READING PARIS AND LONDON

Teaching the City through Literary and Film Representations and On-Site Experience

How does one read the city? How is the city represented? What is the relationship between cities and texts? How do gender, race, class, sexuality, and nation shape and reshape lived experiences of the city and experiences of reading the city? These are among the questions with which we approached the development and teaching of a two-part international seminar, “A Tale of Two Cities: Reading Urban Space and Culture in Paris and London,” in the spring and early summer of 2005. International Seminars (or DIS) such as the one we taught are offered to undergraduates at Drew University, a small liberal arts institution in northern New Jersey, an hour west of New York City. They are designed for second-year students and involve a full-semester pre-departure course and an abroad experience of about three weeks. Six such seminars are offered each year on topics proposed by faculty; students apply in their first year to travel in January or May of their second year.

The seminar and pre-departure course we proposed to the selection committee in the fall of 2003 was defined by the idea of “reading the city.” We were interested in engaging our students as readers of two particular cities, Paris and London, during a twenty-one-day stay in those two capitals and the full-semester course that would precede our time abroad. We planned the literature course we team-taught, “Representing the City: Paris and London in Literature and Film,” with the objective of helping students become careful readers of the city through the examination of literary and film representations and encounters with various textual approaches to reading the city; our challenge was to link the reading competencies we helped our students develop through literature and film to skills they could use and projects they could research on-site during twenty days spent in Paris and London—ten in each city. This essay outlines our approach to both the classroom and the on-site experiences, defines the challenges we faced in both contexts, looks at what worked, and suggests what we would do differently in a second offering of the seminar. What it perhaps cannot convey is the pleasure of studying and seeing anew these two familiar cities through the eyes of such an engaged, enthusiastic, and resilient group of students.

Our interest in proposing the program grew out of our own work, our prior experiences directing study abroad programs in France and England, and our interest in interdisciplinary work and in team-teaching. Born in France, Marie-Pascale teaches seventeenth- and eighteenth-cen-

WENDY KOLMAR
MARIE-PASCALE PIERETTI
1 In his article, "The Transcultural Journey," Richard Slimbach lists the categories of competencies that will lead to learner development: 1. Perspective consciousness: the ability to question constantly the source of one's cultural assumptions and ethical judgments, leading to the habit of seeing things through the minds and hearts of others; 2. Ethnographic skills: the ability to observe carefully social behavior, manage stress, and establish friendships across cultures, while exploring issues of global significance, documenting learning, and analyzing data using relevant concepts; 3. Global awareness: a basic awareness of transnational conditions and systems, ideologies and institutions, affecting the quality of life of human and non-human populations, along with the choices confronting individuals and nations; 4. World learning direct experience with contrasting political histories, family lifestyles, social groups, arts, religions, and cultural orientations based on extensive, immersed interaction within non-English speaking, non-Americanized environments; 5. Foreign language proficiency: a threshold level facility in the spoken, non-verbal, and written communication system used by members of at least one other culture; 6. Affective development: the capacity to demonstrate personal qualities and standards of the heart (e.g., empathy, inquisitiveness, initiative, flexibility, humility, sincerity, gentleness, justice, and joy) within specific inter-cultural contexts in which one is living and learning." (Frontiers, August 2015, 206-207).

2 Because this program ran tury literature and advanced conversation courses on news, film, and popular culture in the French Department at Drew; she has co-led intensive language and culture programs in Paris, Aix, and Toulouse. Born in a New York suburb, Wendy teaches nineteenth-century British literature and Gothic literature in the English Department and also directs the Women's Studies program. She spent a year in London on a Fulbright Scholarship and has directed Drew's full-semester London program several times. As white, middle-class women, teaching at a suburban institution and living both in suburban communities, we had something in common with the majority of the students we traveled with, but we also had substantially more urban and international experiences to bring to the course.

Objectives of the Program

The overall goal of Drew's International Seminar program is for students to learn a rigorous academic approach to studying cultures other than their own through classroom and in-country experience. Our IS objectives included this broad objective of developing transcultural competency with our objectives related to urban space and representation. We wanted students to develop a set of nuanced methods and approaches for reading and experiencing other cultures, and we wanted them to develop a similarly complex and varied set of approaches to reading the city. We wanted students also to develop a comparative method both for putting their Paris readings, observations, and experiences in dialogue with those from London, and for comparing those experiences with their experiences of US cities. To add another layer, we wanted students to understand that social location informs the experience of living in a city, of walking its streets, of narrating those experiences, and of interacting with those narratives. These multilayered objectives seemed to us to interlace easily, but keeping them in our attention and the attention of our students throughout the IS experience presented one of our many challenges.

Our students came to this program with widely varying levels of experience in cities and in other cultures. As a group, the students reflected the predominant demographics of Drew and of most study abroad programs. The group was predominantly white and predominantly female; in a group of sixteen, we had three male students, one of whom was Latino. Like most Drew students, the majority came from the Northeastern United States, most from suburban communities. Most of the students had traveled relatively little; one student had spent a semester abroad in high school; several others had traveled abroad, mostly to Europe, on family vacations of a week or two; but many told us in the application interviews that they had "never been off the East Coast," "never been out of the United States," "never been out of this time zone." It also became clear to us during a pre-departure trip to New York City that, in spite of growing up in proximity to major Northeastern cities, many of the students were not comfortable navigating urban landscapes or public transportation.
Description of Program: Pre-departure Course.

The pre-departure course we offered, “Representing the City: Reading Paris and London in Literature and Film,” was an interdisciplinary, team-taught, upper-level course cross-listed between the French and English Departments. Students traveling with us to Paris and London were required to enroll in the course, but it was also open to other students. Those students traveling with us on the Dias were also required to attend an additional weekly session designed to provide practical preparation for the trip (learning “survival French” and reviewing logistics, travel plans, home-stay arrangements) as well as preparation and planning for the on-site research projects.

We selected the texts for the course primarily from among nineteenth- and twentieth-century French and British novels, poems, and short stories and organized them roughly chronologically but thematically within that structure. The course ended with four films, two French and two British, which brought more contemporary representations of the two cities into the conversation. In addition, at the beginning of the course and intermittently throughout, we assigned historical and literary critical articles that would help the students to frame some broader questions and fill in necessary context and background about the two cities. Among these were excerpts from Richard Lehan’s *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History* (1998), David Harvey’s *Paris: Capital of Modernity* (2005), Jonathan Schneer’s *London 1900: The Imperial Metropolis* (2001), Deborah Parsons’ *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* (2000), and Sukhdev Sandhu’s *London Calling: How Black and Asian Writers Imagined a City* (2004). Students who were traveling with us were also expected to read histories of Paris and London during the semester.

We began the course with two reading exercises. On the first day, we gave the students a collection of paragraph-long quotations, some from works we would read later in the semester and some from other texts, and asked them, working in small groups, to generate a collective list of ideas and images of the city that the passages evoked. On the next class day—for which the first group of framing readings was assigned—we used a similar in-class exercise with a series of images of Paris and London. The images were predominantly paintings and photographs of Paris and London in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some were familiar images of these cities—the Eiffel Tower seen from the Seine or Nelson’s Column and its lions in Trafalgar Square; others were less familiar images of crowded or deserted streets, of street vendors, prostitutes or elegant strollers in a London park, of the London docks crowded with working ships, or the Seine in the early morning mist; and artistic representations—Brassai photographs of Paris café life or Doré engravings of vagrants in a London casual ward. We wanted students to read those familiar images and to think about stories they are meant to tell and how they construct particular narratives about the city (and the nation) depending on 2005, we have only limited access to student materials—papers, journals, etc. at this point. All of the students who participated in the program have graduated from Drew, and the work they completed for the course has been returned to them. Therefore, the presence of student voices in this essay is more limited than we would like and largely anecdotal, based on our own recall of comments and conversations and on the few relevant comments made on program evaluations. We want to thank the sixteen student participants (Laura Chaff, Sara Eldridge, Vincent Cavaliero, Georgia Fowler, Laura Fowler, Victor Garcia, Sarah Gosnell, Ryan Gratacos, Ann Hagstrom, Janet Kushner, Annie Petree, Emily Perkins, Rosalie Ponte, Victoria Solleccito, Margaret Steflk, and Jacqueline Wyrwaj), whose enthusiasm, intelligence, and resilience made this program a pleasure.
on when and how they are used. For the less familiar images, we wanted students to see them as varied and sometimes conflicting representations of the city and what it means to be in the city. We asked how the city was represented, what we could tell about the perspective from which the image was constructed, and whether the representations of Paris and London differed. By the end of these two exercises, we had covered the blackboard with lists of words, ideas, and fragments of narratives about the city. From these, with the conceptual readings also informing our discussion, we generated a list of questions which we used in class for the rest of the semester and which we asked students to use in their weekly response papers. The questions are listed below with a selection in parentheses of the board jottings generated by the students:

*What is the experience of an individual in the city?*
(Alienation, anonymity, loss of identity; excitement, self-discovery, self-annihilation; insider/outsider; victim of crime or violence; cultivation of mind; taste, conversation; isolated; part of a crowd)

*Who inhabits the city? How does a city affect and define its inhabitants?*
(Immigrants, natives; rich and poor; women, men, children; bourgeoisie; artists; criminals; urbanity; defined as mob or crowd; offers safety or poses danger.)

*What is the relationship between the city and the countryside? Between the city and nature?*
(City as an escape from the boredom of the country; country as a refuge from the city; city as a control of nature; city as "jungle" or "garden").

*What is the role of the city as center?*
(Economic, political, cultural, artistic; of immigration, trade, empire, education, sin, debauchery, crime; crossroads, port, "all roads lead to..."

*How do we understand the city as a built environment?*
(Order vs. randomness; aesthetic vs. utilitarian; public vs. private; functional, decorative, or designed for leisure; design of city; arrangement of neighborhoods, districts; relation to river or other natural elements; renovation, "urban renewal"; destruction and rebuilding of neighborhoods; modernization; historic preservation)

*How do we understand the city as a social environment, structure, and context?*
(Possibilities of upward and downward mobility; rigid, closed or fluid social structure; creates or obstructs community and connection; offers care and aid to people in need or exploits and kills; welcomes immigrants or marginalizes and expels them.)

*How does the city define and how is the city defined by history?*
(Buildings from many different times; monuments and memorial structures; changing function of city over time)

*How does the city embody social, political, and moral thinking?*
(City as embodiment of enlightenment thinking, of Modernism, progress, shaped and reshaped to serve political projects and nationalist thinking)

*What are the images of the city and metaphors used for it?*
*What narratives are associated with the city?*
(Film noir; city mouse/country mouse; young man/woman makes it (fails to make it) in the city; crime and detective; sentimental, romance (finding love in the city or not); invasion by outsiders (aliens, vampires, immigrants); being an outsider.)

*How does one read the city? What are strategies for interpretation? How does the city invite or defy interpretation? What makes a city intelligible or not? How does the identity and/or social location of the observer effect the understanding of the city?*
(The flaneur, the consumer, the artist/photographer; maps, plans, grids, labyrinths)

*What is the relationship between cities and texts? How do texts recreate the experience of the urban? How do they mirror its spaces or design?*

Through these questions and the classroom exercises that generated them, the students created, with our help and prompting, multiple starting points for approaching the literary texts they would encounter later in the course and the cities they would encounter when we traveled. In reading the novels and poems that followed these opening exercises, we tried to combine multiple methodologies. In some classes, we approached a text by asking literary questions, but, on other days, we began by asking students to map the texts onto a street plan of the particular city and engage the text from a spatial rather than a textual orientation. We hoped that this reading method would translate effectively into students' interactions with the two cities when they were actually walking their streets.

For example, in reading excerpts from Zola’s *Au bonheur des dames* (*The Ladies' Paradise*), we focused on the French capital's modernization during the second Empire. The context in which large departments stores opened and forced small neighborhood shops to close was the same as the one in which Napoleon III supported Haussmann's plans to eliminate old medieval neighborhoods (and the communities that inhabited them) and to replace them with broad avenues and elegant new buildings, creating the north-south and east-west axes that still define Paris. At the beginning of the class discussion on Zola, students used Paris maps to locate the sites of the *Grands Magasins du Louvre* and of the *Bon Marché* in Paris, models Zola used to develop his tale of a small haberdashery that successfully develops into a large department store. This exercise allowed students to familiarize themselves with the city's geography and with the history and characteristics of particular neighborhoods in Paris; it also changed the way we approached the reading of the text together in class, making us more attentive to the ways in which urban geography is written into and shapes a literary text.
Our reading of *Au bonheur des dames* started another thread of discussion that resurfaced with several major texts later in the course. The *grand magasins*, the department stores that sprang up as centers of consumption and commerce in nineteenth-century European capitals, were some of the first public spaces designed for women, where they would see and be seen. By this point in the class, students had been introduced to Walter Benjamin’s idea of the *flâneur*, that “expert observer of the urban scene, [who] translates the chaotic and fragmentary city into an understandable and familiar space” (Parsons 3); we considered whether this figure is gendered, always the privileged male observer. Some of the early texts in the class by Baudelaire and Verlaine had opened a conversation about *flânerie*, and Flora Tristan’s *Promenades dans Londres* had led us to ask what it means when a woman claims the role of a public observer, as a reader of the city, when the street is a space forbidden to women other than prostitutes. Colette’s *Claudine in Paris* returned us to this theme as its young heroine, newly arrived from the country, has to confront others’ interpretations of what it means for her to be in the street alone or to appear in the public space of a Paris café. Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway walks through London to buy flowers in Bond Street for her party and in “Street Haunting” walks across London in search of the perfect lead pencil, working out in the process what Parsons claims is a gendered way of knowing a “tangible and walkable metropolis” (3). This way of knowing the city, common in women’s modernist novels, is different from the rootless cos- mopolitanism of twentieth-century male modernist texts. Thus, we tried to help our students develop the idea that the experience of cities is gendered in layered ways.

Among the texts we assigned, two in particular allowed us to develop a comparative method of reading, Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* and Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London*. Dickens’ juxtaposition of a London of banks, law offices, and quiet squares with the wine-and-blood-soaked streets of revolutionary Paris allowed us to compare within one text multiple narratives of the emerging city of modernity. Perhaps more useful still was the possibility the text offered of looking at the multiple readings within the text. We asked how French and English characters read and inhabited the two cities and their landscapes differently, and we asked if this novel presented a distinctly “English” reading of Paris and, if so, what aspects of the text could be identified to support that argument.

*Down and Out in Paris and London* allowed us to make similar comparisons from the perspective of the cities’ working class or unclassed. This text follows its English narrator from his time trying to survive in Paris on the wages he earns as a *plongeur* in the steamy kitchen of a large hotel through a period of vagrancy sleeping night-to-night in the casual wards of London and its environs. Orwell’s semi-autobiographical novel looks at the two cities from below and depicting the lives of the poor, the wage- and day-laborers, the immigrants, and the destitute. Throughout the book, we are aware of looking up at the affluent middle-class life just on the
other side of the baize door that divides the Paris kitchen from the rest of the hotel. Comfort is very close but utterly unattainable and the poor, here mostly immigrants from various parts of Europe, are intensely aware of what that other life would mean, while those who inhabit that privilege never see or experience the down and out, a whole world of urban life that most of its inhabitants never notice. This text allowed us to ask the following questions: Does life at the bottom of the social ladder look different on either side of the Channel, at least in Orwell’s experience?

The constructions of urban life and its class divisions in Orwell’s text connected directly with two movies we studied at the end of the course: Mathieu Kassovitz’ La Haine—a film that focuses on the lives of a group of second- or third-generation immigrant youth in the banlieue, the communities in the Paris suburbs—and Stephen Frears’ Dirty Pretty Things—a film set in the night world of London’s illegal immigrants, many of whom also work in a large hotel. These two films gave us an opportunity to bring the issues around class and immigration that Orwell raises into a more contemporary moment and to help students to focus on the ways in which current tensions around class and immigration shape the cultures and politics of the two cities.

These two films and the others that we viewed at the end of the course—Cédric Klapisch’s When the Cat’s Away (Chacun cherche son chat) and Jean-Pierre Jeunet’s Amélie (Le fabuleux destin d’Amélie Poulain)—brought the narratives and images of the two cities into a contemporary context; they also provided a synthesis for the end of the course. Each film was presented by a panel of students: their assignment was to discuss the views of the city that each film represented and then to connect them with the other material we had read and viewed during the semester. Thinking about these films and their dark or fantasy versions of contemporary Paris and London provided another opportunity for comparative analysis and a conceptual bridge into the on-site experience.

In addition to this final panel presentation, students completed two additional assignments for the pre-departure course. Throughout the course, as mentioned above, they wrote weekly responses to the literary texts; in the responses, students used the questions we had generated together at the beginning of the course, a strategy which we hoped would make the questions increasingly a part of their thinking about the city and confirm them as a set of approaches the students would turn to regularly to shape their interpretation of what they encountered on-site. The students also wrote a final paper on a text or texts not listed on the syllabus (we provided them with lists of recommended film and literary texts). We described the paper as a synthetic exercise in which they had to place the text they had selected in dialogue with other texts we had read and with the variety of interpretations and understandings of the city that they had generated. Our objectives for this assignment were, first, for the students to bring their own reading competencies to the project of reading a city text on their own, and, second, for the synthetic nature of the paper to revisit the questions and perspectives we had developed during the semester. In this way, all the course
material would be fresh in their thinking when they arrived in Europe.

At the same time that students were pursuing ideas of the city through literary texts and assignments, we were taking a more practical approach to preparing them for the trip in a series of required evening sessions. A part of each of these sessions was practice in “survival French”; the students learned to count, to greet each other, to order food, and to ask basic questions. Only about half of the students traveling with us had substantial knowledge of French. Although we placed those who had little or no French with English-speaking families in Paris, we felt that all of the students should work on acquiring some minimal French as it would make them more independent when they arrived in France. With a similar objective, we also had the students plot Underground and Metro journeys from the places where they would be living to various sites in the two cities, and also do preliminary explorations of the cities by web.

The other major objective of the DIS pre-departure evening sessions was to have students begin to work on their on-site research projects. Though students would ultimately write individual research papers, we asked them to begin their research in teams. The final individual project could be a research paper, a photo-essay, a website, a film, or a collection of maps. The only requirement was that the project had to rely on some research completed on site. The students chose a broad topic or theme around which they would all focus their projects: art and culture, sexuality; representation of “foreign” cultures; and shopping and commerce. Early in the pre-departure sessions, we gave students guidelines for their final projects and the following suggestions about how the groups might approach their themes:

If your team chose “Rivers,” you might look at the way the river structures the city; the difference between neighborhoods on either side; the river as a commercial resource; the role of the river in the history of the city; bridges and river crossing and their economic, historical, aesthetic role; jobs and work associated with the river; representations of the river in paintings and photographs of the city; the use of space along the rivers.

If your team chose to focus on “Immigration,” you might look at specific groups who have immigrated to the two cities by focusing on neighborhoods, work, contributions to food and culture, markets and shops, social and government policy on immigration, treatment of illegals, representation of immigrant groups in popular culture. Your team could divide by individual groups or neighborhoods, or it could divide by issues and look at multiple groups under each theme. (Course handout)

Step-by-step, through the semester, the students produced individual project proposals and an annotated bibliography of relevant sources. As a group, they created an on-site research plan, developing lists of sites to visit, organizations and people they might contact, things to look for on the street, sources they would collect (such as newspapers, pamphlets, brochures, magazines, photographs, and so on). We required them to
develop topics that compared the two cities and that would be easy to
research on site. The latter of those two requirements presented one of the
real challenges of this course.

Course Description: On-site Experience

We departed, with sixteen students, for the on-site experience immedi-
ately after graduation in late May 2005. We split our time equally between
Paris and London, spending ten days in each city and allowing one day for
our Eurostar journey from Paris to London. We began in Paris in the hope
that their freshness and excitement would take the students through their
initial days of dealing with the difficulties of a non-English speaking envi-
enment and the potential challenges of home-stays with the group spread
out across the city, from its center to its remote suburbs.

The structure of the on-site experience combined planned group
experiences with free time in which students were expected to work with
their groups on their research projects and to complete some assigned
comparison exercises, which they documented in field journals. In gener-
al, mornings were for the most part structured by us with speakers, walk-
ing tours, site or museum visits; afternoons and some evenings were left free
for research and exploration, while other evenings involved group dinners,
theatre, and dance or music performances. In some morning sessions in
each city, students attended lectures by guest speakers, scholars, and prac-
titioners in various fields, who provided, in addition to particular expertise,
both some contact with members of the host culture and opportunities for
students to ask questions and to get suggestions for resources that would
help them with their research projects. Both in Paris and in London, speak-
ers focused on issues related to immigration, so that students had a better
basis for comparing British and French approaches to immigration policy
and immigrant communities. In Paris, a speaker discussed the representa-
tion of Paris in film; in London, another speaker talked about London in
contemporary multicultural literature. Each of these speakers made con-
nections back to the material of the pre-departure course.

The question and conversation time after these talks turned out to be
crucial. Students’ questions, for the most part, grew out of the work they
were doing for their research projects and out of their attempts to connect
their first-hand observations in the street with the historical, social and
cultural perspectives speakers were providing. For instance, at the end of
the lecture on “A Paris of Immigrants,” some students commented on and
asked about the number of interracial couples they had observed on the
streets of Paris. The talk, it seemed, illuminated for them what they had
been able to observe first-hand. The speaker suggested that the French
government’s insistence on assimilation and resistance to maintaining
intact ethnic communities had forced a greater social mixing and created
more opportunities for members of various communities to meet within
the public school system for instance. Clearly, this had not eliminated seri-
ous racist tension and discrimination in France, but this observation led
students to try to observe race more carefully in Paris and in London and
to ask critical questions about the structure of—and American attitudes
and policies toward—ethnic and religious communities in US cities.

Several mornings were devoted to walking tours or site visits. At the
beginning of each trip, we had a walking tour and a riverboat ride that or-
iented students to the center of the city and reviewed major information
about the history of the city. In each city, we also arranged a walking tour
focused on major renovations or reorganizations of the city plan and design.
So, in Paris, we had a tour focused on Haussmann's redesign of the city to
erase the old medieval street plan and replace it with broad boulevards and
vistas. In London, a walking tour of the City of London emphasized the
failure of such plans before and after Christopher Wren, so that London had
just been reconstructed on the old medieval plan. These two walking tours
helped focus students' attention on the physical layout and design of each
city and made them start thinking about the meanings of those different
approaches to city design and re-design and also about the relationship to
the city's past embodied in each approach. We also visited major museums,
one focused on the history of the city (Musée Carnavalet in Paris and the
Museum of London) and one major art museum (The Louvre and Tate
Britain and Tate Modern), and took day trips out of each city. Beyond the
activities we planned, we gave students a comparative list of sites in the two
cities; they were to visit three of these sites in each city, observe and docu-
ment them in the field journals they kept and then compare them after the
visit to the second site. A partial list of those sites includes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF SITE</th>
<th>PARIS</th>
<th>LONDON</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cathedrals</td>
<td>Notre Dame</td>
<td>St. Paul's Cathedral Westminster Abbey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museums (buildings converted from other uses)</td>
<td>Musée D'Orsay</td>
<td>Tate Modern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major National Museum</td>
<td>Louvre</td>
<td>National Gallery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street and City Markets</td>
<td>Bucci St Puces de Clignancourt</td>
<td>Portobello Rd Spitalfields Camden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cemeteries</td>
<td>Père Lachaise Montparnasse</td>
<td>Hampstead Highgate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Areas of Development Financial Centers</td>
<td>La Défense</td>
<td>Docklands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Monuments and Memorials</td>
<td>Arc de Triomphe Pantheon</td>
<td>Nelson's Column Admiral Arch Albert Memorial</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This exercise moved the students around Paris and London and asked them to turn their attention to different areas of the city, but the choices they made from the list were often the most obvious and available and the comparisons they presented in their journals were not always well developed.

In Paris, students were assigned to home-stays with a French family in a Paris neighborhood. Students were required to eat dinner with their families each night and most families planned a Sunday outing for their student. Students were able to opt for families who spoke only French or both French and English. When possible, these families were matched with students according to their particular research projects, so that the host families were also potential project interviewees. The home-stays provided an experience of Parisian private life away from tourist centers and the opportunity for the students to have casual discussions that provided them with ideas and sources for their projects. The home-stays also forced students to find ways to negotiate within the culture on an everyday basis in a way that no other experience could provide. While some students were “surprised at the friendliness and welcome of their French families,” others commented that they felt “far from everyone and alone” when with their French family; for some “nothing was better than immersion with my French family” (Evaluations, May 2005) while for others this was clearly the hardest part of the trip.

In London, the students lived in a group in flats in the London neighborhood of Bayswater. They had to shop and cook for themselves, find the local laundromat and post office, and, in the process, interact to some extent with their English neighbors. In each city, students bought passes for public transport, so that, from their first day, they navigated the city on their own on buses, subways, or on foot. Far better than traveling en masse in a tourist coach, this approach to travel demanded that students develop some attentiveness to the city and its layouts, notice landmarks, plan routes from place to place, and discover the relationships between different sites.
and neighborhoods in the city. They had to be in the street, in the crowd, and had to observe and engage the city in some way. They commented that, by the end of the trip, they had learned “how to navigate a city independently,” and “how to use city space.” “Being a suburban kid,” one student wrote, “[now] I could live in a city.” “After getting around Paris,” wrote another, “I felt I had conquered the city” (Evaluations, May 2005).

Challenges

This two-part experience presented a variety of intellectual and pedagogical challenges for us as instructors, particularly given the multiple objectives we had defined for the course. The first of these was bridging between the on-campus course and the on-site experience. We had, as we have outlined above, tried in the pre-departure course to give the students multiple methods for encountering and interpreting the cities we were visiting. But the challenge, once the excitement of arriving in Paris took over, was both to keep the students attentive to and using what they had already learned, as well as finding ways to help them capture and think through their own reactions and perspectives as they would those of a Dickens character responding to bloodshed in the streets of Paris. In setting up the on-site activities for each city, we chose lecturers who would be able to make connections with the material and issues we had discussed in the course; we hoped that the students would also be attentive to the ways in which these different readers approached texts and topics they had already encountered sometimes in similar ways but also sometimes in very different ways and from different perspectives.

The journals and the site assignments were also intended to provide sustained observation and self-reflection and were meant to be structured around the questions we had developed together. When the journals were submitted, we noticed that students were not always accomplishing those goals. In spite of our questions, the students tended to fall into simply recording what happened on a given day rather than thinking analytically about what they had observed or about themselves as observers. We seemed to be most successful sustaining the course conversations and questions in group discussions when we were there to bring them up and make the connections explicitly; this process happened less effectively when students were doing their own independent observation and reflection. At least some students felt, at the end of the trip, that they had learned “how to interpret cities in multiple ways and connect formats such as movies and literature to historical, social and political aspects of the city” (Evaluations); if others had also learned this, we felt frustrated to see little evidence of it in their journals.

The students themselves presented another challenge, coming as they did largely from suburban backgrounds to a small private suburban liberal arts college. Most of the students had relatively little experience of US cities. On a practical level, this meant that they had few street skills to bring to navigating a European city; on the conceptual level, it meant that they had lit-
tle American material and experience to bring to bear in any kind of comparison. So, when they arrived in Paris, they were negotiating the culture shock of a different country but also the culture shock of their first extended time in a city. We tried to get the students to observe themselves going through this experience and be conscious of its complexity, but for those who were unsettled by it, this was difficult. The notable exceptions were one or two students who had grown up in a more urban environment, among them our sole Latino student; because they had already developed selves that functioned in a city context, they seemed to move more comfortably in the environments of Paris and London than most of the other students. They became the bolder explorers of the two cities and made more contacts for research projects than other students on the trip. The advantage to the whole group of becoming comfortable with the environment was that these few students took others along with them as they explored and helped them to settle into the city and find their own ways through it.

The relatively short time we spent in each city also presented some major challenges. With only ten days in each place, we had limited time for students to feel lost or disoriented or for them to be tourists, and substantial constraints on their effective research time. In spite of our efforts to orient them in a variety of ways before our departure, on site we still had to deal, on the one hand, with those who felt thoroughly lost and disoriented and, on the other, with those who felt the need to see every major site in each city within five hours of arrival. Neither the lost nor the frantic tourists were able to look, observe, or think in the more analytical modes we had tried to teach them, so we planned early on to structure some activities (river tours, walking tours) that both oriented and trained the tentative and lost students and that satisfied the others’ thirst for tourist experiences. Doing so allowed us to move on quickly to experiences that more fully addressed our objectives for the on-site experience. We were lucky to have among our students a couple of seasoned travelers and some adventurous students who set a tone of excited exploration and carried some of the more timid students along with them.

The limited time made it essential that we set clear parameters for the student projects and steer them early away from the undoable. We knew that the projects had to be based on resources that were easily accessible and usable by visiting students. In ten days in a city, students, especially sophomores, could not expect to conduct multiple long interviews with experts, scholars or government officials even if they could have set one or two up in advance—or to complete in-depth research. The most successful topics were those that grew out of research done in the street, on transport, through quick public encounters, site visits or observations, or a question or two asked in a shop or café or over dinner with their host families. As students began to shape their projects in the pre-departure course, we worked with them to develop the topic into a doable on-site project. A group whose broad topic was sexuality, for example, was encouraged to address the following questions: how do you break that
topic down and define it in terms that can be explored on site? What can you observe or visit? To whom can you speak? What can you look for in the street that will help you understand the topic? What can you learn from web or other research before you go that will help you? Finally, one student in the group settled on trying to compare two neighborhoods marked as “gay” neighborhoods in city guides. Another student in this group decided to look at the representation of women’s sexuality in the street. It was crucial that each student leave London on the twenty-first day of our trip with sufficient material to support the development of the project that would be completed once the student returned to campus early in the fall semester. Certain kinds of information could be added later but nothing could replace on-site research.

Home-stays, while in some ways one of the best and most important parts of the Paris experience, also presented some significant challenges. In setting up the home-stays, we worked with an excellent Paris organizer who made mostly successful placements, but the nature of those placements varied tremendously. While one student was placed with an affluent white family in an intimidating yet beautiful apartment overlooking the Seine, another found herself with a Senegalese mother who was the single parent of three living in a tiny cramped apartment. Some students found that their families tried to serve them familiar foods at most meals, while others found that they did not recognize anything that was served at dinner. Some students were in the heart of Paris; others were in distant suburbs and had to walk half a mile to the nearest Metro. Some students found that their family’s English was excellent; others were pleasantly surprised by how well they could use their French; but others ate every night with a dictionary in hand or sat silent, without understanding what was going on. While each one of these experiences is a teaching/learning opportunity and worked particularly well when students were able to visit each other and to see a variety of ways that families lived, the initial questions about why they ended up in particular situations, and how to deal with particular awkwardness and discomforts, created some additional unease at the beginning of the trip. Our challenge was to turn their “this is weird” or “why do these people do things that way?” comments into reflections on their own assumptions and habits, to get them to ask: “Why do we do things that way?” instead. When the home-stays and our strategies around them worked, these were undeniably experiences that challenged our students and built their transcultural competencies.

The Research Projects

Many of the challenges we had to resolve also turned out to be the strengths of the program. This was mostly true of the group research projects, which helped the students read and interact with the cities in multiple and new ways. The projects worked, one student commented on the course evaluation “because we were able to view the city from a particular point of view”;

another student observed that “the more detailed observation required [by
the projects helped me learn more actively”; another felt that the projects provided “a different lens to see the city through but,” the student cautioned, “also created additional stress in a busy program” (Evaluations, May 2005).

We believe that the projects also advanced transcultural competence in the group, to return to Slimbach’s definition, by developing the ethno-graphic skills of the whole group, though perhaps not to equal degrees for every student. Though the projects were designed to be researched by small groups, they in fact became collective projects. They also created continual opportunities for students to teach each other as each researcher became more knowledgeable about an aspect of the city we were visiting.

As we walked through the city, the students were always looking for things that might help with one of the projects or taking photographs of something that might contribute to someone else’s work. The projects that worked most effectively focused on the following: street and stencil art; sexuality in the street; politics in the street; and shopping and consumption. The presence of students in the group who were always looking out for material in the street made everyone look more attentively at city spaces. They looked around, scrutinized walls and alleys for street art, and noticed where it was and what was being represented. They looked at the representations of women in advertising in the metro and argued over its sexual explicitness; some of the women students also reported their own experiences in the street that became part of this researcher’s “data.” They read every political poster they passed and tried to figure out what issues it was debating (in France, usually the opposing positions on the ratification of the European constitution; in London, mostly anti-war or anti-Blair statements). And they noticed what shops and markets were where, who shopped at them, and what they sold. Each project created a new way of looking at the city, its inhabitants, and its public spaces and developed, we felt, a richer and more multiple kind of attention to various urban environments. At the same time, one of the major challenges of the research projects was to keep a realistic sense of what a sophomore could learn in ten days on-site, while trying to push students to take on topics that asked them to look at the unfamiliar. We wanted to push them past superficial understandings of what they were seeing and to give them research experiences that would free them of their own frames of reference or cultural locations. Several projects did seem to work this way for the student researcher and, ultimately, for the whole group.

The street art project grew out of the student’s experience as a street artist himself and was inspired to some extent by scenes in La haine that referred to hip hop culture. Having done a lot of web research on his topic, this student was able, just prior to our departure, to set up an appointment with stencil artist, Blek le Rat and his wife, Sybille Prou, a photographer and documenter of stencil art in Paris. Aside from the fact that setting up an appointment with these two artists who lived in an eastern banlieue of Paris was a real coup, the student communicated his enthusiasm and interest in street art to our entire group by sharing images of stencil art and paste-
up/mosaic art (paper or other medium pasted with glue to any surface) as well as information about these artists. Soon the whole group was looking for traces of this art, often hard to see in the urban landscape. One day, the group found a piece of paste-up/mosaic art on the central column of the Fontaine des Palmiers, in front of the Châtelet theater. The student doing the project knew that the artist's name was Space Invader and told the group that he camouflaged his art by evoking the style of the monument or other surface where he pasted his art. In this case, the artist had created an Egyptian-style mosaic design inspired by the four Sphinxes surrounding this public fountain. Not only did this particular piece show the students the artist's "conversation" with the original monument, it also made them pay attention to a fountain that embodied the Napoleonic fascination with Egyptian art. This particular moment made us revisit the question of how a city defines and is defined by its history. Students could see the comment of a twenty-first century artist on a public fountain that was itself evoking the early nineteenth century and what was perceived as French political dominance/expansion at that time. In London, the street art project also led this student, and several members of the group who accompanied him, to areas of the city and city spaces that they might not have otherwise experienced. Through his Paris connections, the student researcher had an introduction to a London street artist who, with a group of other street artists, creates and "exhibits" his work in an old warehouse space in an industrial neighborhood in north London. Visiting this space and interacting with this group highlighted for students the connections between the French and English street art communities but also the differences. It made them think about the appropriation and transformation of urban spaces over time and it took them out of the worlds of tourist London.

One of the projects in the sexuality group focused on a comparison of gay neighborhoods in Paris and London; it, too, changed the way students looked at both cities. The student working on the project had conducted research prior to departure on the history of the several neighborhoods and had read gay and mainstream travel guides to the city and noted the sites and neighborhoods they identified to their readers. The students quickly found and began to explore the Manais in Paris, a neighborhood that, as the students' preliminary research showed, had evolved tremendously over time: a marshland drained in the Middle Ages to become an attractive place for nobility who settled there in the famous "Hôtels particuliers" (large mansions); in the early twentieth-century, it became the site of the Jewish community and then, in the 1990s, Paris' primary gay neighborhood. The difficulty of this project increased when students went to London and realized that the gay neighborhoods are much more spread out and less clearly defined than in Paris. Soho, the guidebooks' candidate for the primary gay neighborhood, seemed a more mixed community to them and different from the Manais. This different configuration brought into question the high or low visibility of a "minority" community depending on how integrated it is in a particular area. Other interesting questions also emerged from their
inquiry: what specific historical, economic, commercial, social and religious factors explain why a minority settles in a particular neighborhood? Does a community defined by sexuality behave differently in an urban environment than one defined by national, class, or religious identity? To find answers to these questions, students had to walk a lot through the streets of these neighborhoods and take notes on what they perceived to be their characteristics. Students also had to talk to Parisians and Londoners, to waiters and waitresses in cafés and people they met on the street and in clubs in order to understand how people in the city saw these neighborhoods. With projects such as this one and others that focused on ethnic or immigrant communities, we worried about the potential for a voyeuristic, outsider perspective on the community, especially given the limited time students had in each city. In this case, the student researcher was a women’s studies major who had already done work on sexuality and gender, which meant she brought strong background knowledge to the project. She also used multiple tourist guides defined for different audiences, which agreed and disagreed and highlighted different aspects of these neighborhoods depending on their intended audience. These texts made the student more aware of her own perspective and observations and of the ways in which what she observed in the street—especially in London—did not necessarily mesh with guidebook narratives and descriptions.

Another student—who arrived in Paris with her project still in an amorphous form—became fascinated by the political posters, graffiti, and placards all over Paris that focused on the upcoming referendum on the European Union constitution (May 2005). Her project became an analysis of the ways in which political life manifests itself on the streets in Paris and London. In addition to street protests and passionate discussions with her host family, she found an abundance of political texts and images to analyze. Everyone in the group began to collect and photograph these materials and to look out for them everywhere we went; and they started to wonder why they saw what they saw where they saw it. The following questions became topics for conversation with her host family at dinner and questions for all of our visiting speakers: Why did the “non” posters predominate in a particular neighborhood? Why did a particular environmental group support the “oui” side and another the “non”? This particular researcher’s French proficiency was high, so she was able to collect and make use of the pamphlets, newspapers, and literature that she and other students collected and to share with the group what she was reading. In London, the politics she found most prominent in the street in 2005 were anti-Blair and anti-Iraq war. A group of protesters camped every day in front of Parliament were a convenient source of anti-war literature and of interviewees; she visited them several times with other students, talked with them, and photographed the protest. Thanks to this project, all of the students started looking for evidence of political life on the street in the same way that they had helped spot camouflaged stencil graffiti. Of this research experience, the student wrote later:

These varying experiences made me begin to consider my role as
participant in the vast political workings of the city. Why might my experience be different in one of these cities, as opposed to the small town where I grew up? Rather than consider myself an outsider, a proverbial fly on the wall, I think it is important to address the fact that visitors to and inhabitants of a city are active participants in its political behavior. In fact, one might say that it is the unique combination of participants in a city that fuels political contention (Laura Fowler, e-mail, 5/28/2008).

Intrigued by Zola’s description of a department store in Paris and its economic and social effects on a neighborhood, another student proposed to create a photo-journal with critical observations on shops and commerce in Paris and London. This project was effective in terms of transforming the common tourist activity of shopping or window-shopping into a critical reading of commercial sites. The student went with other students, attracted by the nature of the project, to explore various types of open-air markets, boutiques, and department stores. Because shopping had become research, the students looked for more varied shopping and market sites and started to pay more attention to the full range of goods for sale and to the variety of the shoppers; a trip to Bon Marche, Harrods, or Liberty of London involved looking at the building and its location, wondering why the Liberty building is a half-timbered pseudo-Tudor structure, while Harrods has a hall filled with golden sphinxes and Egyptian columns, neither of which they would probably have noticed had they simply been looking to buy presents. These buildings and their interiors evoked questions about how the histories of these particular department stores drew in and refracted Britain’s economic and colonial history and about whether and how those histories still shaped contemporary experiences of shopping in these stores.

Each of the successful research projects added a layer to the group’s experience of the two cities and built connections and collaborations within the group as students grew increasingly interested in each other’s research. The projects undeniably built ethnographic skills and world knowledge as the students helped each other refine their research questions and accumulate additional materials for the project. Some students, like the student who comments on her politics project above, also shifted their understanding of themselves as observers and participants in the lives of these cities.

What We Would Change

This teaching and travel experience succeeded in meeting many of our goals for the course and the on-site experience, making our students better readers of the city and helping them develop transcultural competencies. Evaluations suggest that the students thought so too. As is inevitable in any teaching experience, there were surprises—such as the way the individual research projects reshaped the group’s experience—and there were some disappointments. At the end of the program, we were frustrated that our students seemed to have only begun to develop useful comparative methods.
and could not effectively articulate or form a coherent analysis based on Slimbach's first competency, "perspective consciousness"—the ability to reflect on one's own assumption and location. Perhaps we were asking too much of sophomores. In a second offering of this program, we would address these areas of frustration or disappointment in the ways outlined below.

Though the pre-departure course modeled comparative methods, and on-site assignments emphasized it, the students, whatever their intelligence and ability levels generally did not demonstrate effective comparative approaches in their journals or in their final projects. In retrospect, we wonder if we spent too little time making explicit how to do comparative work. In the next iteration of the program, we will make this question much more central to the pre-departure course and evening sessions. In the course, we can emphasize the many levels on which comparison functions within the texts and how to create comparisons between texts. What are the various dimensions on which we can compare the texts? What kinds of evidence do we need to provide to support comparisons? In helping students plan their research projects, we will have them plan more carefully as part of their proposals the specifics and grounds of comparison. We also realized that students were comparing two foreign cultures' "urban objects," often without having a basic knowledge or experience of the "urban object" in their home culture. Giving students some questions to ask might help their research, such as: on what basis will I compare neighborhoods in two cities? Will I be able to collect comparable information in the two cities? Can I test the research plan in a US city with which I am familiar? What would I need to learn and what information would I need to acquire in order to study this "urban object" in my own culture? Am I also able to find that information for Paris and London?

Redesigning our major comparison exercise seems necessary to address some of these questions. Students were given the list of paired sites to visit just before they left the States, but only began to work on these comparisons once they arrived in Europe. In redesigning this exercise, we would begin the activity of comparison during the pre-departure course in two ways. First, we would have students visit comparable sites in New York or New Jersey, do basic research, and make observations about those sites. By discussing these observations as a group, analyzing photographs of the sites, we would develop collectively better methods for observing and documenting such urban sites. In addition, each student in the group would research one pair from the list of Paris/London sites and prepare a brief summary of that information; these summaries would be compiled into a guide that the students would take with them to Paris and London. As a result, each student would begin their comparison with some knowledge of why the sites are important and what to look for—and one student in the group would be able to serve as a guide and resource for the others. With more in-depth preparation, we believe that our students would be more successful in their comparative project—a goal that is central to this DIS. Students should also keep much better records of their on-site observations, photographs, and other research activities. Every student
in the group had some amount of material she/he had collected and could not use because its source was undocumented and the student could not recall enough of that information once back in the States.

We will also enhance our emphasis in pre-departure activities on "perspective consciousness," defined bySlimbach as "the ability to question constantly the source of one's cultural assumptions and ethical judgments, leading to the habit of seeing things through the minds and hearts of others." At the end of the program, students were not effective in synthesizing, analyzing, or reflecting on the fragmentary consciousness they had developed. In future courses, we will have to begin by asking the students to be self-reflexive about their own social locations at home before they travel, to hypothesize about their reactions to the cities we will visit, and to reflect on how home will look from those sites. Journal assignments could, in part, focus on re-evaluating those hypotheses and attitudes as the trip progresses. By also including some discussion in the evening sessions about how the United States is perceived from Paris and London, students might also become more attentive to how others read them. By improving our approach to comparison and to self-reflection in these ways, we hope to improve the analytical skills and critical consciousness the students are able to achieve in their journals and projects. This strategy seems particularly important when students are making observations about issues such as race, immigration, or sexuality—issues about which they may feel conflicted, confused, or silenced in their home environments.

Sharpening the goals of our program and refining its articulation in these ways should, we believe, enhance our students learning in several ways. Making more explicit connections between classroom and experiential learning will help students become more aware of how knowledge of the city is constructed in their class readings and how it relates (or not) to their own experiences. Reading the city in books, viewing the city on the screen, or observing it in the street should make our students more confident in their abilities to apply knowledge acquired in the classroom to enrich, revise, and assess perspectives they develop through personal perceptions of Paris and London. Finally, our students will not only see much more than meets the eye in these two European capitals, but they will also reap the reading strategies acquired in this seminar more generally to enhance their capacity to navigate texts and cities independently outside the course. Some recent retrospective comments from student participants, with which we will close, suggest that the program succeeded in accomplishing some of these goals in its first iteration; in the future, we hope to develop the program further and more fully integrate its various elements.

Before I entered the DIS program,... I was relatively inexperienced with life in big cities such as Paris and London. Growing up on a farm in the countryside, my family very rarely traveled into urban areas, except occasionally to see a Broadway show or visit a museum. Even trips to New York during my time at Drew were infrequent. I'd never spent a night in a large city, let alone navigated my
way through one by myself. However, my visit to Paris with DIS was a completely life-altering experience that significantly changed the way in which I perceived the concept of “the city.” In this city, I felt truly liberated. To walk the streets of Paris, admiring the elegance and beauty of the architecture and the depth of its culture was beyond anything I could have imagined. The DIS experience was more than eye-opening; it was incredibly liberating. I barely knew that city or its language, yet I found myself conversing with people in a language that was entirely new to me. It was such an exciting experience that not only completely changed the way I viewed “the city” but also my own identity and understanding. (Laura Cluff, E-mail, 5/28/2008)

The DIS made the cities very accessible to me on both the personal and academic level. I felt that the predeparture class successfully exposed me to a range of materials which allowed me to view each city holistically and through a range of critical lenses. The course and trip complicated the cities for me; historicizing them and exploring their modernity, distinguishing their unique cultural identities and reaffirming them each as a cohesive interdependent whole. It was that complication, that investigation of the complexity inherent in the city in itself and the city’s relationship to the individual, that really illuminated “the city” as a concept for me....

Through the DIS I gained invaluable insights into the histories and cultures of Paris and London specifically, but I also honed my own sense of what “the city” means. That experience and that set of critical tools continue to affect the way I view the cities I live and work in and the urban and non-urban spaces I encounter. (Victoria Sollecito, E-mail, 5/29/2008)

Works Cited


Student Course Evaluations, May 2005.

Student E-mail Comments, May 2008.
WENDY KOLMAR is Director of Women's Studies, Professor of English, and Associate Dean for Curriculum and Faculty Development at Drew University in Madison, NJ. She teaches courses on feminist theory, Victorian literature, women and literature, gothic and supernatural literature, film, and literary criticism and has directed the Drew London Semester three times. She regularly serves as a consultant and reviewer for women's and gender studies programs and has also served on the governing bodies of the National Women's Studies Association. Her publications include: Haunting the House of Fiction: Feminist Perspectives on Ghost Stories by American Women (with Lynette Carpenter; 1991); Creating an Inclusive College Curriculum (edited with Ellen G. Friedman, Charley B. Flint, and Paula Rothenberg; 1996); Feminist Theory: A Reader (with Fran Batkowski, now in its second edition), and a special film issue of Women's Studies Quarterly.

MAGDALENA MACZYNSKA is an Assistant Professor of English and director of the Writing Seminar Program at Marymount Manhattan College in New York. Her research interests include contemporary and postmodernist fiction, the history and theory of the novel, urban studies, post-secular theory, and writing pedagogy.

BONNIE NEUMEIER is a long time resident and community activist in Over-the-Rhine and co-founder of several grassroots organizations addressing issues of poverty and oppression. She acts as mentor for students participating in Miami University’s Learning Semester in Over-the-Rhine. She is currently working on a book-length manuscript, “An Activist’s Scrapbook,” which she hopes will capture the gifts and challenges of Over-the-Rhine activists to share with and inspire others.

MARIE-PASCALE PIERETTI is Professor of French at Drew University, in Madison New Jersey. She teaches advanced conversation classes (current events and cinema), seventeenth-century theater, eighteenth-century novels, and twentieth-century francophone women writers. She has co-directed numerous language and culture programs in Paris, Toulouse, and Aix-en-Provence. Her most recent publications have focused on women translators, women in the academies, and female epistolary writers in eighteenth-century France and include Marie-Jeanne Riccoboni, critique du roman français à travers sa correspondance, ses traductions et son écriture de romancière, (in Discours critique sur le roman: 1670-1850, 2007), D’un échange unilatéral à un autre: variations sur un choix stylistique dans Les Lettres d’une péruvienne et les Lettres de Mistriss Fannu Butlerrd (in Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth century, 2004), and Toutes personnes […] seront admises à concourir: La participation des femmes aux concours académiques (co-author John Iverson, in Dix-huitième Siècle, 2004).