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### Gender and Emotional Investment in Language Learning during Study Abroad\*<sup>1</sup>

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#### *Introduction*

Alone among the gender-related “facts about study abroad” to be found on the website of the Study Abroad Research Group (<http://studyabroadresearch.org/>) is the following cryptic statement: “Sexist and other gender-related behavior may influence learning.” The authors of the webpage cite Polanyi’s (1995) narrative study of language learner journals, a study complementing the findings of a larger research project in which gender was determined to be a major factor predicting gain scores on the Oral Proficiency Interview by American sojourners in Russia (Brecht et.al. 1995) . Polanyi’s analysis of learners’ stories revealed that American women perceived many of their encounters with Russians as sexist in nature or as constituting harassment, and that their access to language learning opportunities was correspondingly limited. Since 1995, additional studies in other contexts have continued to highlight perceptions of sexism by American learners, especially women, in study abroad contexts.

The goal of the current paper is to propose a relatively nuanced account of the role of gendered activity as it shapes emotional investment in language learning during study abroad. Contemporary work on the ideology and performance of gender is inspired by poststructuralist accounts of identity and by emphasis on the local and socio-historically situated nature of language learning activity (Norton, 2000; Pavlenko 2001; 2002). This work suggests the need for a more subtle account of these phenomena than the emphasis on sexism or harassment in the study abroad literature would allow. It has been established that American women often recount experiences of sexism in the study abroad context. However, when these learners encounter gender-related differences, it is not just a matter of local interactional norms which may or may not sanction the activities known in the U.S. as “sexual harassment”, it is also a matter of

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how broader and historically-situated ideologies of gender are instantiated in the U.S. and in the study abroad context.

Furthermore, it is important to analyze how these ideologies are incorporated into the identity narratives of learners and used to stimulate or to repress desire for the language and its associated people and practices (Cameron & Kulick, 2003).

In using the term “emotional investment” we wish to draw attention to the distinctive situation of the American foreign language learner. The participants in our study are mostly speakers of a powerful “world language” from a country where foreign language learning has traditionally been framed as an optional add-on to an elite education (Judd, 1992). Post 9/11 initiatives to focus more resources on foreign language learning have tended to target the “languages of the enemy” (Pavlenko, 2003), a category that (usually) does not include the French language. Practical need for competence in French, or a concrete return on investment in learning it, are therefore difficult to predict: the participants in the study, like many other American foreign language learners, will probably not rely on their French language skills for their livelihoods or survival. Thus it would appear that the replacement of positivistic construct of “motivation” by that of “investment,” as proposed by Norton (2000) to represent the situation of immigrant learners of ESL, may represent only a partial fit in the case of these learners. Rather, it seems possible that motives for foreign language learning are closely connected to the emotional lives of learners, including the gender, national or class-related identities to which they aspire or which they reject. The performance of motives for French language learning in narrative may constitute a creative act in which learners artfully assemble and display rationales and desires derived from the surrounding discursive environment.

In previous research, Kinginger has examined two cases of exceptional French language learning, both pointing to a similar interpretation. Alice (Kinginger, 2004a), a young working-class woman from a migrant family in the Southeastern United States, initially associated the learning of French with higher class values and experiences, as reflected in the American media and textbook industry’s portrayal of France as a place where consumption of rarified, elite products takes place in an ambiance of cultured gentility. Her drive to learn was also fueled by personal aspirations, however: to overcome fatalism and self-deprecation; to turn her past experiences of impermanence and transience on their head and make of them a virtue. After a struggle to enter a university-sponsored study abroad program, Alice was confronted with the reality of daily life in France as an American woman whose only option for practice in speaking French was “to let old, drunk French men buy her drinks.” Alice suffered a severe bout of depression before reworking her motives in better concert with her new surroundings, fighting for access to conversations in French, and ultimately gaining the ability to appreciate and to participate in acts of socio-political critique.

The case of the French-English bilingual writer Nancy Huston (Kinginger, 2004b) also offers an illustration of the ways in which foreign language learning offers an attractive potential for the performance of new and different emotional selves. Although she grew up in Western Canada, Huston is now a celebrated French-language writer, with over 25 major works to her credit. In her autobiographical works, Huston repeatedly praised her second language not only for its civilizing influence upon her subjectivity, but also for the feeling of unlimited exoticism she derives from self-expression in French, and the access to literary creativity she derived from this medium.

Huston claims to have used French as an escape route from the boredom of her childhood, a drab world of Anglo-Saxon propriety set on a backdrop of rugged Western pursuits involving rodeos and cheap beer, from which she was buoyed away by French – and the French feminist movement – into an adulthood of refinement, autonomy, self-esteem and creative satisfaction.

Both Alice and Huston, each in their own way, present cases of exceptional foreign language learning: Alice for the odds she overcame and the sheer ferocity of her determination to learn French, and Huston for the significance of her achievement in turning herself into a successful French language writer. In the current study, we turn our attention to three stories of language learning that are perhaps less extraordinary, but still compelling, perhaps in part because of their very ordinariness. Specifically, we examine the negotiation of gender-related identities by American students in France, two female and one male (Spring 2003), as revealed in narratives of learning history. Our primary interest is in the influence of gendered activity on emotional investment in and outcomes of language learning. From activity theory, we borrow the notion that motives for engagement in language learning are dynamic, grounded in particular features of personal history, and subject to modification through access to new sociocultural resources, including images of gendered identities (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2000). From poststructuralist SLA, we take the view that identity is a site of struggle as learners attempt to map images of self onto the resources for self-expression made available to them as study abroad participants (Pavlenko, 2001; 2002).

We are further inspired by an emerging tendency to value studies which attempt to document language development while also maintaining a focus on life history. Block (2002: 138), for example, urges researchers to “start taking seriously research in which there is an attempt to reconstruct detailed life stories of learners hand-in-hand with an interest in linguistic development over time.” Thus, in addition to analysis of the narrative data, we offer, in a supporting role (Ratner, 1997) quantitative data on development of language awareness in the form of test results: a standardized test of reading, listening, and grammatical awareness (the Test de Français International) and a Language Awareness interview designed to assess knowledge of social-situational variability in French.

### *Gender and Language Learning in Study Abroad*

The study abroad context is viewed by many US foreign language professionals as the quintessential learning experience, where students have unlimited access to the kinds of activity that promote development of communicative competence. Confidence in the study abroad experience is such that one university recently abolished its home curriculum in foreign languages in favor of systematic sojourns abroad for students (Schneider, 2001). However, systematic research has yet to demonstrate universal effectiveness of study abroad for language learning. Rather, findings of empirical studies point to the significance of individual differences in a variety of contexts and learning situations (e.g., Huebner, 1995; Freed, 1995; Marriott, 1995) or suggest that language development in study abroad may be less dramatic than anticipated (Hoffman-Hicks (2001).

Attempts to understand the qualities of the study abroad experience have thus come to complement studies emphasizing its demonstrable impact on language

competence. Wilkinson (1998), for example, designed an ethnographic study to investigate what kinds of interactions influenced learning of French in France. In interpreting her results, she stresses the complexity of the setting:

[...] the immersion context, far from the protective environment of a language lab, is a complex, multidimensional setting where verbal communication holds significant, yet often invisible, cultural and social meanings, in addition to the literal denotations which students are already trained in the classroom to recognize. (p. 132)

Analysis of the study abroad setting, according to Wilkinson, must take into account both the types of contact the students develop and their reactions to and perceptions of these contacts. Given the ubiquity of gender and gendered identities in the shaping of social relations, it follows that, within the literature on study abroad, gender often emerges as a defining characteristic of the experience.

The Polanyi study noted above (1995) presented narrative data contrasting the experience of men and women as recounted in learning journals of study abroad in Moscow. Stories of men's experience often highlighted situations in which the participants were framed as competent participants in communicative settings well before they were actually able to participate, or situations in which their needs were anticipated and met without need of discussion. The women, on the other hand, were rarely set up to participate actively in social interaction and recount stories of recurrent and unwanted interactions with Russian men which were sexually charged.

Two studies have focused on the effects of public displays of behavior perceived as sexist. A study by Twombly (1995) examined the experience of young American women studying in Costa Rica. Her findings suggest that these women were initially quite perturbed by the practice of "piropoing," or catcalling in the street because they felt targeted by this practice both for their gender and for their status as foreigners. "The results of our interviews suggest that for many of the students we interviewed and observed, at least the first four months of the sojourn in the foreign country were not an immersion experience, but an alienating experience in which gender played a major role" (Twombly, 1995). Talburt and Stuart (1999) discuss the manner in which a young African-American woman studying in Spain was subjected to continuous and humiliating emphasis on race and sexuality in her interactions with Spaniards.

Siegal (1996) presents a case study focusing on the role of learner subjectivity in the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence by European women learning Japanese in Japan. The study, part of a longer ethnographic project, examines the conflict concerning sociolinguistic appropriateness experienced by one learner in conversation with her professor, where unequal power and positionality exert influence upon the quality of the interaction. Although she did understand the pragmatics of appropriate demeanor for a woman in Japanese society, in attempting to craft a voice for herself as a professional woman in Japanese, the student manipulated honorifics, modality, and topic control in ways that sometimes resulted in inappropriate language use. The study emphasizes the conflict inherent in this learner's need to honor her interlocutor through appropriate behavior, yet to maintain "face" as a professional woman.

Finally, a study by Kline (1998) examined literacy practices among American students studying in France. In her study, the female participants also encountered

behavior they perceived as sexist and/ or humiliating, opting to take refuge in literacy at the expense of attempts to develop social networks.

Taken together, the studies cited above suggest that encounters with other cultural settings with different norms can cause serious difficulties for young American women, particularly if they have been sensitized to typical American public discourses on sexism and gender equity. However, the story does not end with a clash of norms, nor does it involve only women.

### *Language Learning, Narrative, and Transformation of Gendered Identities*

The unacknowledged issue in the study abroad literature is that additional language learning *inevitably* involves exposure to new identity-related resources. New gender ideologies and performances may present conflict with the old. For adult learners, when the array of gender-related resources developed in the first language does not translate easily into the second, they must first understand the nuanced meanings invoked, then choose how to proceed, whether or not and to what extent they shall adopt these new resources as their own. Pavlenko (2001) illustrates how transformation of gendered identities is played out in life stories of language learning. Beginning with the assertion that gendered identities are social and cultural constructs, she argues the case for cross-cultural differences in normative masculinities and femininities. Gendered styles are produced in speech communities, and individuals produce themselves as gendered subjects through accommodation to these styles. While gender performance in a particular society is not predetermined, a limited range of gendered subjectivities is validated in a given society at a given moment. Thus, “a transition to a different culture, a different society, may involve change in how one views and performs gender” (p. 135). Through careful exegesis of language learning memoirs, Pavlenko illustrates how border crossers encounter, celebrate and resist ideologies of gender. Those who choose to assimilate may experience this transition as liberation from oppressive childhood socialization or as a painful process of self-translation in which previous closely-held identities are lost.

The participants in the study, like most study abroad students, devoted only one semester to this pursuit. Thus, investigation of the study abroad experience is unlikely to include longer-term aspects of gender socialization. However, if this experience is reinterpreted as a potentially crucial turning point in the life stories of learners (Block, 2002) (rather than as the most acquisition-rich experience possible), then it may also be viewed as a time of choice, when learners are exposed to the identity options and challenges associated with advanced competence in their second language, and when emotional investment is either furthered and enhanced or withdrawn.

In the cases under consideration, we must also take stock of the macro-level ideologies of second language gender that learners bring with them to the experience. We know that the study of French itself is associated with femininity in the United States (see for example, Watson’s 1995:12 claim that “Real Men Don’t Speak French”). The cohort of students under study was typical in its gender composition, with 19 women and 4 men. While we cannot claim to know precisely which images these participants

have experienced, we are aware of numerous and generally consistent gender-related portrayals of the French in the American media. The traditional American French man, on the model of Pepe Le Pew, is portrayed as effete if not effeminate, yet obsessed with sensual pleasure and sexual prowess. Recently, however, and perhaps coincidentally, in the wake of Franco-American conflict over the American led invasion of Iraq, in films such as *Jonny English*, *The Matrix: Revolutions*, and *The Matrix Reloaded*, French men have become self-engrossed, luxuriating and ultimately ineffectual evil geniuses. Despite recent tarnishing of its image, French nevertheless remains the “language of love,” and a French accent is associated with romantic figures from the history of American cinema, such as Charles Boyer, Maurice Chevalier, or Gerard Depardieu.

Images of the French woman are summarized in a recent self-improvement publication featuring a cover design inspired by 1950’s graphics, including a stylized poodle, and entitled *Entre Nous: A Woman’s Guide to Finding Her Inner French Girl* (Ollivier, 2003):

What makes French girls as serenely self-satisfied as purring cats... and catnip to the men who admire them? We’d all be as free as the French girl if we looked like her, right? The stereotypically French girl is often insolently thin, casually chic, and fashionable despite a simple wardrobe. With or without makeup she is always put together and utterly self-confident, imbued with natural elegance and an elusive distance that is particularly, maddening French... The French girl understands that sexy is a state of mind. Her relationship to food and to her body is sensual, not tyrannical, and she takes pleasure in both. (frontespiece)

The object of *Entre Nous* is to instruct American women on attaining “that je ne sais quoi” of French femininity, including self-possession, discretion, respect for history and ability to shop for quality and authenticity. The implied paradox is of course that these attributes somehow occur naturally and effortlessly in French women, but that they can be taught. American women, in addition to insolent thinness, are lacking in “je ne sais quoi” and require tutelage in order to measure up to the French model. Thus, works like *Entre Nous* and associated images of French femininity place American women in a position of inferiority in terms of body image, style, and general savoir-faire.

The above-cited image of the French woman as primarily composed of her body is consistent with Gergen’s (2001) claim that gendered styles may also influence the construction of narrative itself. In her feminist/ poststructuralist treatment of “embodied stories” Gergen examined popular autobiographies to support her thesis of divergence in stories of embodiment: men’s and women’s accounts of their bodies differ, with constant inclusion of references to the body by women, and absence of such reference in stories by men. Gergen concludes that these differences are due to lifetime socialization into a gendered “caste.” Men are socialized to rise above corporeal concerns, while women, as objects of contemplation, participate in their own objectification by presenting life stories in which self and body are unified. Taken as a hypothesis about the role of the body in the life stories of American men and women, and in combination with the above-described macro-level ideologies of French body image, Gergen’s claim suggests an interesting line of inquiry into the stories at hand, namely: how do gender and body image intersect in narratives of emotional investment in French language learning?

## ***The Study***

Data for the current paper were selected from a larger study examining the social context of language learning in study abroad, sponsored by CALPER (Center for Advanced Language Proficiency Education and Research, The Pennsylvania State University). The larger study involved 23 undergraduate French majors or minors who were completing undergraduate degrees at a large northeastern state university, and who undertook to study abroad in France during the Spring semester of 2003. The students were enrolled in a variety of study abroad programs located in several metropolitan areas of France and offering a range of courses, housing options, and supporting activities. We have selected from among the participants three cases illustrating the variety of profiles in participation and language learning that are represented in our data.

These data include pre-departure interviews, field notes taken on site, on-site interviews, and in most cases, learning journals in which gender is a recurrent, major theme. Interviews were semi-structured, focusing in the pre-departure phase on the participant's history of engagement in language learning, their motives for undertaking a sojourn abroad, and their aspirations for this experience. Mid-term interviews were conducted to address the concerns of participants, focusing on the qualities of their everyday experience and the extent to which they were realizing the goals set forth in the pre-departure interviews. The participants were also interviewed at the end of their sojourn in France, and were asked to provide an assessment of their experience, to reflect on its value and possible influence on future choices. The great majority of these interviews were conducted by Kathleen who had participated in a study abroad program in France before undertaking graduate studies in applied linguistics, and was therefore able to counsel the students, to be a sympathetic listener and to offer practical guidance in exchange for the students' participation. In addition to the interviews, participants were asked to maintain bi-weekly entries in a journal where they were to describe their daily activities in relation to opportunities for language learning.

Data in a supporting role include quantitative assessments of gain or loss on two pre- and post- tests: a standardized test of general proficiency in reading and listening (Test de Français International, or TFI) and a Language Awareness Interview focusing on knowledge of variable socio-linguistic features of French. Raw scores on the TFI range from 0 to 990 and are grouped by the test administration (TOEIC Services Canada and the Education Testing Service) for interpretation in terms of general professional proficiency, from "Beginner" to "Advanced Professional Proficiency." The Language Awareness Interview represented an attempt to assess the extent to which participants became aware of socially-driven variability in French lexis, syntax, pragmatics, and textual genre. For current paper we will focus only on the section of interview dealing with awareness of colloquial lexis (Dewaele & Regan, 2001). Taken together, these measures provide a sampling of the participants' developing awareness in two distinct domains: standard, academic uses of French, and the everyday use of "le Français ordinaire" (Gadet, 1989) in social settings requiring attention to considerations of face and appropriateness.

In our analysis, we attempt to portray the dynamic qualities of emotional investment in the development of French language competence as this investment

relates to gendered identity narratives, including narratives of gender-related social experiences, narratives of embodiment, and invocation of macro-level ideologies of gender. In so doing, we probe the sources of “individual differences” in the outcome of study abroad by reconsidering the role of gendered activity beyond the standard emphasis (in American research) on harassment and sexism. We focus instead on these students’ confrontation with new resources for the performance of gender and the extent to which this confrontation shapes their motives, suggesting that: 1) gender and gender-related activity exert major influence upon the experience of language learners abroad, and 2) in study abroad as in the classroom, classifying all the people involved at all times as “learners” may represent an optimistic but inaccurate move (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2002).

### *Three People: Deirdre, Jada, and Bill*

The three individuals whose cases we study here each present a unique profile of participation and learning during the study abroad semester. Briefly, in Deirdre’s case study abroad clearly did not result in language immersion, as she withdrew her investment in language acquisition when faced with the challenges of her new situation. Jada, on the other hand, developed a broad local social network and a repertoire of coping strategies which carried her successfully through these challenges, permitting her to maintain her desire to learn French while extending her competence in French into new domains. In terms of Bill’s language acquisition, the study abroad experience can only be qualified as a brilliant success; Bill experienced a broad range of social and professional contexts in which his performance as a user of French was actively assisted, and demonstrated important gains in both academic and everyday domains of language use. In the section below, we summarize the experience of each of these participants and then focus on the gender-related aspects of their stories.

#### *Deirdre*

At the beginning of the study, Deirdre was a 20-year old junior majoring in information sciences with a projected minor in French. She had invested considerable classroom time in her learning of French prior to her sojourn in France. Beginning in junior high school, she had completed 5 years of study at the secondary level and 2 years in college. She had also completed three semesters of Italian courses. She was enrolled in an academic program in a major southern city, where she lived alone in an apartment.

Although at the time of the pre-departure interview she professed desire to “get out and talk” so that she could increase her ability to speak French, beginning with her arrival in France the story of Deirdre’s experience is one of ambivalence and gradual withdrawal from the use of French. She claimed great affiliation with her family at home, and particularly with a boyfriend she was obliged to leave behind in order to go to France. Her comments about her circumstances at the midterm point were almost universally negative and focused on the difficulties of managing everyday life without competence in French language and culture.

It was remarkably easy for Deirdre to avoid learning French. She made little effort to engage speakers of French, limiting her use of the language to her courses where “you just listen and take notes.” Deirdre spent most of her free time in the program’s student center where she surfed the English language web and exchanged Instant Messages and emails with her friends and family at home. As the semester drew to a close, she began taking advantage of the program’s efforts to shelter American students from the atmosphere of socio-political tension that had emerged from French opposition to the US-led invasion of Iraq in the Spring of 2003. The program organized outings and excursions to local sights, thus insuring that these students would stay together and avoid hostile comments or acts.

Although Deirdre was clearly overwhelmed by the difficulties of study abroad in general, in the final interview she also addresses her perception of gender-related problems, which she ascribes to lack of respect for women. Repeated experience that she perceives as harassment and the images of women in advertising “make her hate to go outside”:

i’ve noticed there’s no respect to women, i’m not a feminist by any means, but i feel like again with the guys and the way they just talk to girls when they’re going down the street. i mean, i just think that there’s no respect for them at all, there’s naked women pictured in ads everywhere just half naked in their lingerie, um and i guess i mean the French are more comfortable with women being naked. you see it on the beach all the time, but i mean it’s just everywhere i go feel like there’s some sort of harassment that i can expect. no matter how i’m dressed, or no matter what i look like that day, no matter how i’m presenting myself, like if i’m coming back from the beach, or i’m coming back from class. i just—i expect it. (Interview, May, 2003)

Furthermore, Deirdre cannot project herself into the gender roles that she perceives as typically French, citing a fundamental difference in the behavior of French versus American girls. Deirdre echoes the kinds of comments regarding French women to be found in works like *Entre Nous*, describing them as excessively concerned with their dress and general appearance, calling them “snotty”:

um i think women are—i think they can be kinda snotty, i think they stare a lot. everyone’s noticed that. and i think they’re stylish, i think they’re very concerned about the way they look. um their bodies as well as their fashion... Monday morning rolls around and the girls dress up like they’re going out Friday night, and it just—it looks ridiculous to me. (Interview, May, 2003)

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

um i think American women are a lot more athletic. definitely. you don’t see any girls running here, you don’t see any girls in sweat pants or anything like that, i think American women are often more laid back, and just worried about their—having a good time with whatever they’re doing. um i think that for example at Penn State, you’ll see girls just walking to class in their sweat pants, or even in their pjs. (Interview, May, 2003)

As part of Deirdre's general tendency to cast French reality in a negative light in comparison with the American, her comments on gender accuse the French in general of failure to respect women without apparent reflection on possible nuances or cross-cultural divergences in the meaning of "respect." Her comments on femininity, as may have been predicted based on Gergen's thesis, emphasize body image and dress, with condemnation of the French for excess zeal in attending to image and an assertion that American women enjoy greater liberty in their choice of self-presentation style.

Many of Deirdre's comments reflect an active commitment, from the beginning, to justify rejection of emotional investment in French. In discussing gender, her emphasis on problems of sexual harassment is hardly surprising given the previous literature on this topic, but she also goes on to emphasize the image of women in general to explicitly reject the images of French femininity she has observed, and to claim for herself a positive association with the relaxed, "laid-back" image of American women.

The test score data show that Deirdre made only a modest gain in academic language ability as reflected on the Test de Français International. She began with a score of 545, which placed her in the "Intermediate" category of interpretation, and she returned with a score of 585, still "Intermediate. Her a modest 40 point gain is composed of a 60-point rise in the listening score (L) and a loss of 20 points in the reading test (R).

Pre L	Post L	Pre R	Post R	Pre TOT	Post TOT	Diff. L	Diff. R	Diff. TOT
255	315	290	270	545	585	60	-20	40

In the "colloquial words" section of the Language Awareness Interview, Deirdre also showed a modest gain. To recall, the purpose of this interview was to assess changes in learners' awareness of socially-driven linguistic variability in French. A list of 25, colloquial words based on a corpus of advanced French Interlanguage (Dewaele & Regan, 2001) were presented, and participants were asked to provide a translation of the everyday, or colloquial use of the words. On this test, Deirdre initially identified 2 of the words; on her return she was able to translate a total of 8.

Thus, the test score data show that Deirdre's listening ability may have grown slightly, in concert with the time she spent "listening and taking notes" in class, but that her ability to read in French remained at the same level or lower. Her score on the colloquial words test suggests that she developed only very modest appreciation of language use appropriate for interaction among peers. Taken together with the history of Deirdre's declining interest and investment in French, and her increasing alienation from the study abroad context over the course of the semester, as recounted in interviews, these results are hardly surprising.

### *Jada*

A 21-year old junior majoring in psychology and French, Jada had also invested considerable time in French language study: one year of French in eighth grade, five

years of high school French, and five semesters of college French. Jada was enrolled in the same program as Deirdre, located in a major southern city, and opted to live in a university residence hall.

Jada's stated ambition on going to France was to "be French," and to achieve this transformation through careful observation of dress and manners. For Jada, being French at this stage is largely a matter of appearances:

- Jada: =I want to be French=I want to part of their culture, I know I'm gonna have a lot of trouble with the food because I'm very picky. but everything—I wanna be French=
- KF: =yeah=
- Jada: =ya know? I don't wanna be spotted as that American girl=
- KF: =yeah=
- Jada: =so=
- KF: =so how do you propose—how do you -- how do you conceptualize doing that? like what are some things for you to become French=like what do you=
- Jada: =well I think first you just have to desensitize yourself from the idea of being American ya know = I mean •hhh• I'm used to my jeans I'm used to my s(omething) I'm used to my baseball cap=

Jada plans on "sitting in the middle of the street just like watching people walk by and like seeing e-everything that they do." In so doing, Jada hopes to meet French friends and avoid the use of English, as she assumes that speaking English is "very easy to fall into."

In sharp contrast to Deirdre's story, Jada's journal and interview data chronicle an extremely active social life including nightly outings, a large circle of friends and acquaintances, and a number of casual relationships with French-speaking men. Jada relied on the company of American program participants throughout her sojourn, but she derived a sense of confidence from this association which allowed her to extend herself in social interaction with others. She also used her residence hall as a context for developing her social circle, violating the local norms by keeping her door open and inviting other students into her room. By the end of her stay, she had developed one close friendship with a young French woman and had become noticeably popular in the residence hall.

In describing her interaction with French speaking men, particularly the many North African men she met in her residence hall, Jada emphasizes cross-cultural differences in body image, praises the men's honesty in stating their preference for thin women in tight clothes, and ascribes the entire phenomenon to retrograde gender-related practices reminiscent of the 1950's and of the cover image of *Entre Nous*:

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

wow. they do know that because look at them. like it's really just staring you in the face and I almost feel like it's the 1950s. in America. (Interview, April 2003)

By the mid-term, Jada had also observed that some of her own previously unexamined actions, particularly smiling “at everyone” do not necessarily match local norms, but that at the same time these actions offer her occasions to meet people:

the guys are like the dragueurs and the girls really kind of—they wait to be approached. and they enjoy that attention or whatever. whereas like I smile at everyone. so I constantly get people coming up to me, and they talk to me. and I'm like I don't wanna talk to you. but like I smiled at them. you know what I mean? (Interview, April 2003)

Jada recounts numerous incidents where she and her friends were subject to sexual harassment, and one case, after the American invasion of Iraq, where her American group was physically attacked in the street after a sporting event. In contrast to Deirdre, and in spite of the dramatic nature of the attack in particular, Jada attempted to come to terms with these events and to “let the water slide off (her) back” (Midterm interview, April 2003). As part of her developing competence in French she also develops strategies for coping with unwanted advances from men that she describes for example, as follows:

when I was at the Internet café the other day some guy heard Liz and I um she was speaking to me in English and I was just typing along and the guy started to talking to us and was like oh you speak English I would like to speak English with you. and we were like—I was like I'm sorry we're actually in the middle of making our plans to go somewhere so maybe afterwards and I was just trying to be very like polite and then like he came up behind us and like he put his arms—like his hands on our back and I don't like being touched by anyone I don't know. like I'm a very affectionate person like I'll hug my friends I don't care. but when I don't know you do not touch me. and I was like ok you're disgusting and he was like well if you need help with your French and I was like no I speak French very well thank you. and like I told him in French like I speak ver—and like I don't think I speak ver—speak very well but like I just felt the need to tell him that I didn't I was like no je parle français très très bien merci. (Interview, May 2003)

Thus, by the end of her sojourn in France, Jada had realized that she was not likely to “become French,” but she emerged from this experience with her desire to learn French intact, a growing sense of control over her own interactional resources, and a new level of reflection on the advantages of intercultural awareness:

it's really bizarre when i hear oh the French are like this and i'm like but look at the Americans. like be a little introspective for once. (Interview, May 2003)

The test score data show that Jada made a gain in academic language ability as reflected on the Test de Français International. She began with a score of 575, which placed her in the “Intermediate” category of interpretation, and she returned with a

score of 630, or “Basic working proficiency.” Her 55 point gain is composed of a 35-point rise in the listening score (L) and a gain of 20 points in the reading test (R).

Pre L	Post L	Pre R	Post R	Pre TOT	Post TOT	Diff. L	Diff. R	Diff. TOT
290	325	285	305	575	630	35	20	55

In the “colloquial words” section of the Language Awareness Interview, Jada also showed a modest gain. On this test, Jada initially translated 9 of the words; on her return she was able to translate a total of 15. Thus, Jada’s test scores demonstrate a significant if not dramatic gain in her knowledge of both academic and everyday French.

### **Bill**

We turn finally to the case of Bill, one of the few male participants in our study, a 22 year old senior majoring in business. Bill elected to study in a business-oriented program located in a major city in the eastern region of France. The program included coursework in finance and French culture along with a mandatory homestay arrangement for housing, and an internship in a local business. Bill had studied French from the fourth grade through his senior year in high school, then had taken only two college-level courses, ending with a second-year level conversation course taken early in his post-secondary studies. He is, however, an avid language learner, having formally studied Italian for one semester and intermittantly taught himself Spanish, Hebrew and Greek.

Bill’s pre-departure comments about the French had little to do with body image, but instead focuses on moral issues of family values and community spirit. Bill believes that learning French will allow him to “connect better with people” and that he will develop “tremendous French friends” with whom he will be “hanging out like for life”:

I guess another impression of of the French is that they have just a better sense of community? and relationships? [inaudible] and I feel like we just live on this sh--shallow level a majority of our lives and um I mean just even putting family and people ahead of most things or at least higher up than—than an American would (Interview November 2002)

Although Bill was classified as an “Elementary” learner on the Test de Français International at the onset of the study, the data from his interviews focus extensively on his determination to learn the language. Bill was supported in this endeavor by his host family, by classmates and colleagues, by members of a campus association called “Melting Potes” (“pote” being an informal term of “friend”), by soccer teammates and the “computer nerds” with whom he played video games, all of whom actively assisted his performance in French. His evaluative remarks summarizing the experience include expressions of gratitude for his presence in France during the Iraq conflict, because of the valued exposure to alternative points of view in the media. Having entered the study

abroad program with the clear expectation that he would develop strong associations with French-speaking people, Bill claimed by the end of his stay that he felt “completely integrated” into French society and that the friendships nurtured in France would be life-long.

In commenting on issues of gender during the final interview, Bill expresses a distinct preference for French women over American women, and for American men over French men. American women, according to Bill, are passive, “have absolutely no opinion about anything” and waste their time chatting about “crap.” French women, on the other hand, act assertively in the presence of men, and are not fearful of challenging them in discussions. His further comments on French femininity might have been directly lifted from the pages of *Entre Nous*:

uh most French women have this incredible sense of style, um and ... they appreciate them for what they are. and there's not like as far as their body type is concerned and i think they they even the older women, they look great all the time. like not trashy or anything like that but i think they make a genuine a genuine effort as for whether it's conscious or subconscious they just do a great job and i think that's—that shows a lot for their character not that they want—well i guess they want to impress people but in the sense that like i'm proud of who—like i mean i dunno i think it's a good thing i don't think it's a bad—i don't think it's being superficial. (Interview, May, 2003)

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

to have incredible tolerance with men. and to be able to say no over and over again. and to not think twice about it and to not let it affect you, and just to keep saying no no no no no no not to look at them, not to talk at them. with them. i find that incredible. (Interview, May, 2003)

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

i can't say how many times i have like been so forward when like French guys come up to French girls and i have to—with American friends. like they've said no a couple of time like annoyed them. and i can see it in their face and so i take it upon myself like look like first—i'll literally dance with them literally like i have no no problem i mean i would dance with them and if they don't get the point i'll start yelling at them like go away like you're not wanted here. and i just don't – like what's wrong—like what don't you understand here.

The concert of circumstances therefore permits Bill to celebrate images of French femininity while resisting what he perceives to be normative French masculinity. At the same time, he posits the superiority not only of American masculine practices of

avoiding sexual harassment and honoring gender equity, but also of his own role as defender of French girls. The story, in brief, casts Bill in a very favorable light.

On the Test de Français International, Bill began with a score of 315 (“Elementary”) and progressed to the “Intermediate” level with a score of 505, composed of gains in both listening and reading.

Pre L	Post L	Pre R	Post R	Pre TOT	Post TOT	Diff. L	Diff. R	Diff. TOT
150	235	165	270	315	505	85	105	190

On the “colloquial words” test, Bill could translate 3 words at the pre-departure phase, and 17 at the end of his sojourn. Taken together, these results suggest development in awareness of both academic and everyday French, results that are consistent with Bill’s account of his success in the classroom and in social interactions with speakers of French.

***Summary and conclusion***

In this paper, we present three stories of study abroad students’ confrontation with gendered practices and ideologies in France. In general, the students in the study are shown to examine and interpret their observations of gendered practices through the lens of American ideologies of French gender. As predicted by Gergen (2001) this confrontation emerges in stories by and about women as “embodiment,” that is, accounts are frequently related to body image and self-presentation. In Deirdre’s case this confrontation was embedded in and added to a general sense of alienation from the social context and from language learning. In essence, Deirdre observed images objectifying women and practices she identified as sexual harassment and used these as contributions to her rationale for rejection of emotional investment in French language competence.

For Jada, these same practices were construed as a challenge, part of the general effort to develop communicative competence in French that she maintained throughout. Jada participated actively in many gender-related events and learned, over the course of her stay, a great deal about variation in gender ideologies and about how to defend herself from unwanted advances. Jada’s story includes many instances of her framing as a sexual object by interlocutors in various settings, but she did not allow these events to deter her, and over time, learned how to manipulate them according to her preference: using them as opportunities for social interaction in French or disentangling herself from undesirable situations. Of the three students, Jada is the only one who appears to have begun to question her own image and behavior in order to enhance her success as a learner and speaker of French.

Unlike Jada, Bill did not feel obliged to question his performance of gender in light of the new social environment he was experiencing. On one hand, he appears to have been able to form associations and seek language learning opportunities with men

and women that were less sexually charged. On the other hand, Bill's experience seems to have strengthened his identification with American gender-related ideologies, including images of French women, perhaps in part because he was able to use them in creating a story of his own gallantry. As a heterosexual man, he was set up to play the role ascribed to men by works like *Entre Nous*, that is, the admiring consumer of "catnip," a role that he accepts but modifies to include a moral dimension that explicitly rejects sexual harassment.

In terms of language learning, these stories clearly relate, though perhaps indirectly, to overall accounts of success or failure. Deirdre appears to have learned very little French, because she withdrew her investment in that effort from the beginning. Jada's involvement in numerous social interactions with French men may well have increased her communicative repertoire in gender-specific ways in addition to the documented gain scores on the two assessments. Bill's well-rounded experience and increasing investment in the learning of French are reflected in his dramatic gain scores on both the TFI and colloquial words test. While we cannot and do not wish to attribute causality to the relation between these stories and the quantitative data, we do believe that the outcomes of the assessments are not inconsistent with the students' own accounts of their experience, gendered stories of alienation and stories of desire to selectively appropriate aspects of communicative competence in French.

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