
Teaching Difficult Topics: The Example of the Algerian War

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While history as critical discourse differs importantly from the more subjective narratives of collective memory, even historians vary in their accounts and analyses of past events. This article argues for the need to include a spectrum of voices and text types when teaching history in the context of foreign language study, taking the example of “official stories,” collective memories, and historical accounts of the Algerian War of 1954-62. In addition to presenting varied views and text genres, the argument is made for the importance of teaching the controversies that arise around difficult topics, even many years after the fact. Teaching different sides of a difficult story and its unresolved conflicts is a form of realism that respects students’ intelligence and fosters their self-awareness as cultural subjects. Examples of a multiple perspectives approach are drawn from two textbooks published in France, with additional suggestions for classroom materials and activities at various instructional levels.

INTRODUCTION

In the words of Frédéric Abécassis, co-author of *Pour une histoire franco-algérienne*, “l’histoire est polyphonique” [history is polyphonic] (cited by Nuyten 2010, p. 57). While history as critical, reflective discourse differs importantly from the more subjective narratives of collective memory, which reflect the perspective of a particular group (Wertsch, p. 127), even historians themselves vary in their accounts and analyses of past events. This paper argues for the need to include a spectrum of voices and text types when teaching difficult historical topics in the context of foreign language study. The overarching goal of a pluralistic approach is to foster students’ critical thinking and their awareness of the complexity of cultural identity, including, perhaps most importantly, their own.

HISTORY’S DARKER SIDE: DIFFICULT TOPICS

Difficult topics can be defined as historical topics of import to a society or nation which remain painful to the present day, and which, unlike certain economic problems or natural catastrophes, arguably involve wrongdoing or a moral dimension. They relate to the relatively recent rather than distant past. The Algerian war, for example, is considered in France to be a *plaie* or wound, much like the Vietnam War for the United States. More than one high school textbook published in France refers to the Algerian war as a cancer (Bacholle-Baskovic, pp. 976-978). Similarly, historian Benjamin Stora’s analysis of the war, *La Gangrène et l’oubli*, turns on the metaphor of a festering wound and the scars it has left (1991, p. 320). Difficult topics often involve the repression of painful memories, in Pierre Nora’s words, “ce que la France refoule et ne veut pas savoir d’elle-même, ses troubles et ses

trous de mémoire” [what France represses and does not want to know about itself, its anxieties and memory gaps] (1984, p. 19).¹

Raising difficult topics can be disquieting for American students and instructors as well. Two examples come to mind in the context of an advanced level French course I have recently developed and taught on France and the Arab World. In one case, an international student from Algeria spoke to the class about his grandparents’ traumatic experiences during the Algerian War, describing the rape of women and burning of corpses by members of the French military. In another case, during a field trip to Washington, D.C. to visit the Embassies of several Arab countries, the Syrian Ambassador to the U.S. angrily evoked the French bombing of Damascus in 1945 during his remarks to the students. Both of these speakers’ emotional accounts communicated the view of France as enemy. Seeing France through their eyes added an uncomfortable but meaningful dimension to the study of a country which had always been a source of great attraction to me, as an instructor, and in all likelihood to many of my students as well: there were significant and disturbing stories to be told. As Jean-François Brière pointed out many years ago, in an article ahead of its time, foreign language instructors are inclined to want to pass on a positive vision of a culture they love. However, in his view, “a presentation of a foreign culture which seeks to promote love and admiration for that culture is as detrimental to cultural understanding as a negative presentation” (p. 205). Brière argued that the goal of language and culture instruction should be to raise learners’ awareness of themselves as cultural subjects, and of the “subjective and culturally defined nature of any point of view and any discourse on culture, one’s own or that of others” (p. 203).

In lower level foreign language courses, the tone of textbook presentation is promotional, given the understandable goal of making language and the countries where it is spoken appealing to learners. The darker sides of history and contemporary life are evoked in vague or simplified terms, if at all, particularly when a moral dimension is involved. Yet these difficult issues can engage students intellectually and emotionally by conveying the complexity of cultural and national identity. It is important to expose students at all levels of language study to non-simplistic presentations of France and French-speaking countries, but how can we best achieve that goal? Before attempting to answer this question, and because the focus of this paper is specifically on an historical subject, it will be helpful to define several concepts relevant to a discussion of history and memory.

HISTORY, COLLECTIVE MEMORY, AND OFFICIAL STORIES

How can collective memory be defined? Wertsch’s discussion of collective memory highlights the idea that the memory of individuals is fundamentally influenced by social context, and that memory is “distributed” in a group through instruments that mediate remembering, such as narratives and rituals (p. 119). He points out that the “larger picture of which collective memory is a part is usually formulated in terms of conflict and negotiation [...] in the social and political sphere” (p. 123). This negotiation is undertaken in the interest of providing a “usable past” in service of a particular agenda, often a group identity project of some sort, like mobilizing a nation to conduct war.

The term “official story” is usually taken to mean a government-promoted version of historical events which leaves out or covers up important truths. The title of the well known 1985 Argentine film, *La historia oficial*, plays on two meanings of *historia*, both “story” and

“history,” and the protagonist who eventually uncovers the hidden truth of the *desaparecidos* and the fate of their children in the 1970s is an experienced teacher (and, as the narrative unfolds, a newly awakened student) of history. In a broader sense, governments use history to serve political ends through a variety of commemorative acts, and politicians of various stripes communicate their values to constituents by embracing longstanding cultural symbols of the nation (Pécheur, pp. 54-55).

Referring to the work of French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, that of contemporary cultural historian Pierre Nora, and other recent studies of commemoration, Wertsch offers a list of basic oppositions that can be used to distinguish history from collective memory, noting that these terms should be considered as part of a continuum rather than strict polarities. Overall, recent discussions of the differences between history and memory have underscored the idea of complexity as a *sine qua non* of historical analysis. By contrast, collective memory and commemoration are said “to eschew ambiguity and to present the past from a single committed perspective” (Wertsch, p. 126).² Qualifiers of history and collective memory, in Wertsch’s analysis, include the “subjective” vs. “objective” (in quotes in Wertsch’s text), unself-conscious vs. reflective stance, and heroic narratives vs. controversy and change as part of historical interpretation (p. 127). While absolute objectivity is doubtless unattainable, awareness of complexity is a safeguard against acceptance of official stories, and “schematic narrative templates” (p. 130), that is, cultural narratives, like manifest destiny for the United States, that define national identities or are part of an “identity project” (p. 131).

Nora’s (1996) introduction to *Rethinking the past: Of memory* highlights similar oppositions. Memory, in his analysis, is connected to the present, embodied in living societies, unconscious, vulnerable to distortion, subject to forgetting and re-awakening, and associated with emotion and magic. History, by contrast, is a representation of the past, is intellectual and nonreligious, belongs to everyone and no one, and is associated with analysis and critical discourse. Memory, he writes, “is always suspect in the eyes of history” (p. 3).³

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES AND CRITICAL DISCOURSE

According to the 2007 report of the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Foreign Languages, transcultural understanding can be defined as “the ability to comprehend and analyze the cultural narratives that appear in every kind of expressive form” (p. 238), for example social and historical narratives and “symbols or sites of memory in the broadest sense, including buildings, historical figures, popular heroes, monuments, currency, culture-specific products, literary and artistic canons, landscapes, fashion, and cuisine” (p. 239). In the case of French history, the study of symbolic places like l’Arc de Triomphe or le mur des fédérés in the Père Lachaise cemetery, people such as Jeanne d’Arc or Jules Ferry, and acts, from Zola’s letter “*J’accuse*,” to Jacques Chirac’s apology to French Jews for the complicity of the Vichy government (Pécheur, p. 55), involves learning not only what occurred historically, but also how these cultural symbols continue to signify in contemporary contexts, and how they are used to political ends.

In the spirit of Gerald Graff’s concept of teaching the conflicts, language and culture study can and should promote the understanding of culture as polyphonic. Teaching the conflicts, and acknowledging that “culture is a debate rather than a monologue,” according to Graff, “has nothing to do with relativism or denying the existence of truth” (p. 15). On

the contrary, he writes, “when truth is disputed, we can seek it only by entering the debate” (p. 15). Graff cites the words of Diane Ravitch, whose comments on scholarly controversies apply to cultural conflicts as well, and are worth repeating here:

If scholars disagree, students should know it. One great advantage of this approach is that students will see that history is a lively study, that textbooks are fallible, that historians disagree, that the writing of history is influenced by the historians’ politics and ideology, that history is written by people who make choices among alternative facts and interpretations, and that history changes as new facts are uncovered and new interpretations win adherents. (p. 60)

A multiple perspectives approach also entails teaching students how to talk about difficult topics, how to express their own views and those of others, in thoughtful ways. Lane & Rubinstein’s discussion of cultural relativism and the difficulties involved in developing cross-cultural understanding provides helpful guidance in navigating difficult topics. The authors underscore the need for modesty, nuance, and complexity: “finding a voice requires a more modest sense of how and what can be said with certainty and to whom and, most importantly, listening to and valuing the perspectives of the ‘Other’” (p. 38). Similarly, the search for a way to successfully confront difficult topics in the classroom, to borrow Lane & Rubinstein’s words, depends upon “finding a language and constructing an approach respectful of diverse cultural concerns” (p. 38). I understand this to mean that the ultimate goal in educating students is to instill the desire to know more, to look as completely as possible at multiple aspects of an issue, and to speak about it with respect for its complexity. While students may express their moral principles and personal views on a topic, they also need to learn (as part of critical thinking and analysis) to use information with caution, formulate hypotheses rather than stereotypes, and speak in nuanced terms (Paige et al., pp. 57-58).⁴

Erin Kearney has advocated incorporating a range of cultural narratives in the foreign language classroom, so that students encounter meanings that “address, echo, and contradict each other and are prompted to recognize the complexity inherent in cultures” (p. 334). Importantly, she argues, this kind of encounter can foster awareness of one’s own perspective as situated rather than absolute. Engagement with narrative texts of many genres, in Kearney’s words, enables learners to “imagine themselves and the world differently” (p. 334). In this sense of the term, “cultural narrative,” as I understand it, can mean first-person stories, fictional or memoir, but also impersonal, historical accounts. Literary excerpts are an exceptionally rich resource of cultural narratives – one often preferred in American textbooks for the treatment of issues like colonialism and oppression, for example. The readability and interest of *personal* narrative, particularly first person narration, which enhances reader identification, make excerpts, short stories, and novels attractive choices for the foreign language classroom. Interviews, videoclips, and film also have appeal because of their use of spoken rather than written language, and their visual dimension. Yet the juxtaposition of various personal views of a difficult topic does not necessarily lead to understanding and critical distance. Personal narratives can be powerful, effecting identification and emotional response. Expository, non-narrative texts or documents are needed as a counterpoint to achieve the goal of multiple perspectives and critical distance.

In the next sections of the paper, a brief summary of the Algerian War is followed by examples of a multiple perspectives approach in the treatment of the war drawn from two textbooks published in France. Contemporary controversies in French public discourse and Algerian perspectives on the war are then discussed. The remainder of the paper aims to stimulate thought about how instructors and textbooks might represent difficult topics to learners of language and culture, and to provide resources for materials and activities in intermediate and advanced level courses.

EVENTS OF THE ALGERIAN WAR

The Algerian War, or revolution, as it is called in Algeria, lasted from 1954-1962. French colonization dated back to 1830, and later in the nineteenth century, Algeria was divided into three administrative departments, and integrated into the French nation. A large population of French citizens and other Europeans (known as *pieds-noirs*) became well established in *l'Algérie française*. Following WWII, the Liberation inspired Algerians to organize and demand independence for their country. In 1945, conflict between French and Muslim Algerians resulted in the death of more than one hundred Europeans. In May of that year, during Victory in Europe parades, signs carried by nationalists provoked reprisals by colonialists that took the lives of thousands of Algerians in what came to be known as the massacres of Sétif. In 1954 several nationalist movements consolidated behind the *Front de libération nationale* (FLN), and in November of that year the FLN initiated armed revolts throughout Algeria and issued a proclamation calling for a sovereign state. In reaction to the nationalist attacks, François Mitterrand, then Minister of the Interior, famously uttered the phrase, “L’Algérie, c’est la France” (Slama, p. 49).

In 1956 the FLN initiated the targeting of urban areas, and the Battle of Algiers, a French campaign against urban guerrillas, began. Although the French won this campaign, they eventually lost the war. The conflict between proponents of *l'Algérie française* (the French Army leadership and *pieds-noirs*) and those who favored independence threatened to divide France to the point of civil war. General Charles de Gaulle was recalled to office in 1958 through the efforts of those who wanted to preserve a French Algeria. However de Gaulle, once in power, understood the impossibility of this outcome, and announced, the following year, his decision to allow Algerians to decide their own destiny. This decision precipitated an unsuccessful putsch against de Gaulle by a small group of prominent generals in the French army in 1961. An organization associated with this group, the Organisation de l’Armée secrète (OAS), carried on a campaign of counterterrorism against the FLN and French authorities.

A cease-fire was agreed upon by FLN representatives and the French government at Evian, France, in 1962. Algeria overwhelmingly voted for independence in a referendum held later that year. At the end of the war, more than one million *pieds-noirs* left Algeria. Algerian soldiers who had fought on the side of the French (*barkis*) were at the same time abandoned by France and considered traitors by their countrymen; between 60,000 and 150,000 *barkis* were massacred at the end of the war.

The Algerian War was a traumatic episode, marked by the practice of torture (on both sides), summary executions, internal division, and death (250,000 – 500,000 Muslim

Algerians, according to French historians; one and a half million by Algerian accounts). In the words of historian Benjamin Stora, the Algerian war

se lit toujours comme une page douloureuse de l'histoire récente: pas de commémoration officielle autour de dates significatives – comme le 18 mars 1962, jour de la signature des accords d'Evian –, peu de grands films de fiction, pas de centres de recherches et d'enseignements dans les universités à propos de cet événement. Pourtant, cette guerre de sept années, qui alors n'osa jamais dire son nom, a été un moment considérable. Elle a provoqué le départ d'un million de "pieds-noirs" et de leurs familles vers la métropole et le massacre de milliers de harkis (cited by Lacoste, p. 32).

still reads like a painful page of recent history: no official commemoration of significant dates – like March 18, 1962, when the Evian agreements were signed – no major fiction films, no university centers for research and teaching relating to this event. However, this seven year war, which at the time did not dare speak its name, was an event of great impact. It precipitated the departure of a million "pieds-noirs" and their families to metropolitan France and the massacre of thousands of harkis.

TEXTBOOK CASES

Two textbooks dealing with historical topics, published in France, offer approaches of considerable interest. The first, *J'ai vécu la guerre d'Algérie* (D'Abbundo, 2004), consists of four first person narratives about the Algerian War representing extremely different experiences, followed by short factual texts relating the basic events and context of the war. The book is one in a series published by Bayard Jeunesse, Le Mémorial de Caen, which also includes volumes on D-Day, the Vietnam War, World Wars I and II, the Resistance, the Cambodian War, and the Spanish Civil War. The testimonies include those of a French peasant farmer drafted into the army, an Algerian FLN member, an *harki*, and a French woman raised in the Algerian *pied-noir* community. The narratives contain many points of interest, a number of which belie commonly held assumptions: (1) the farm boy's ignorance about the war at the time of his conscription; (2) the courage and pride of the *moudjahid* of the ALN (Armée de libération nationale, the military arm of the FLN), his decision to leave Algeria following the war because he had been on the wrong (losing) nationalist side, and his eventual return to the country to live on a modest pension in an urban HLM (*habitation de loyer modéré* or low-income housing complex); (3) the *harki*'s choice to join French forces not out of a desire to help the French, but rather to save his life; and (4) the modest lower middle class neighborhood in Oran where the *pied-noir* woman lived as a young girl, with her mother and father, a postal worker.

The accounts are compelling also because they are reflections of older people who have new perspectives on their past experience. All four are between the ages of 64 and 66 at the time of the book's publication. In the first account, the former conscript, who as a retiree has become an activist in an agricultural union, traveling to Colombia to aid peasant farmers, explains his decision to give his veteran's pension to charity as an anti-war gesture, and an acknowledgement of the injustice he felt was done to Algerians during the war. In the second narrative, the *moudjahid*, looking back forty-two years later, expresses pride in what he accomplished during the war, but has regrets about the violence that transpired: "Cette guerre, je ne l'ai pas voulue, mais je l'ai faite parce que c'était mon devoir. Tout ce que je

regrette, ce sont les morts. Des deux côtés” [This war is not something I wanted, but I fought because it was my duty. All I regret is the deaths. On both sides] (p. 40). He also feels dismay at the younger generation’s apparent lack of interest in their elders’ sacrifice:

Je suis très fier de ma carte d’ancien combattant du FLN, car je me suis battu pour une cause juste et noble. Mais aujourd’hui, j’ai l’impression que très peu de jeunes Algériens sont reconnaissants pour ce que nous, leurs aînés, avons fait pour leur liberté.” (p. 40)

I am very proud of my FLN veteran’s card, as I fought for a just and noble cause. But today I have the impression that very few young Algerians are grateful for what we, their elders, did for their freedom.

In the third story, the former *barkî* states that he has never returned to Algeria (“mon pays, c’est la France,” [my country is France] (p. 59). His children do not want to hear him talk about the past: “Papa, pense à l’avenir, pas à ce qui est derrière toi.” Alors je ne raconte pas.” [Daddy, think about the future, not about what is behind you.’ So I don’t talk about it] (p. 59). In the last account, the *pied-noir* explains her feelings of being misunderstood, unappreciated, and invisible upon arrival in her new country (“les Français [...] refusaient de nous voir, nous les ‘pieds-noirs’”) [the French (...) refused to see us, the *pieds-noirs*] (p. 77), and emphasizes a continued lack of resolution and closure regarding her Algerian past: “Aujourd’hui, je ne peux affirmer que cette page soit tournée, car elle n’a pas été bien lue” [Today I cannot say that this page has been turned, because it has not been well read] (p. 77). She has remade her life, but has not forgotten: “Et je me souviendrai jusqu’à ma mort de l’Algérie, parce que je ne veux pas oublier qui je suis” [And I will remember Algeria until I die, because I do not want to forget who I am] (p. 77). Thus the themes of remembering, forgetting, just and lost causes, and lament for lives lost, come into clear focus through these life stories.

Beyond reading and discussing the individual narratives, instructors can prompt students to discuss the textbook’s overall pedagogical agenda, if students do not raise this topic on their own. The collection is named for Le Mémorial de Caen, “Cité de l’Histoire pour la Paix,” in Normandy, and in the preface the editor states the common theme of the testimonials: “la guerre meurtrit les peuples et broie les individus” [war inflicts wounds on peoples and crushes individuals] (p. 5). Students can explore the Mémorial’s web site, which, in its introductory paragraph, underscores the loss of life (60 million people) through war and world conflict in the twentieth century, from World War I to the fall of the Berlin Wall. It is important for students to think about the perspective and agenda of this textbook (peace-making), and all textbooks they read. Critical thinking has to do with noticing, looking for a point of view or stance, sometimes more tellingly in what is omitted or underrepresented, than in what is explicitly emphasized.

The second French textbook, *Histoire* (Lambin, 2002), is designed to prepare students in Terminales ES-L-S (Economique et Sociale, Littéraire, Scientifique), for the *baccalauréat* examination following high school. The approach is documentary; in each unit a variety of speeches, testimonies, documents, and images are presented as part of a *dossier*. Numbered texts and documents are grouped together, with corresponding short explanatory paragraphs. Review notes at the end of the chapter include lists of important events and

issues, and biographical notes on major historical players. In the treatment of the Algerian War, texts include:

- excerpts from several speeches of de Gaulle (1958, 1959, 1961);
- the 1957 letter of resignation of the Secretary of Police in Algiers and former member of the Resistance in protest of the use of torture in French detention centers (“La France risque [...] de perdre son âme dans l’équivoque”) [France is in danger (...) of losing its soul in ambiguity] (p. 284);
- the interview of a former member of the Resistance arguing for the need for torture in certain circumstances (“n’y a-t-il pas parfois des maux nécessaires pour éviter le pire?”) [are there not sometimes evils that are necessary in order to avoid the worst?] (p. 284);
- a newspaper editorial by a Catholic historian and former Resistance member on the complexity of all sides in the war (“J’ai appris de mon maître Saint-Augustin, ce Berbère, que toutes les nations qui se manifestent dans l’histoire sont nécessairement un mélange de Cité du Bien et de Cité du Mal”) [I learned from my teacher St. Augustine, a Berber, that all nations presenting themselves in history are necessarily a mix of the City of Good and the City of Evil] (p. 286); and
- a priest’s empathetic commentary about the difficult in-between status of the *pieds-noirs*.

Photos in the unit depict the following:

- de Gaulle in Constantine (1958);
- the letters OAS (Organisation de l’armée secrète) spelled out in the snow of Trocadéro, Paris, below the Eiffel Tower;
- figures fallen on the floor of what appears to be a metro station during the repression of the FLN-sponsored demonstration of 17 October 1961 by the Paris police;
- the “*semaine des barricades*” [week of barricades] in which partisans of *l’Algérie française* held continual protests in Algiers (1960);
- *pieds-noirs* arriving by boat in Marseille in 1962; and
- *barkis* interrogating an FLN prisoner (1961).

Also included in the chapter are an FLN poster depicting Nasser and Ben Bella of the FLN (1956) standing together with arms raised, in victory over the colonial beast, and a 1954 newspaper headline (“L’ALGERIE C’EST LA FRANCE” quoting Minister of the Interior, François Mitterrand). The reader is struck by the diversity and interest of the texts; they are also highly manageable in terms of length, and readable by virtue of the aesthetic page layout, colors, and illustrations.⁵

The schematic nature of the expository discourse in the textbook and the effort to represent many different positions may have a downside, however. In the case of the topic of torture, for example, as mentioned above, the textbook juxtaposes two conflicting views, one expressed by a French officer, Holocaust survivor, and participant in the 1961 military putsch against de Gaulle, who sees a justification for torture in extreme circumstances, and the other expressed by the Secretary of Police in Algiers who resigned his post because of his

anti-torture convictions. This effort to give equal voice to both sides of an issue (a trend in contemporary American media as well), can present its own problems: memories, opinions, and feelings belong to an individual, and their truth value is not at issue, precisely because they are not facts. Yet while every view is authentic in that sense, that certainly cannot mean that all views are well founded as interpretations of history, or even that every view deserves equal representation. The presentation of opposing views needs to be accompanied by critical analysis or synthesis of events. The overall textbook presentation remains a broad outline, despite the perspective provided by such documents as “L’engagement d’un intellectuel” in which an historian underscores the complexity of war and refuses “toute classification manichéenne” [any Manichean classification] (p. 284). Nevertheless, the instructor can invite students to consider the structure of the textbook presentation itself as a way to further explore the issue.

The example of the French textbook *Histoire* raises an important basic question regarding the treatment of cultural topics in general. All chapters and topics in the book are organized in the same way, not just “difficult” ones. Indeed, all cultural topics deserve the same approach, using a mix of documents, narrative, voiced and unvoiced texts. The multiple perspectives approach for difficult topics is not different *per se* from the treatment of any other cultural topic; what may be different is the idea that difficult topics are those which remain painful, or at least sensitive in the present. In addition to presenting varied views and text genres, it is therefore of interest and importance, where possible, to teach the controversies that arise around difficult topics, even many years after the fact.

TEACHING THE CONTROVERSIES: RECENT REPRESENTATIONS OF THE ALGERIAN WAR

As the Algerian War has become the subject of more public discourse in France over the last twenty years or so, emotions have run high, and protests have been voiced. While President Jacques Chirac issued an official apology in 1995 for France’s mass arrest of Jews in Paris during the Occupation, and the French parliament passed a law in 2001 recognizing slavery as a crime against humanity and requiring this recognition in public education and research, no apology has been made for oppression caused by colonization, or for the torture inflicted upon insurgents in the Algerian War at the national level.⁶ When, in 2001, Mayor of Paris Bertrand Delanoë presided over the installation of a memorial plaque on the St. Michel bridge recognizing the 1961 massacre of approximately 200 Algerian peaceful protesters by the Paris police, the ceremony was boycotted by center and right wing members of the Paris City Council, and a number of deputies walked out of the National Assembly in protest.

The French law of 23 February 2005 recognizing the contributions of the repatriated French in Algeria and other overseas territories also sparked great controversy, given its stipulation that school curricula recognize the positive role of the French overseas presence (Tillier, 2010, p. 53).⁷ Specifically, the most controversial section, in Article four, reads: “Les programmes scolaires reconnaissent en particulier le rôle positif de la présence française outre-mer, notamment en Afrique du Nord, et accordent à l’histoire et aux sacrifices des combattants de l’armée issus de ces territoires la place éminente à laquelle ils ont droit” [School curricula shall recognize in particular the positive role of the French overseas presence, especially in North Africa, and grant to the sacrifices of the combattants from these territories the eminent place in history they deserve].

A group of educators and researchers in the fields of history and law issued a communiqué calling for the removal of Article 4 from the law, and another petition to repeal the law was signed by 1001 historians, leading to the creation of the Comité de vigilance face aux usages publics de l'histoire (Tillier, p. 53). This organization, as well as Liberté pour l'Histoire, an association of historians chaired by Pierre Nora, editor of *Lieux de mémoire*, were founded following the enactment of the law, with the purpose of standing watch against the politicization of history and resisting the teaching of an official story. The law also inspired indignation in Algeria, prompting President Bouteflika's condemnation of the mental blindness and revisionism it was seen to represent. The pressure mounted by the groups in France eventually resulted in a retreat on the part of the Parliament: Article 4 of the 23 February law was deleted, and it was decided that no further legislation would be enacted regarding classroom curricula. Notwithstanding this decision, a ministerial directive was issued in 2007 stipulating that history teachers read to their classes the last letter of Guy Môquet, a 17 year old communist resistor executed by the Germans in 1941, in which he says good-bye and expresses his love to family and friends before his death (Tillier, p. 53).

When asked in an interview whether the silent treatment of the Algerian War and events of October 1961 in France, especially in textbooks, amounts to “un ‘retour du colonial’” [a return of the colonial], writer Mabrouck Rachedi, born of Algerian parents, responded in the affirmative, pointing to Article 4 of the February 23, 2005 law (Puig, p. 570). Rachedi expressed the view that the Algerian War remains an enormous taboo in France today, and that the temptation to rewrite history is strong. With respect to the events of October 17, 1961, he noted that it was not until an article by the historian Einaudi appeared in 1998 (*Le Monde*, 20 May 1998) that official notice was taken: “on s’imagine bien le chemin qu’il reste à parcourir pour que la France regarde enfin son histoire, *toute son histoire*, en face” [one can imagine the long way one has to go before France can finally look its own history, its entire history, in the eye] (Puig, p. 570).

Rachid Bouchareb, director of the award-winning film *Indigènes* (2006), which told the story of North African soldiers fighting for France in WWII, was accused by a French center-right deputy of falsifying history in his 2010 film *Hors-la-loi* (released in English as *Outside the Law*), a fictional family epic dealing with the 1945 massacres of Sétif and the Algerian resistance in France. The film incited demonstrations at Cannes and repressive reaction among French politicians, prompting letters of protest by director Yasmina Adi and writer Didier Daeninckx, among others. And, going back decades, the censorship on the part of film distributors within France of Italian director Gillo Pontecorvo's *La Bataille d'Alger* (1966) filmed only three years after the war, is also a story worth reading. The French delegation walked out of the Venice Film Festival, and the film was not shown in France until 1970, but even in 1971, a movie theatre that showed it regularly had its windows shattered by protesters on more than one occasion (Stora, 1991, p. 250). The readily available three-DVD set, *La Bataille d'Alger*, contains supplementary features relating to the making and reception of the film, as well as interviews with former French officers on their police role in Algeria and more specifically the question of torture.

Not surprisingly, there is an Algerian official story of the war, carefully documented by Algerian-born historian Stora, which, beginning in the late 1980s, celebrated the creation of the Algerian state by focusing on a selective group of exemplary heroes. More recently, according to Stora, the official memory transmitted through textbooks and schools in Algeria has obscured the pluralism that characterized nationalism in its early stages (between

the World Wars), and has replayed a formulaic script: “Arab Islamism, armed struggle, communitarian nationalism” (2001, p. 233). Stora also evokes the ferocious massacres of at least 10,000 harkis in 1962, explaining that the extent and ferocity of these killings (“l’une des pages les plus tragiques de la guerre d’Algérie”) [one of the most tragic pages of the Algerian War] were to remain carefully hidden away in the Algerian official story (1991, p. 202). The existence of Muslim soldiers in the French colonial army did little to substantiate the founding myth of a people united against colonization (1991, p. 207). For their part, the French turned the other way, failed to plan for the departure of the *harkis* from Algeria, and refrained from intervention in the Algerian retribution against them, resulting in the “disappearance” of tens of thousands of soldiers who fought for France (1991, p. 207). In the manifesto of the French Comité de vigilance, the authors cite the danger of confusing historical research with collective memory, arguing for critical analysis over value judgements, and complexity over consensual visions of history that tend to hide the conflicts. For the Algerian War, this means understanding fractures within Algeria itself, as well as differing views among the French, “the bloody conflicts among Algerians for hegemony in the political struggle, and the Franco-French battles between adversaries and supporters of Algerian independence” (Stora, 2001, p. 234).

Finally, controversies have sometimes been ignited by commemorative events and places, for example the 2003 “Année de l’Algérie” marking 40 years of Algerian independence, or the creation in Paris of the Institut du monde arabe and Cité nationale de l’histoire de l’immigration museums.⁸ More recently, President Nicholas Sarkozy’s announcement of the decision to create a Maison de l’histoire de France in 2015 in a site now occupied by the Archives Nationales in central Paris has been characterized as a “projet dangereux” by a group of nine historians in a declaration published in *Le Monde* (21 October 2010).

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Although a wide range of resources are available on the internet and in print for advanced level students of French, there is less material suitable for use in lower level courses. Not surprisingly, few introductory or intermediate textbooks published in the U.S. explore the Algerian War in any extended manner. However, most do have cultural sections on the Maghreb, usually consisting of short, factual paragraphs which explain geography, historical ties to France, and, in the case of Algeria, important groups of people (*harkis*, *pieds-noirs*, immigrants) (Blood & Mobarek, pp. 121, 125). Culture capsules of this kind can be the point of departure for student-created portfolios or dossiers incorporating texts in English, photos or images, and short, accessible texts in French. By way of example, Appendix B provides instructions for an intermediate-level activity consisting of a text collection and composition on a cultural topic. In the case of the Algerian War, the instructor can provide students with specific sub-topics, such as the role and fate of the *harkis*, or the FLN resistance within France during the war, along with a short list of sources. Because the dossier is a bilingual activity, with reading and writing in both English and French, students at lower levels are not limited by their language proficiency, and can learn more than basic facts about a complicated historical event.

Upper level coursework allows for more sophisticated reading and writing tasks. At the beginning of a course or unit, students can be prompted to reflect upon their home culture’s

construction of national identity in writing journals, and the same topic can be revisited at the end. Cultural narratives can include written and visual texts ranging from biographies or first person accounts to cultural “scripts” in literature or film. Students can search the web for articles on controversies like the ones discussed in the previous section, and write or present oral reports for their classmates. Students might also compare the experience of the Algerian War to aspects of the U.S. experience of Vietnam War: the ways in which the U.S. has dealt with the trauma and loss of that war, commemorative acts, reparation, or even current relations with Vietnam.

In an advanced level course on France and the Arab World, I assigned an essay of two to three pages based on a variety of documents and media. Included were the feature films *Hors-la-loi* (2010) and *La Bataille d’Alger* (1966); two segments on the three-disc DVD set of *La Bataille d’Alger: Etats-d’armes*, consisting of interviews with French officers about their role in the battle of Algiers and the question of torture, and *Remembering History*, in which a variety of important figures, both Algerian and French, speak of their role in the war and their interpretations of events; newspaper articles on *Hors-la-loi*; the factual summary of events at the end of *J’ai vécu la guerre d’Algérie*; and a timeline of phases of the war with videoclip highlights found on www.curiosphere.tv (dossiers interactifs, “frise de la guerre d’Algérie”). Students were instructed to reflect upon what they had learned in class discussion and through reading and films about the Algerian War; they could consider the themes of history and memory, the war felt as *plaie* (wound) in France, the fictional representation of the war in both feature films, the nature of guerrilla warfare, the methods of the French military, or other issues of interest to them. They were asked to refer to specific texts, yet they were also free to select the issues that were most meaningful to them.

In terms of film resources, in addition to *La Bataille d’Alger* and *Hors-la-loi*, Austrian director Michael Haneke’s 2005 film *Caché* is an engaging and thought-provoking vehicle for discussion of the Algerian War’s legacy in contemporary France, and the repression of both collective and individual memory (Celik, 2010, p. 59). As in Puenzo’s *La Historia oficial*, the unfolding of a personal, traumatic story is linked to social and political history. The film can be shown with sub-titles to students of any level, with classroom discussion and freewritten responses in French in advanced courses. Introductory and intermediate level students can engage in on-line discussion boards in English. They might also read a critical review of the film in English (Ogrodnik, 2009; Scott, 2005). The title, *Caché*, refers to the October 1961 massacre of approximately 200 Algerian protesters in Paris by French police, headed by Maurice Papon, an historical event long hidden from public view in France. But other events and feelings in the story are also hidden: the main character’s desire to deny his feelings of guilt over an episode of his childhood, his withholding of this truth from his wife, and, perhaps most importantly, the surveillance camera which records, from an unnervingly static position, the street and house where he and his family live in Paris. Interestingly, the identity of the intradiegetic photographer is not identified; rather the “objective” view of the hidden camera remains a position, which prompts the movie viewer to reflect that any perspective – even one first thought to be objective – is a “take” or stance, and may be used untransparently, for hidden purposes. Another possible interpretation is that the camera position represents the eye of conscience. The film’s thematization of vision and blindness, concealment and revelation, is a compelling introduction for students to the notion of perspective, memory, and history. A reflection upon France’s will to forget the violence of its colonial past (Celik, 2010, p. 79), *Caché* reveals the prosperity and cultural prestige of a

nation (represented by the couple's aesthetically tasteful, bourgeois home and their intellectual pursuits) built on the poverty and oppression of others, and the vague but discomfiting sense of guilt which is the bitter fruit of this foundation. In Haneke's words, the film deals with the "dark corners" or "dark stains" of collective guilt (Porton, 2005, p. 50).⁹

CLASSROOM STORIES

Instructors and students have their own stories. In my own case, I was completely attracted to the cultural difference of France as a young student. I remember my French teacher telling me, as we walked together on a street in our neighborhood one afternoon, that everything, right down to the way men combed their hair, was different in France. Struck with francophilia, I was fortunate enough to participate at the age of fifteen in a summer study abroad program in Angers and Aix-en-Provence in 1962. I recall seeing and asking my host family in Angers about graffiti I had seen on stone walls outside of the city: the letters OAS and the name POUJADE (right wing populist extremist, Pierre Poujade). During the second half of the trip in Aix-en-Provence, I lived in the apartment of a working class woman whose daughter and son-in-law were *pieds-noirs* who had just left Algeria. Decades later, I think back to those compelling signs of history which were opaque to me at the time, and I see a different France. As for my students today, in the France and the Arab World course I have taught, most recently in a video-recorded interview, an Algerian exchange student recalled his grandmother's constant lament of the loss of her son in the war. In the same course, an American student told classmates about his great uncle's French *pieds-noirs* parents, who were shot down in their Algerian shop. The juxtaposition of personal stories, collective memory, and historical accounts can prompt the reflection and appreciation of complexity which are necessary to critical thinking about culture present and past.

It is difficult to hide one's values and convictions, even if one tries. Students often sense an instructor's views indirectly; they notice what he or she emphasizes, leaves out, appears most interested in, and so forth. Instructors are engaged, thinking individuals who care about the societies they live in and come from, and whose teaching reflects a "stance" based on "cumulative experiences, beliefs, ethical values, motivations, and commitments" (Scarino, 2010, p. 324). While I do not want to impose my views or belabor them in any way, if asked by students I do not pretend to have none. At the same time, I want to stress my own conviction about the importance of bringing multiple, conflicting perspectives to the learning environment, so that students understand the forces and interests at work in controversial topics. It is fitting to end this paper at the home base, with the classroom culture or space, itself, and the stances of both instructors and students who can learn about themselves through the study of others. Teaching different sides of a difficult cultural story and its unresolved conflicts is a form of realism that respects the intelligence of all involved and fosters both students' and instructors' self-awareness as cultural subjects. And an appreciation of complexity in questions of history and culture is a simple but important outcome of foreign language study.

NOTES

1. All translations from French to English in the article are my own.

2. See Blatz & Ross (2009) for further discussion of the rewriting of history by succeeding generations, and the “selective presentation” of history in textbooks and media.
3. For foundational research and analysis in the field of memory studies see Huyssen (2003) on transnational dimensions and the role of public debate in memorial projects; Nora (1984, 1996) on collective remembering in French history; Halbwachs (1992) on the social frameworks of memory; Linenthal & Engelhardt (1996) and Schudson (1992) on the role of collective memory in recent U.S. history.
4. For further discussion of cultural relativism, see Shweder (1990).
5. See also Bacholle-Boskovic’s (2003) survey of the treatment of the Algerian War in four other high school textbooks published in France. Overall she notes that heretofore hidden dimensions of the war are beginning to emerge into the daylight in France (“le placard est désormais ouvert et un entrebâillement est déjà sensible dans les manuels scolaires”) [the closet is now open and a crack is now detectable in school textbooks] (p. 972). Her analysis points to lacunae in several of the books she surveys, including the fate of the *barkis*, and the violence of the French army.
6. See Blatz & Ross (2009) on the phenomenon of government apologies for historical injustices.
7. The first paragraph of Article one of the law reads: “La Nation exprime sa reconnaissance aux femmes et aux hommes qui ont participé à l’oeuvre accomplie par la France dans les anciens départements français d’Algérie, au Maroc, en Tunisie et en Indochine ainsi que dans les territoires placés antérieurement sous la souveraineté française” [The Nation expresses its gratitude to the women and men who participated in the work accomplished by France in the former French departments of Algeria, in Morocco, in Tunisia and in Indochina as well as in the territories placed at an earlier time under French sovereignty.] Earlier and non-controversial memory laws included the Gayssot law (1990) punishing the denial of crimes against humanity (Jewish genocide), the Taubira law (2001) defining slavery and slave trade as crimes against humanity, and the Armenia law (2001) recognizing the Armenian genocide of 1915.
8. For a discussion of these controversies in France see Weiss (2010); see also Blight (2009) on museum controversies in the American context.
9. For further analysis of Haneke’s film, see also Pages (2010) and Penney (2010).

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APPENDIX A

Selected Teaching Resources on the Algerian War

Articles and Books

D'Abbundo, A. (2004). *J'ai vécu la Guerre d'Algérie 1954-1996*. Paris: Bayard Jeunesse.

Four personal narratives reflecting on various aspects of the Algerian War, followed by documents and photos explaining major historical events and movements in Algeria and France.

Interprétations de l'histoire, questions de mémoire. *Le français dans le monde*, 372, 48-57. *Fiche pédagogique* available to subscribers on www.fdlm.org.

This series of articles contains material on the film, *Hors-la-loi*, including an interview with director Rachid Bouchareb.

Jordi, J-J. (2004). *L'Algérie*. Paris: Editions Autrement.

The Autrement Junior series is written for young French readers. Foreign language learners may appreciate the readable prose, larger-type format, and relatively short segments of reading on each topic.

Meller-Saïd, L. (2001). *Alger: Un enfant dans la tourmente*. Paris: Editions Raphaël.

Fictional diary and correspondence between two Algerian children, a Jewish nine-year old and his Muslim friend from Kabylie, from 1958 to the end of the war in 1962.

Slama, A-G. (1996). *La Guerre d'Algérie: Histoire d'une déchirure*. Evreux: Gallimard.

A valuable resource for documents and images (political tracts, posters, photos, newspaper headlines, illustrations), as well as profiles of important figures and quotations. See in particular the last section entitled "Témoignages et documents."

Websites

www.amb-algerie.fr (official site of the Algerian Embassy in France).

Under the heading "Documentation" and sub-heading "Textes historiques algériens" are a variety of documents relating to Algerian independence.

www.curiosphere.tv.

This France 5 site offers short films and archival newsreel footage (under the headings *Vidéos* and *Dossiers interactifs*) of events relating to the war, including the 1962 attempt on Charles de Gaulle's life by the OAS, the putsch by French generals against de Gaulle, the

violence in the Charonne métro station in Paris, and interviews of former officers on the question of torture. Among the *dossiers interactifs*, the *Frise de la guerre d'Algérie* is particularly interesting and useful, providing a timeline of important dates of the war, profiles of major figures, videoclips, as well as supplementary pedagogical material.

www.memorial-caen.fr (Le Mémorial de Caen, Cité de l'histoire pour la paix).

Under the heading *Evenements* and sub-heading *Les dialogiques* are texts relating to the theme of memory and history.

APPENDIX B

Cultural Dossier (Intermediate Level)

Instructions to the Student

The cultural dossier consists of a text collection and composition on the Algerian War in French. Once your specific topic has been identified, do an internet or library search for articles and other materials (films, video clips, tunes, maps) in French that relate to your topic, and begin a text collection. Keep **a special folder** for your collection. Label the folder, identifying your topic in French. You should aim for at least **five** texts (articles and other items) for the semester. You will be asked to turn in the folder from time to time, and your instructor will make comments and suggestions on your work.

For each text you place in the folder, fill out the worksheet below and attach it to your text.

* * *

Item # _____ Today's Date _____

1. Give the title of article or text in French.
2. Identify the source (name of newspaper, magazine, etc.), author (if appropriate) and date of publication.
3. List at least five important vocabulary words (key words in French) that relate to the topic.
4. Explain the gist of the article, or relevance of the text, in English. In other words, explain what you have learned about the topic. Is there an overall view or stance on the topic that you can identify?
5. Write a short paragraph in French about the article, explaining your reaction, something you've learned, or something that particularly interests you.

* * *

Make any corrections to your worksheets suggested by your instructor (for example, providing English definitions of vocabulary or writing a longer paragraph in French).

Bring your text collection and worksheets with you to class to work on a draft version of a composition. In the draft, **in your own words**, briefly explain your topic to a general reader, and the nature of your own interest in the topic. Explain what you've learned from reading the five French articles (or other texts) in the dossier.

You will work on a draft version at least once during class time. During that time, you can ask your instructor for help as you write. The drafts will be collected and the instructor will provide suggestions or corrections.

Submit your dossier (including five texts with worksheet), along with **both the draft and final versions of your composition** in French. The final version should be one page typed, double spaced.