned to use a non-local relative’s address on their resume in order to avoid spatial stereotyping. At the time, Chemin de l’Ile hardly deserved the negative reputation, as it was relatively calm; in the late 1990s and early 2000s, it had one of the lowest crime rates in Nanterre, the town in which Chemin de l’Ile is located. Yet, the neighborhood had experienced a very turbulent past, including heroin dealing and the incineration by local inhabitants of a police station built at the bottom of a residential complex.

By using their relatives’ home addresses and in other ways, the young people at the center of this study, predominantly of Algerian parentage, demonstrate their sophisticated understanding of how labels such as “ZEP” or “les cités” contribute to negative stereotypes about the spaces and styles of Chemin de l’Ile and other similar low-income, suburban neighborhoods. Unlike their immigrant parents and grandparents for whom cités provided relatively affordable and safe living conditions after often dreadful experiences in shantytowns, successive French generations of suburban inhabitants have faced the overwhelmingly negative effects of growing up there. Adding spatial prejudice to racial prejudice, the young people in this study encounter stigma that marks “who they are” as Arab youth, and also “where they are from” as jeunes de la cité (“cité youth”).

The immigrant parents and grandparents of these young people have also clearly experienced discrimination in France. However, racism and discrimination may have played less of a role in their parents’ and grandparents’ experience of work in France because they (the men at least) were recruited specifically for manual labor after World War II, and so their immigrant status was closely related to their function as workers to rebuild France. In contrast, due to the economic crash in the 1970s and their improved access
to education, children of North African immigrants have been both less able and less willing to find the low-paying, manual labor jobs that their parents came to France to obtain. At the same time, high rates of scholastic failure, a poor economy, and racist hiring practices often impede these French citizens from attaining economic security.

Along with other official designations, such as zone urbaine précaire or ZUP (precarious urban zone), habitation à loyer modéré or HLM (moderated rent housing), and les cités (high-rise subsidized housing), zones d’éducation prioritaire (ZEPs) have been stigmatized in the French media since the early 1980s. Much as the terms ZEP, ZUP, and HLM constitute official categories with which to describe (and attempt to redress) the social and economic marginality experienced in such areas, they may also serve to stigmatize them. Economically, these spaces have become increasingly marginal in relation to manufacturing jobs, as France has largely shifted away from an industrial economy. Representationally, low-income suburban neighborhoods have been repeatedly associated with negative journalistic topics such as crime, immigration, drugs, and scholastic failure. In a finding in line with the problem of stigma inherent to such categories, an official French census study conducted from 1981 to 1992 by the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies or INSEE (Bénabou et al. 2005) found no significant benefit of the ZEP designation to the students themselves. Teachers benefitted from higher salaries in these areas, whereas student performances and schools failed to improve, in part due to decreased enrollment in the face of parental fears regarding the designation.

In another pattern that illustrates the social force of stigma, Gross, McMurray, and Swedenburg (1994) describe representations of nocturnal rodéos during the early 1980s as a powerfully negative way that HLMs were depicted in the French press. These urban battles with the police involved young men stealing cars and racing them, only to later set them on fire so that any evidence would be destroyed. The so-called rodéos were highly publicized in the French press, giving HLMs a reputation for lawlessness and violence. In the 1990s, both right-wing and left-wing newspapers such as Libération and Le Figaro focused on la banlieue chaude (“the hot suburb”), a category that conflated negative stereotypes by repeatedly linking civil disturbances and violence with North African migration in general and disaffected Algerian youth in particular, in conjunction with representations of crime, scholastic failure, and drug addiction (Tetreault 1992).6

Most recently, the civil uprisings in low-income suburban areas across France in 2005 and 2010, both of which began following civilian deaths after police intervention, have been characterized in political rhetoric and media coverage as the fault of la racaille, a racialized, violent image of cité
street toughs (Silverstein and Tetreault 2006). While the left-wing has tended to depict this population as social victims, the French political right-wing has blamed *cité* dwellers for a purported rise in crime and *l’insécurité* (“insecurity”), a term that emerged in post-9/11 French politics, often serving as a code word for “terrorism” and forming the basis for the newest version of anti-immigrant sentiment. Thus, for close to 40 years, low-income suburban areas and their inhabitants have been stigmatized by shifting labels that belie an insidious semiotic stability in French media representations and political rhetoric.

In Chemin de l’Île, adolescents were aware that the successful strike to retain ZEP classification would function in part to keep many such stereotypes about them and their neighborhood intact. “Winning” ZEP status (or, in this case, maintaining it) meant that the stigma of need and poverty would be officially recognized, but only partially rectified, since unemployment for young people within the neighborhood would likely remain at roughly 20%, or almost twice the national average. And a large number of the immigrant and working-class parents in the neighborhood would likely remain poor and possibly illiterate—both negative predictors of their children’s success in school.

As I will explore further in Chapter 2, adolescents’ awareness of the neighborhood’s stigmatized status coincided with their understanding of it as an “Arab” space—that is, a space predominated by inhabitants of North African background. As such, Chemin de l’Île offered a density of community, extended kinship, and social networks that often afforded teens a strong sense of belonging and “home.” At the same time, adolescents were aware of popular negative representations of *cités* as “Arab” spaces, and recycled such stereotypes in everyday conversation—for example, by mentioning to me frequently that there were “lots of Arabs” in Chemin de l’Île.

Although increasing numbers of North African immigrants have stayed in France and produced children who are considered French by nationality, the categories “French” and “Arab” are still too often counterposed as mutually exclusive. As French journalist Sylvain Cypel noted in 2014, in France, a “diffuse populism is stirring … [with] a nostalgic mindset that everything ‘was better before’ … [and] a palpable conviction that everything bad comes from the outside: Brussels, globalization, immigration” (*The New York Times*, January 23). Cypel goes on to cite the 2013 desecration of Muslim French soldiers’ tombstones in Carpentras as evidence for the ways that, in France, “racism and xenophobia” are often expressed as “anti-Arab, anti-Muslim, or anti-black.” In this case, symbolic violence against deceased French soldiers casts them as “Muslims” only, rather than simultaneously as national French heroes who lost their lives for their country, and is thus
indicative of the pervasive tendency to treat “French” and “Muslim–Arab” as incompatible or non-overlapping categories.

Moreover, popular anti-immigrant discourses that specifically target North Africans essentialize “French” and “Arab” “cultures” as embodying traits that purportedly exist outside of historical context. Justin E. H. Smith, in a 2014 op–ed piece in *The New York Times*, takes issue with popular French philosopher Alain Finkielkraut and argues instead for a historicized understanding of diversity and multiculturalism in France:

… his recent popular book “L’identité malheureuse” (“The Unhappy Identity”), proclaims, in effect, that immigration is destroying French cultural identity. He bemoans the “métissage” of France, a term one often sees in the slogans of the far right, which translates roughly as “mongrelization.” […] Immigration in Europe, as in, say, the Southwestern United States or within the former Soviet Union, is determined by deep historical links and patterns of circulation between the immigrants’ countries of origin—in France’s case, particularly North Africa and sub-Saharan Françafrique—and the places of destination. (*The New York Times*, January 5)

Popular anti-immigrant discourses as that of Finkielkraut serve to erase the fact that French and North African cultures have been irrevocably mixed and relationally defined for centuries, due to French colonization of the Maghreb and its attendant historical, political, and cultural proximity to France. Along these lines, Etienne Balibar (1991) has argued that the commonly voiced essentialist position that “French” and “Arab” cultures are too different to be successfully compatible represents a “neo-racism” that substitutes “culture” for “race.” Low-income suburban neighborhoods such as Chemin de l’Ile are at the frontlines of these struggles over spatial and symbolic territory, both within the French popular imagination and within cités themselves, as I show in my following description of the conflict that arose at the ZEP strike celebration.

**After-Party—Spatialized Conflicts within the Cité**

While representational and political struggles over who is to be included within the imagined “French” national community (Anderson 1991) are often waged in popular media with respect to neighborhoods such as Chemin de l’Ile, similar struggles arise within the cités themselves in people’s everyday discourse (Essed 1991; VanDijk 1987). Some of these conflicts emerge, for example, as “culture wars” over the linguistic, musical, and dress