

Reflective Essay

Associate Professor of French and Francophone Studies
Department of Romance and Classical Studies, Michigan State University

Period of Evaluation: May 16, 2010 – May 16, 2017

I am a literary, film and cultural studies scholar in French and Francophone Studies and a two-time documentary filmmaker. In this Reflective Essay, I present a self-evaluation of my research, teaching, service, and outreach endeavors at MSU during the period under evaluation. I also present an account of planned research activity.

Self-Evaluation

When I was awarded tenure and promotion to Associate Professor on July 1, 2010, I was acutely conscious of the anxious national and global debates on what was ambivalently termed the “crisis in the humanities” and of their strategic and agenda-setting character. By that year, integrating digital humanities in teaching and research had already become one of the most prominent debates in the profession, and language programs were coming under intense public scrutiny (seen in the proliferation of scholarly publications, online journals, conventions, workshops, seminars and curricular reforms addressing these topics, endorsed by leading professional organizations like the Modern Language Association). As I considered the complicated context in which I reached this professional milestone during that summer of 2010, it was evident to me that the new directions that my scholarly, teaching, service, and outreach endeavors would take next will inevitably be called upon to address the deep implications of these realities for the way we think, teach, research, produce knowledge and find our footing in the discipline. In so doing, I joined the community of fellow French studies and humanities scholars who pondered various forms of engaging their work in enriching and informing public debates, about issues of shared concern. This response proved to be critical in globally turbulent political times and the critical post-9/11 geopolitical juncture, within which those two spirited debates were rapidly unfolding and changing the landscape of my discipline, that of language programs, and of the humanities in general. Amidst the uncertainty surfacing from such moments of crisis and change, and against the unfamiliar backdrop of the shifting terrain of knowledge production, dissemination, and consumption in my discipline, I saw an opportunity. After all, the concomitance of the two debates simply signaled that they were two sides of the same coin encompassing both a challenge and a promise. If our ultimate task as scholars in the humanities is to make our research undertakings responsive to the complex human and social needs of our times, then – I thought to myself – the challenge I must meet is to create outlets for my research and teaching in French and Francophone Studies that engage with the emerging concerns produced by changing social, economic, and political realities. Even more than ever before, I firmly believed that advancing the humanities’ public relevance through teaching and research was an essential means by which to champion this discipline, while assuring the integrity of its timeless values. That realization was the moment I knew how I would, or rather must, direct the next phase of my research and teaching commitments.

A. Scholarly Research and Creative Work

My past and recent research grew out of an interest in studying the various forms that expressions of (multicultural) citizenship, difference, otherness, collective memory and cross-cultural encounters and interactions take in postcolonial France and the Francophone postcolonial world. My scholarship probed the ways in which Francophone narratives produced

by or on minoritized or racialized groups challenge, interrogate, complicate, or rupture the continuity and homogeneity of dominant nationalist, hegemonic, ethnocentric and Eurocentric visions of citizenship, cultural identity, and history; then move beyond them toward more inclusive, more plural, and more integrated visions of the social order, of history, and of the nation. Some of my earlier work included the study of autobiographical narratives by Moroccan-Jewish female writers; narrative strategies in Francophone literary and film productions as they intersect with issues of male domination, social exclusion, racial prejudice, colonial oppression, the experience of immigrants and cultural minorities, religious violence, ethnocentric views of Quebecois culture and history; testimonies narrating torture, suffering, and prison trauma of former political dissidents in Morocco or various victims of the Algerian War (1954-1962). In all of my published works cited above, I examined from different angles of analysis how various emancipatory agendas, and narratives of resistance to intersecting hegemonic systems and monolithic worldviews, are formed from those marginal locations and spaces of dissidence. Central to these theoretical ruminations are the questions of how citizenship is constructed, performed, and institutionalized; who creates and inhabits these spaces of citizenship; who is excluded from them; how does the ideological and political landscape shape the legal frameworks that define spaces of citizenship and how it must be practiced.

Cognizant of the formidable learning curve that the challenge of the digital turn entailed, my resolution to take it up while continuing my commitment to producing traditional forms of scholarship, since my tenure and promotion on July 1, 2010, has led seven years later to the creation of two critically acclaimed documentary research projects featured nationally and internationally in the official programs of professional meetings and conventions in my field and as a finalist in film festival official selections, 8 book chapters in ranked academic publishing venues, 7 articles in refereed journals, 2 translations with a top-ranked university press, Guest Editorship of a refereed journal, 14 invited talks and conference presentations, other printed and media scholarly outputs, and reviews of my work in different publishing venues, attesting to the value and impact that my work had in my field and publicly. My first book was cited in studies that were published by the *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, the *PMLA*, the *Journal of North African Studies*, *Research in African Literature*, and in books, MA and PhD Theses authored by scholars from the United States, Europe and Africa. During the seven years I held the rank of Associate Professor, I have been consistently active in research with an average rate of two published articles/book chapters a year, while fully engaged in teaching, mentoring, advising graduate and undergraduate students, in service, and in community and global outreach.

Informed by current scholarship in decolonial and intersectional feminist critique, and diasporic and transnational studies, my scholarly research since my tenure and promotion responds to an increasing concern within my field with the question of writing and thinking memory, reflecting global scholarly trends and interest in the subject, following the decline of the modern nation-state as a model of political organization. At the close of the 20th century and the turn of the new millennium, France's political landscape was deeply shaken by an impassioned national debate on the "duty to remember" (*le devoir de mémoire*) and to recognize victims of France's colonial past, in the broader context of the French government's legislation of new and controversial memorial laws. Following memorial laws created a few decades earlier to recognize the dark chapters of France's history of World War II, the new memorial laws focused on France's colonial past from slavery and the slave trade to the Indochina War and the Algerian War. My research endeavored to study the various cultural responses to French memorial laws that erase colonial violence from French national history. It analyzed how those cultural responses question and denounce political nostalgia for empire expressed in the French government exalting the "positive effects" of French colonialism in 2005, delegitimizing thus anti-hegemonic readings of French history as narratives of repentance or self-flagellation.

I saw in the digital turn described above, and the possibilities it opens up for filmmaking, an opportunity to propose a model for re-thinking the role of filmmaking in bridging the humanities and public life, throwing into sharp relief the potential of the humanities for advancing public understanding of the roots of various crises we face in the contemporary moment. Stepping into this relatively new terrain of film production and digital work, and overcoming initial feelings of uncertainty, ultimately helped me anchor my reputation as a French Studies and film scholar who engages her discipline in public humanities, making it a cultural response to times of crisis.

Working on the two documentaries and their related digital content marked a departure from my previous scholarly work in that they represent the first scholarly projects that I undertook in the form of audiovisual media and film, nourished by cross-institutional, international and campus-community partnerships. Framed from this perspective, and to my knowledge, the only ones dedicated to Hmong historical memory and diasporic experience across three continents, the two documentaries were intended to serve scholarly and public interests regarding questions of social and racial justice, human rights, memory, and their implications for a healthy democracy. The value and impact of my film work was recognized recently by its reception of the Best Documentary Award at the Universe Multicultural Film Festival (April 2017), and the many invitations received to screen it and present it at various academic and public institutions in the U.S. and France, as part of dedicated speaker series and curricular programs.

B. Teaching & Mentoring

As a 20th century and contemporary French and Francophone studies specialist, I generally focus in my teaching on enabling students to discover and appreciate world views that are specific to various cultural groups in the Francophone (French-speaking) world, with emphasis on intellectually equipping them to approach adequately cultural productions outside metropolitan France. Additionally, my teaching strives to encourage them to think critically not only about what makes these cultural worlds different from their own, but also about what they hold in common. One of the courses that I regularly teach as a requirement for the French major and which is heavily dedicated to this goal is *FRN 416 Introduction to French Studies: Francophone Cultures*. Since joining MSU, I redesigned this core survey course to cover through the study of cultural material various regions within the French-speaking world. Students are expected to actively engage with pedagogical materials that expand their perspectives, challenge their cultural references and assumptions and push them to express themselves in French about a range of cultural topics and complex historical events that shaped the lives of people in the French-speaking world, such as the Quiet Revolution in Québec, the Dispersion of Acadians, the Haitian Revolution, the Algerian War, the French Indochina War, the Kmer Rouge Genocides in Cambodia, among other things. Through hands-on activities, students are particularly encouraged to explore how the cultural and film productions studied in the course help us understand and recognize the rich and complex histories of the French-speaking societies in question. Students are assigned a variety of multi-modal tasks (collaborative inquiry-based projects, oral presentations, and research papers) of varying levels of complexity. Those tasks are designed to appeal to their critical thinking, cultural self-awareness, and analytical skills, as they approach the cultural content under study, which they often discover for the first time. I have also redesigned several undergraduate and graduate film seminars and courses focusing on foundational works as well as new writing and filmmaking trends in the French-speaking world.

Deeply informed by my research, my teaching reflects a constant commitment to pursuing continuous improvement as an instructor, to maximize opportunities for student critical engagement, thinking within and outside the discipline, interactive and applied learning, and dynamic study of course materials. During the period under evaluation I consistently sought opportunities to reflect critically on my teaching through participation in a variety of teaching

and learning workshops, designed to provide ongoing pedagogical training by introducing faculty to best practices in engaged and interactive learning. I feel that I have benefited in many ways from these opportunities, which inspired me to redesign several courses to allow more room than I did previously for engaged learning in the classroom. The redesigned structure of the language, literature, film and critical theory courses I taught is deeply informed by and reflective of this pedagogical vision. I continue to integrate modes of learning, including multimedia content, into my courses that allow students to think creatively and critically outside the discipline, to reflect on the social value of what they learn in the classroom, to discover the relevance of the knowledge they gain in our program in a broader cross-disciplinary context of discussion, and to appreciate the value it brings to serve their career goals. My teaching is never separate from advising and mentoring my students and reflecting on how I can support their individual journeys of professional development and preparation for their future careers. My commitment to this area of our student's undergraduate and graduate experience is seen in the efforts I consistently devoted to engage undergraduate and graduate student organizations in co-development of academic and cultural activities that add value to their learning and lead to more academic enrichment outside the classroom. I also led several professional development workshops for graduate students in French, Spanish and German, to support their preparation for careers in the profession. The generous grants that supported the documented scholarly and educational events I organized made it possible for me in fall 2013 and spring 2014 to engage members of the MSU French Club and to recruit several students as Research Assistants, to work on learning projects (including video productions) that offer them more opportunities for cultural, language immersion, educational, professional and self enrichment. Their involvement as Research Assistants was built into the cluster of events organized around the 9-day artist-in-residence and guest speaker programs that I initiated and organized to bring to campus two digital, media and film professionals from France, Professor [REDACTED] and award-winning French journalist [REDACTED]. Their program of visit was built into the curricular program through guest class visits and course projects to foster students' exposure to various interdisciplinary issues, which I document in more detail in **Appendices 1 – 2** and my CV.

During my years of service, I tried to reflect on habits of thoughts and practices that are key to effective teaching, learning and student mentoring. The value and impact of my research-informed teaching, of my commitment to continuous improvement as an instructor, and of curriculum development undertakings were recognized through students' constructive input, both formal and unsolicited, through internal grants and several invitations from peers to give guest lectures in their classrooms, drawing on various parts of my research work. This year, I received notifications from two of my former doctoral students, [REDACTED] whom I also mentored as a member of their doctoral guidance and dissertation committees, and who shared with me that they were offered tenure-track positions at reputable institutions such as University of North Carolina at Charlotte and Brandeis University respectively, recognizing in their letter to me my commitment to supporting their intellectual preparation for a career in the profession and to successfully navigate the job market. Of all the immensely valuable workshops I have participated in with this teaching philosophy in mind, perhaps the workshops titled "*Universal Design for Learning: Effective Pedagogical Strategies for All Learners*", facilitated by Professor [REDACTED] (in 2010), and "*Controversial Topics and Difficult Dialogues: Effectively Engaging Students in Critical Conversations*", facilitated by Professor [REDACTED] (in 2011), addressing strategies for making learning accessible to students of all backgrounds, including students with disabilities, were the ones that left the greatest impact on my thinking and practice as an instructor, since they productively linked the question of interactive and engaged pedagogies with issues of inclusivity and equity in the classroom. Upon reading student evaluations for the most recent semester I taught (spring 2017), I was particularly moved by the comments of a student who self-identifies as a student with learning disabilities. Their comments on how my teaching approach empowered them to be successful in meeting

course learning goals made me feel that the time I devoted to continuous improvement as an instructor was a time well invested to support all my students in their learning and preparation for their future careers:

“■■■■ consistently outlined to us her expectations. Before beginning class discussions, she would explain how participation points would be earned that day and encouraged/praise all levels of contribution to the class discussion. We were told to add commentary, provoke questions, or continue on another student's idea. This was great for me, because I was willing to use my voice despite the nervousness I had in doing so because I knew what was expected of me as a student. Throughout the semester I had a flare up of symptoms, and ■■■■ assured me that she takes my documented disability seriously. She was very easy for me to work with, and reminded me of my abilities through conversations during office hours. At the end of the semester she concluded an email correspondence by stating that she believes I already have everything in me that I need to succeed. These words are so important to me. ■■■■ is the mark of a dedicated educator who genuinely comprehends the individual needs of her students. She looked at me even beyond this lens, and understood me as the complex person I am. She empowered me to ask for what I need, and consistently supported me in the classroom throughout the semester. I believe angels come when you least expect them, and ■■■■ was surely one for me!”

My research-informed curriculum development projects have been funded and recognized by several external and internal competitive grants and in various professional settings, and earned me a nomination for the College of Arts and Letters nomination for the *Innovation in Teaching Award*, in 2014. Last but not least, the 2 feature film projects I led, intended to serve as pedagogical resources, were already requested for use in the community as well as higher education in a variety of fields in which oral histories of cultural minorities are relevant, such as postcolonial studies, transnational and global studies, migration studies, memory studies, history, French Studies, film studies, sociology, anthropology, Asian Studies, American and ethnic studies, cultural studies, political science and urban studies. The first documentary was already used in courses taught by professors from Michigan State University, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Tulane University, University of Maryland and University of Notre Dame and others.

C. Service & Outreach

Beyond the typical duties attached to department, college, and university committee service, which I regularly fulfilled, adding my voice to important institutional conversations on behalf of my unit, I served our graduate program twice as Graduate advisor then as Director of Graduate Studies, for both the French and Spanish programs. I contributed through these roles to building new procedural foundations, coordinating administrative and curricular operations for our graduate programs, when it was going through an important transition, merging French and Classics with Spanish and Portuguese programs. My commitment to service was also recognized when I was appointed by my department in 2016-2017 to serve as a member of the College of Arts and Letters Action Committee and of the Task Force charged by the Dean to investigate and begin planning for the creation within the College of a School of Language Sciences and Literary & Cultural Studies to be home for all languages taught at MSU. Both were charged by the Dean to investigate and recommend an administrative structure for the School that will distinguish MSU from its peers, facilitate strategic collaborations, and establish by-laws based on best practices in order to create a culture of inclusive excellence in the School. Sensitive to the new needs of our department in this context of a new administrative structure of our language programs, I have accepted to serve again as Director of Graduate Studies for the next academic year to support our graduate students and graduate programs during this important transition.

My commitment to community outreach involved seizing opportunities for designing events that simultaneously carry pedagogical, scholarly, service to the profession and outreach dimensions. It also involves participating as presenter or moderator of activities in MSU outreach programs, in the community or in the City of East Lansing K-12 co-curricular programs that promote the cultural enrichment of the community and appreciation for world

languages, such as the *East Lansing Film Festival* (in 2006), *World Languages Day* (spring 2017) and *Embrace the World: A Celebration of Diversity* (Spring 2016). My recent work on the two documentary projects has been itself the product of strong partnerships with the community at various levels of production. Please see **Appendices 1-5** for detailed documentation of some of the most important outreach endeavors I have undertaken during the period under evaluation. In my view, bringing together these three areas of faculty engagement are instrumental for creating models of teaching and learning that deliver to students a more optimal, well-rounded, and rewarding educational experience that prepares them as globally informed citizens and professionals for the challenges and demands of today's job market and future career trends.

Planned Research Activity

Book project in progress:

Building on previous archival and oral history research and the rich primary materials developed in the two documentaries I recently produced, I'm currently working on a new book project that examines the ways in which French nationalist historiographies are challenged from marginal locations, including perspectives documented in my two films. The critical study of these family histories and personal accounts and its anchor in current issues allow for a deeper understanding of the intersection of the personal and the political, of the ways in which these forms of writing enable complex and more dynamic modes of historical understanding as well as provide a lens to diagnose the roots of the social and ethnic tensions dividing French society today. These stories also carry subversive political power and socially transformative and reparative narratives.

Future documentary project:

In its May 4, 2017 issue, the day after the much publicized and contentious French presidential debate, the left-leaning daily newspaper, *Libération*, founded by ██████████, featured the provocative headline “La race, éternel tabou de cette élection et des précédentes” (Race, the Eternal Taboo of this Election and Previous Elections). Its author ██████████, a *Université Paris-VIII* professor and researcher, writes of the unique struggles and anxieties faced by French Muslim and black cultural minorities affected by an unequal social order reinforced by far-right discourses that exclude the issue of race and France's history of slavery and colonialism from its vision of French national history. These remarks find resonance in the paths that my primary areas of research and teaching took and attended to since my tenure and promotion.

After researching sites of French colonial memory in relation to former French Indochina, in my first two documentaries, I feel poised to undertake a new documentary project that spotlights sites of memory of French slavery, and the French memory politics that has relegated this dark episode of French history to the margins if not to oblivion. The valuable connections I forged, during the making of the two previous films, with established French scholars who have produced extensive work in this area, coupled with a rare access to research resources, led to precious opportunities for incubating this new documentary concept. Some of those important resources include the Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery and History Museum in the Castle of the Dukes of Brittany in Nantes, France, one of the largest French ports of the Atlantic Slave Trade. The project will undertake to document the life of Paul Vergès, one of the iconic leaders of the largely understudied French social and political movements that developed in France's overseas' departments and territories, linking their struggle for social and racial justice to historical recognition of France's legacy of slavery and the slave trade. As a project collaborator in my second documentary, Françoise Vergès, his daughter and established scholar of French colonialism, slavery and feminist decolonial theory and politics, accepted to partner again on this new film, highlighting the invisible connections between France's history of slavery and colonialism and its troubled present. Turning to media and digital tools to produce and disseminate my scholarship in its new phase is an ideal means to explore questions of preservation of historical records (written and visual) and to critically approach historical memory, untold stories, and forgotten narratives.