

May 2016

Who Do You Think You Are

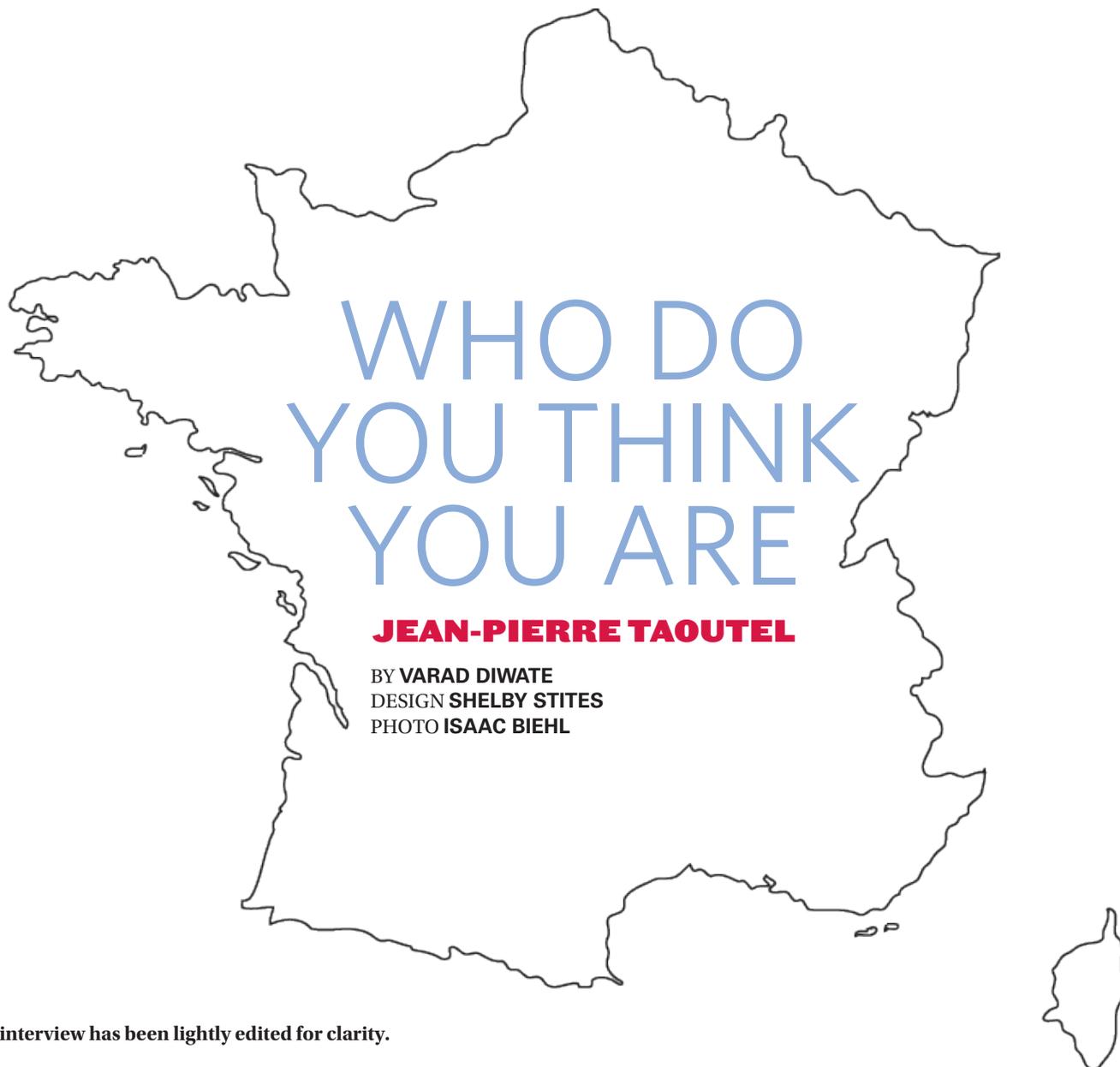
Varad Diwate
Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos>

Recommended Citation

Diwate, Varad (2016) "Who Do You Think You Are," *Ethos*: Vol. 2016 , Article 16.
Available at: <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos/vol2016/iss4/16>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Publications at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Ethos by an authorized editor of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.



*This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

Iowa State is home to Cyclones from around the world. This includes not just students, but also faculty members who enrich students with different perspectives. Jean-Pierre Taoutel, senior lecturer of French, is one such faculty member who continues to raise awareness about global issues through honors seminars. With a dose of wit and humor, he tells us about growing up in Lebanon during the country's civil war, his passion for literature and getting used to new educational and cultural norms in the U.S.

Ethos: Where did you grow up?

Jean-Pierre Taoutel: I was born in Syria and grew up in Lebanon. I moved to France for my university studies at the age of 20. I still have family members in both France and Lebanon.

E: What languages do you speak?

JPT: French and Arabic are my native languages. As a bilingual speaker, I end up mixing them when talking to my family members. I started learning English when I was 12 years old. I also learned some Spanish in high school.

E: How was your experience growing up?

JPT: It was during the Lebanon War. I lived in

Beirut, less than a mile away from the Green Line — a major fighting area. I studied in the basement in a candlelight after a night of bombing. There were no excuses for missing homework! The school system was working in a very strange way. We would start classes early at 7 a.m., which meant waking up at 5:30. We were done by 1 p.m. Why so early? Because this was the time soldiers slept after fighting during the night. This was the quiet time when life came back to usual before bombing started again in the afternoon. This was an experience many students would not relate to today. I still remember a certain experience. We went to class and found nobody had slept well enough the night before. The teacher made a deal and allowed us to not listen to him and rest. I also

remember taking an exam and my concern was not the grade I would be getting; it was about going back home. I could hear bombs going off during the exam, even if they were not quite close. I was wondering if I should go back home or seek shelter in the basement.

E: What were some of your other experiences?

JPT: As a kid, there are some funny parts to the war. Our school was occasionally cancelled. We were happy, but our parents used to say, "Study! Otherwise you'll end up growing up stupid!" We were also confined to the area we lived in.

E: Tell us about your journey to the U.S.

JPT: When I was doing my Ph.D. in France, there was an exchange program between Sorbonne University, where I was a student, and Hamilton College in New York state. Every year, Hamilton selects one student from Sorbonne to teach French. I wanted to go to the U.S. for a long time. So, in 1998, I put in my application and I was selected. At Hamilton, I could teach for one year. I could apply to other institutions to stay longer than that. I was accepted at the University of Florida in Gainesville and Iowa State. I decided to come here. I knew I was not going to be serious in Florida; I would be running outside in the sunshine. It has been sixteen years since then.

☺: What did you study at Sorbonne?

JPT: I studied 20th century French literature. I spent a total of eight years at Sorbonne, including my undergraduate program. In France, as soon as you start studying at a university, you specialize in your field. You have to declare your major without taking a variety of classes.

☺: Did you always know what you wanted to do?

JPT: I knew it was going to be something related to literature. I love literature! My education in literature could open a number of career paths related to using language.

☺: Were you always interested in teaching languages?

JPT: I was used to teaching French to French people, which was mostly literature. I first taught French as a foreign language in the U.S. I thought it was very easy!

☺: How was the transition from teaching literature to teaching basics of the language?

JPT: I would say this wasn't an issue. When

you know one, you know the other; it's not complicated. I found that the transition between French and American education systems was more interesting. In France, I was used to grading out of 20. A 15 out of 20 is basically an A. During my first class in the U.S., I used the same system and just multiplied the scores by five. I went to the class and said everybody had a good grade. But they were upset. I said to my colleague, "They got As and they are unhappy!" He explained how I had given them Cs. I don't think I had enough training. I was just parachuted in this American classroom and had no clue about grading or anything else. I also learned you are supposed to talk to students in a politically correct way. There are things you can say and not say. In France, people are very direct. Here you really have to pay attention to what you say.

☺: What are some of those things you had to adjust to?

JPT: For example, you have to avoid saying to a student, "You are performing badly." You are supposed to say "You can improve." You have to be positive. In France, the focus is on constructive criticism. Also, anything can be perceived as sexual harassment, including saying things like you have a nice shirt or a nice haircut.

☺: Apart from studying literature, what else do you enjoy doing?

JPT: I like going to the gym. I like to read a lot. I also enjoy whatever Ames has to offer.

☺: What perspective do you bring for students at Iowa State?

JPT: For those who study French, I hope they discover French culture and become more aware as global citizens. I like the honors seminars as they are outside my department,

allowing me to reach more students from other fields. I hope students become more aware of global issues and understand what's happening around them. I am surprised to see how many educated people don't even read a single newspaper. Some students don't know what's happening in Syria after four years. They'll tell me with a smile how they don't read the news. If you don't know what's happening around you, you are not educated.

☺: Can a lot more be done to improve awareness?

JPT: Yes. I can still understand reasons though. This is a large country and people haven't really seen war close to them. There is also not enough activism on campuses. Hopefully, students will get more involved. At some point, they will have to make choices. And I hope what I give students enables them to make ethical decisions.

☺: How has your experience been living in the US?

JPT: I love living in the US! I like that Americans are very practical. Everytime I talk to my friends in France they ask me if I have gained weight or if I have been sued! Obviously they are going off on stereotypes.

☺: Any interesting experiences?

JPT: It was during the week of Halloween a few years ago. I saw students walking on campus with their costumes on. I had this one student who came to class dressed in a really strange way. I said, "Oh! Nice Halloween clothes!" and she said, "No! These are my [regular] clothes!" Since then, I have learned [my lesson]. ☺

