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Emily Apter

I have always denounced terrorism. I must also denounce a terrorism which is exercised blindly, in the streets of Algiers for example, and which one day could strike my mother or my family. I believe in justice, but I shall defend my mother before justice.¹

Albert Camus, Stockholm interview, Dec. 14, 1957

Camus's position in the 1950s was one of extreme intellectual and emotional difficulty and tension. He had written about freedom, justice, violence and revolt in abstract terms, and asserted principles which he presented as of both fundamental importance and universal application. He never altogether abandoned this language, and he continued to write about politics in the tone of a severe moralist. Yet his actual positions were political and partisan. The violence of the Hungarian rebels and of the Anglo-French expedition in Egypt raised no problems. It was violence "on the right side"—precisely the logic he had rejected, on grounds of a rigorous morality, in relation to revolutionary violence. Freedom was an absolute for the Hungarians, and their violence in asserting their will "to stand upright" was "pure." The violence of the Algerian Arabs, who thought that they were making the same claim, was "inexcusable," and the nature and degree of the freedom to be accorded to them were matters to

¹ Herbert R. Lottman, *Albert Camus: A Biography* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1979), 618. Further references to this work will appear in the text abbreviated L.

A variant of this statement was made in the form of a comment to Emmanuel Roblès: "If a terrorist throws a grenade in the Belcourt market where my mother shops, and if he kills her, I would be responsible if, to defend justice, I defended terrorism. I love justice but I also love my mother" (cited in the *Pléiade* edition of Camus's work, confirmed to Lottman by Roblès).

be decided by France, in the light of its own strategic needs—a plea which was irrelevant when made by Russia.²

Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Albert Camus: Of Europe and Africa*, 1970

Algeria is no longer a Mediterranean paradise. It is neither the homosocial utopia André Gide celebrated at the turn of the century in *Les nourritures terrestres* nor the never-never land of what Club Med made of the North African coast sixty years later. Gutted and drained by violence aimed at everyone by every kind of warring faction, the nation no longer stands as the emblem of self-determination or successful decolonization. In any event we can be sure that Algeria never stood for the timeless landscape of metaphysical intensity that Albert Camus concocted for his readers at Editions Gallimard in the postwar years. However messy it may have become, Algeria remains a rich and varied terrain for the study of what Edward Said has lately called “a comparative literature of colonialism” with many “intertwined and overlapping histories.”³

Tom Conley, Afterword to Réda Bensmaïa's *The Year of Passages*, 1995

The three citations throw into stark relief the fact that Albert Camus's vexed relation to his Algerian *terre natale*, remains unfinished business and therefore a necessary part of the agenda in reexamining Camus's reputation as a world-class, cosmopolitical author in the 1990's. The often remarked on, yet no less astonishing phrase from his Nobel acceptance speech in 1956, placing filial piety on the same axis as the defense of a dirty colonial war, provides the context for Conor Cruise O'Brien's scathing exposure of Camus's moral double standards vis-à-vis Europe and North Africa. It also points up the extent to which critical reception of Camus's work has, until relatively recently, tended to downplay how he compromised his moral stance by taking the French side; focusing instead on the deconstructive metaphysics of his landscapes of absence.⁴ Tom Conley's geopolitical positioning of Camus within a Mediterranean dystopia riven by “intellocide” (the assassination of intellectuals deemed symbols of westernization by the Front Islamique de Salut), and the economic ruin wreaked by the

² Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Albert Camus: Of Europe and Africa* (New York: The Viking Press, 1970). All further references to this work will appear in the text abbreviated COB.

³ Tom Conley, Afterword to “A Novel Machine” in Réda Bensmaïa's *The Year of Passages*, Trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 134.

⁴ A recent book by Wolf-Dietrich Albes, *Albert Camus und der Algerienkrieg* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1990) overturns this tradition of deconstructive readings. Albes seems to interpret Camus's entire philosophy of the Absurd as a product of colonial guilt.

morally collapsed, militarily bolstered shell of a post-Independence nation-state, underscores how it has now become impossible to abstract Camus's writings from their Algerian backdrop, and more specifically, from the current politics of civil strife.⁵

The Algerian Camus is currently being disputed by Algerian secularists and western postcolonial critics. On one side, we find Algerian exiles and dissidents (many fearing for their lives), who have resuscitated Camus as a universal freedom-fighter who loved the country of his birth despite his misplaced political allegiances. Heralded as a partisan of truce between a Mendès-France Algerian policy and the nascent FLN (this was in 1956 when he agreed to be a go-between in a failed meeting of the "Comité pour une Trêve Civile"), Camus re-emerges as a moralist willing to take the heat, one whose defense of justice should remind the west of its obligation not to abandon Algerian advocates of a secular society.⁶ It was this "global human rights" Camus, the apostle of an international democracy exercised through consensual mechanisms of world governance, whom I encountered while teaching in an Institute of French Cultural Studies in the summer of 1995. A Kabyle student in the class (an assistant professor at Bates College named Alawa Toumi), whose research interests included "Women's Movements in Algeria," "Intellectuals and the Resistance," and "Le Fascisme," contested my rather flip evocation of Camus's sun-blasted "writing degree zero," as a literary style that white-washed the colonizer's shadow while neutralizing autochthonous subjects. Toumi's defense of Camus, as it turned out, was rooted in personal stakes: the brother of Khalida Messaoudi (an outspoken feminist activist living underground, who remains high on the FIS's hit list of intellectuals deemed hostile to hard-line Islamicist ideologies of reform), he reinvented Camus as a political operative; a code-name for the promulgation of an international democracy movement that would heal the breach between the Islamic world and the west.⁷ Distrustful of western postulates of

⁵ Teaching *L'étranger* to a group of apolitical students at Williams College in the mid-80's, I discovered that it was a "Sisyphian" task to get them to think seriously about the Algerian context of the novel.

⁶ Herbert Lottman writes: "For Camus the war was criminal and stupid. He hoped to obtain the agreement of the French Government, the FLN, and Messali Hadj's movement—which Camus wrongly considered to be of equal importance—for the civil truce scheme. In coming to Algeria he also hoped to make contact with the nationalists, without daring to hope that he would actually be able to meet representatives of the FLN!" (L 571)

⁷ For more on Messaoudi, see her *Une Algérienne debout. Entretiens avec Elisabeth Schemla* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995).

cultural difference that reinscribe Oriental/Occidental binarisms, he implied that the strategic reappropriation of Camus as an Algerian author on the part of laical Algerians forms part of a larger reaction-formation against the current climate of anti-westernization and religious censorship. Rather than reject Camus as a traitorous proponent of French Algeria, or at the very least, assimilated *algérianité*, many native Algerians today, he seemed to be arguing, would prefer to lay claim to Camus as part of their own symbolic capital—a star in the firmament of an Algerian literary heritage inclusive of *pied-noir* writers. In this cosmopolitan literary bloodline, the names of Mohammed Dib and Kateb Yacine (consecrated post-Independence writers), would figure in an indiscriminate jumble of exilic and/or French-identified Algerian-born literary figures, including Jean Amrouche, Mouloud Feraoun, Emmanuel Roblès, Jules Roy, Robert Merles, Rachid Boudjedra, Assia Djebar, Abdelkebir Khatibi, Leïla Sebbar, Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous.

Alawa Toumi's stance made me mindful of a contradictory situation: while the academy has traditionally provided safe haven for oppositional intellectuals, oppositional discourse within the academy, with its paens to "resistance," has often kept aloof from the politics of human rights. There are many possible explanations for why this is so: "taking sides" is often intrinsically too complex from a distance; organizations such as Amnesty International or PEN have their own (often parochial) agendas; interventionism contains the risk of backfiring; the institutions monitoring violations often seem complicitous with corporate manipulations of moral capital in a global ethics market. Be that as it may, the recuperation of Camus as a means of resisting *intégrisme* cautioned me against assuming that the "Camus in Algeria" question could be readily dismissed.

But it also failed to relieve my visceral discomfort in re-reading his work in the present moment. For critics steeped in postcolonial perspectives, Camus's name triggers not only a deplorable record on the Algerian War that rightly cost him friendships on the left, but also his systematic nullification of Arab characters, particularly evident in *L'étranger*, *La peste*, and the short stories included in *L'exil et le royaume*.⁸ Dissolving the contours of Algerian cities and coastal landscape into

⁸ Camus's altercation with his friend, the Algerian author Jean Amrouche, illustrates the truly nasty side of Camus's position-taking. On January 11, 1958 Amrouche published an article in *Le monde* (that had been refused by *L'express*) entitled: "La France comme mythe et comme réalité. De quelques vérités amères." Amrouche asserted that France had forgotten the evils of the colonial system in its dream of a

sibilant friezes or projection walls of the European mind, erasing the signs of precursory Algerian secessionism by recording not a trace of the protests and massacres at Sétif in the immediate aftermath of Liberation; and converting the site specificity of a soon-to-be imploding colonial war into a labyrinthine tectonics of European postwar melancholia, Camus presents colonial unease in a metaphysically abstract worldscape.⁹

Sullen, taciturn "Arab" characters emerge as *figurants*; alternately mime and geste stick figures holding up the scenery, or scopic effects, tracking European inquisitors with malevolent diffidence. The short story *La femme adultère* exemplifies the almost caricatural quality of Camus's rendering of the Maghrebian subject as gaze. The "Arabs" sitting in the bus next to Janine catch the invisible rays of her unfocused desire with their stony "impassive" looks. Shifty observers,

universal mission. He insisted that one could no longer maintain "the traditional ambiguity between liberal humanist rhetoric (*le dire*) and colonial, racist acts (*le faire raciste et colonialiste*). In his view, French left and right were bedfellows on the Algerian question. The left served as an alibi for the chauvinist rightist majority, while the French Communist Party pusillanimously supported French Algeria. Amrouche saw independence as the only possible historical outcome of the war. Shortly afterwards, he was denounced for his "excesses" by Jacques Huerigon, a former Latin professor of Camus's at the University of Algiers. Camus congratulated Huerigon: "I was 100 percent in agreement with you in what you have written on Amrouche" (as recounted by Olivier Todd, *Albert Camus, une vie* [Gallimard, 1996], 710–11).

⁹ O'Brien's reading of *La peste* reacts strongly against Camus's semi-erasure of the Algerian city and its inhabitants. Either he should have created a completely non-specific site, or he should have avoided the implied substitution of Arabs for Germans in his portrayal of an occupied city:

"It was almost dusk, but the town, once so noisy at that hour, seemed curiously deserted. Only a few trumpet calls in the still golden sky showed that the military were still pretending to carry on their business. During this time, along the steep streets between the blue, ochre and violet walls of the Moorish houses, Rambert talked with great excitement." [as cited by O'Brien, (COB 53)]

"Curiously deserted" indeed. Neither Rieux, the doctor, nor Rambert, the reporter, ever goes into these houses. We hear nothing of the progress of the plague among them. The Arab question is simply abolished, once it has served to reveal the differing standards of two Europeans. Up to a point, the strategy of the fable requires the disappearance of the Arabs. It was metropolitan France, not Algeria, which was occupied by the Germans. In the story of occupation and resistance there was not any factor, directly involved, corresponding to the Arab population of Algeria. Myths and fables require a certain simplification, and it is therefore not surprising that Arabs should be kept out of the picture. What is surprising and disquieting, on the contrary, is that the subject of their existence in the setting of the city should be introduced—in a context of rigorous insistence on the whole truth—as a preliminary of the story of a city in which they have no existence, and in which only the local color of the facades of their houses remains. This is a very serious flaw in the book, because it destroys the integrity of the conception of one of the central characters: the city itself. The city becomes a "never was" city, whereas we should be able to think of it as a real city under an imagined plague. (COB 53–54)

they spy while pretending to sleep (“L’autocar était plein d’Arabes qui faisaient mine de dormir enfouis dans leurs burnous”). The driver of the bus seems to “smile with his eyes,” but his face remains enigmatically “masked.” In a trading town in the interior, a senior Arab merchant haughtily passes the couple as if they were invisible. (“Ils se croient tout permis maintenant,” grumbles Marcel.) Forming a specular cordon around the phobic Janine, Algerian cyclists appear as giant, menacing burnouses on wheels, zigzagging in wild circles as they close in on their European quarry. The natives are also registered as a barely tangible presence at the end of the novella in the epiphanic space of an “obscure center of her being;” an enemy within that doubles, Janine realizes, as the object of her intense, unaccountable longing.¹⁰ It is no small irony that the strangeness of the “Arabs” gaze, as overreaching as their conversation is recessed, grows in direct proportion to the Europeans’ refusal to engage with the culture that surrounds them: “The driver says several words to the passengers in this language that she had heard her entire life without ever understanding” (FA 115). Naturally a people seems immured in silence if, when they do speak, nothing is understood!

Though it may be a purely western obsession with “colonial subjects,” that prompts me to take issue with Camus’s ascription of an interiority of naught to the Algerians populating his fictive world, it would seem nonetheless, that to deny the importance of Algerian subjecthood would be to fly in the face of the classic decolonization literature, which, from Aimé Césaire to Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon, has affirmed subjectivity claims for the colonized. Making a case for instantiating a colonial subject becomes more plausible provided one eschews universalist models of what that subject might be. On the other hand, surface-depth or inside/outside characterological paradigms, standard practice since French realism, may prove indispensable given their international currency in modern world literature.

Even if the argument is made that Camus’s blunted North Africans are simply extensions of the wounded, mummified personas of their European counterparts (a mummification venerated as part of the high seriousness of the Absurd), their radical de-characterization carries serious political consequences; confirming the negation of a

¹⁰ Albert Camus, *La femme adultère*, in *Oeuvres complètes d’Albert Camus*, vol. 4 (Paris: Gallimard and Club de l’Honnête Homme, 1983), pp. 112, 115, 120, 123, 126, 128 respectively. Further references to this work will appear in the text abbreviated FA.

subject people at a time of colonial war.¹¹ Anticipating Mathieu Kassovitz's *La haine*, a film made in 1995 about Maghrebian "homies" negotiating cultural disenfranchisement in the Parisian banlieue, Camus reduces his Algerian characters to receptacles of crushing aggression and *ressentiment*. The more celebrated emotions of existentialism—ontological nausea, aborted self-knowledge—are reserved for the Europeans. Edward Said has observed that Camus "exquisitely articulates . . . the massive 'structure of feeling'" incubating within a "metropolitan transfiguration of the colonial dilemma." The emergence of Algerian nationalism, he points out, is gagged and bound; a necessary expense of registering the piercing *Entfremdung* of the *colon*.¹² In other words, it is the stranger in the Algerians' midst who reverses the path of his own estranging effect as foreign occupier, so that it falls back on himself; forming a narcissistic loop around that eminently seductive, philosophically prestigious figure of the existential antihero—"L'étranger."¹³

Capitalizing on what Said has characterized as the "waste and sadness" of French imperialism's penultimate gasp, Camus captures the "negative vitality" of settler recalcitrance (CI 185). Nowhere is this

¹¹ Camus aficionados would undoubtedly take issue here with my reductive approach to his characterization. Many would argue that I am applying social realist criteria to produce "positive" fictive types or role models. I emphatically want to disown such normative readings, recognizing as I do that if there is true "genius" in Camus's prose, it lies precisely in its achievement of ontologically benumbed characters, seemingly wrapped in the postwar, pre-revolutionary chill of being. My point here is not that the European protagonists should be well-rounded, psychologically transparent figures, but rather, that the Algerian characters should also have acceded to the complexity of existential characterhood within the terms defined by Camus.

¹² Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1993), 184–85.

¹³ Conor Cruise O'Brien supplies a brilliant reading of the "alone-ness" of the stranger in Camus's short story *L'hôte*. He points out that in the final published version, the story ends with the words: "Daru looked at the sky, the plateau and beyond the invisible lands which stretched down to the sea. In this vast country which he had loved so much, he was alone" (COB 85). The original manuscript stopped with the Arab walking to prison; there was no reference to threats.

The second version ends: "YOU BETRAYED MY BROTHER. YOUR SCHOOL WILL BURN AND YOU WITH IT. Daru looked unseeing at the light springing from the surface of the plateau. In this vast country, which had been his, he was alone."

The third version ends: "In this vast country without which he could not live—with which he made one—which remained his only native land" (COB 85).

Comparing the three versions, one observes the "love of country" gradually giving way to the alienation of solitude. The native land is disappeared to the point where it becomes alternately a "light" (presumably of the white heat of native anger), and "invisible," a vacant blur merging with the sky.

On the theme of loneliness in the homeland, also see the section on "Meursaults 'Fremdheit' als Bedrohung der kolonialen Gesellschaft Algerien" in Albes, *Albert Camus und der Algerienkrieg*.

bilious energy more poignantly conveyed than in the portrait of an old-style *colon* rendered by Camus in his unfinished Algerian epic *Le premier homme*. Described as “the kind they insult nowadays in Paris, you know . . . of the patriarchal genre,” he reenacts Custer’s last stand fast-forwarded to the Algerian crisis.¹⁴ When a nearby farm is attacked (the throats of the parents slit, the daughters raped and murdered), the prefect tells the assembled farmers that it is time to turn a page in the book of history; time to reconsider colonial questions and the manner in which Arabs have been treated. But the old man vows that nobody will tell him what is law in this country. When evacuation orders are given, he empties the wine vats, destroys his crops, and works around the clock to raze every last remnant of his property. Before departing for Marseilles, where he will spend the rest of his days pacing the floors of an efficiency apartment, he advises his Algerian workers to join the revolutionary Maquis. Adopting the myth, popular since *la défaite*, that French national decline is the explicable outcome of devirilization, he predicts that the French will inevitably lose their empire “since there are no more real men left in France” (PH 167–68). The old *colon*’s grim fate makes a marked impression on the autobiographical narrator of *Le premier homme*, for this homestead was the narrator’s birthplace, the site of a dead paternal legacy. Throughout the novel, the paternal void, and the loss of personal genealogy, undergird the narrator’s bizarre affirmation that Algeria “has no history.”¹⁵

Though it would be tempting at this point to rehearse in some depth Camus’s construction of Algeria as, simultaneously, an impotent, desecrated fatherland and a locus of maternal identification, I will concentrate instead on dissecting Camus’s notion of French Algeria as a consummate oxymoron; a cosmopolitan hallucination of hybridity hatched in full view of decolonization. Camus’s insistence on seeing one nation where there were at least two; his projection of continental holism in the face of incipient binational antagonism, illustrates the conflict, ever present today, between worldly hybridities and nationalist ethnic and religious particularisms. The conflict is particularly acute in Algeria because French rule prevailed for the longest duration of any colony (1830–1962). The roots of the French

¹⁴ Albert Camus, *Le premier homme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 167.

¹⁵ “Le Christ n’a pas atterri en Algérie” [Christ did not set foot in Algeria], Camus wrote in his notebooks of *Le premier homme*. This enigmatic remark may have some possible relevance to his protagonist’s myopia with respect to Algerian history (PH 292).

nation-state, strengthened by the Napoleonic legacy, had fully taken in Algeria—it was the colonial “pearl” of the French imperial sweepstake. Even if we acknowledge that since Independence Algeria has not been technically binational, the Evian Accords signed in 1962 assured France a neo-colonial presence in the economic sphere of Algerian affairs. Moreover, the intelligentsia perpetuated French educational and cultural hegemony. As Réda Bensmaïa has noted, Arabization was slow to take hold in the aftermath of the war: “On the eve of independence,” he writes, “an Algerian literature ‘written in French’ seemed a contradiction in terms: political independence, it was thought, would be quickly followed by cultural and linguistic independence. Yet since 1962 there has been a flowering of works in French by Maghreb writers.”¹⁶ Bensmaïa’s observation supports my contention that contemporary Algeria qualifies as binational insofar as French and Arabic co-exist as national languages within its borders. Despite the importation of English and Russian as technocratic languages under Boudmedienne, and despite the fact that French is by no means an official national language in Algeria, its virtual “second language” status in the fields of education, media and literary culture contributes to the binational (as distinct from hybrid) character of Algeria’s internal political rift.

In Homi K. Bhabha’s introduction to *Nation and Narration* hybridity is associated with an internationalism deriving from the Fanonian dictum: “National consciousness, without nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension.” Bhabha glosses:

It is this *international* dimension both within the margins of the nation-space and in the boundaries *in-between* nations and peoples that the authors of this book have sought to represent in their essays. The representative emblem of this book might be a chiasmatic “figure” of cultural difference whereby the anti-nationalist, ambivalent nation-space becomes the cross-roads to a new transnational culture.”¹⁷

Though there is obviously something compelling about the transnational hybridity argued for by Bhabha, the case history of Algeria,

¹⁶ Réda Bensmaïa, “1962, November. After Eight Years of War, Algeria Becomes Independent,” in *A New History of French Literature*, ed. Denis Hollier (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 1018–19. Bensmaïa also notes Memmi’s change of heart on the Arabization question when he wrote in the anthology *Ecrivains francophones du Magreb* (1985; *Francophone Writers from the Maghreb*): “Without ceasing to believe that the Arabic tongue will ultimately find the place it deserves, I have had to admit that the inertia of custom is more powerful than logical or sentimental expectation” (1019).

¹⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 4.

both in Camus's day and now (albeit under markedly different conditions), suggests that transnationalism is rendered inoperative by cultural binationalism. Put simply, "chiasmic subjects" will be rent asunder when the claims of conflicting national patrimonies are staked on their bodies. Camus's Algerian crisis brings 1990's utopianism around hybrid identity back to questions of bilateral citizenship and the splitting of patriotic identifications. In Camus's writings, the idealized proto-Braudelian fantasy of "Mediterranean man," a Euro-African subject whose cultural attachments allow him to forget the *Realpolitik* of colonial power imbalance, shatters in the context of the Algerian War, when hybridity is re-nationalized; rendered schizoid as opposed to culturally composite.¹⁸

Camus's disavowal of an imminent *postcolonial* binationalism is as much a way of writing as it is a clearly outlined set of positions cured over the course of the Algerian revolution. In an introduction to his *Chroniques algériennes*, published in 1958 at the height of the War, Camus deploys a bipartisan rhetoricity operating as a diplomacy of give and take. Consistently the prose moralist, he levies or suspends judgement in equal measure on both sides. Camus condemns torture on the grounds that it is unjust in absolute ethical terms, and counter-intuitive because it nurtures the next generation of terrorists. But in the next breath, he pleads the cause of French Algerians abandoned by sectors of metropolitan public opinion, that, in 1958, excoriates the *colons* as exploiters of a prostituted land. Bent on restoring dignity to his patrimony, Camus honors the settlers of the 1870s—"seigneurs misérables et libres d'un étrange royaume"—patriotic pioneers who tilled the land and shed their blood for France in the war of 1914 (FA 123). This was to become an obsessive theme of *Le premier homme*, the work that he was carrying with him in draft form at the moment of his fatal car crash in 1960.

Pursuing a policy of double-pronged redress in the Algerian articles, Camus approves the end of colonialism (and along with it the foreclosure of French dreams of reconquest), but mollifies the other side by ruling out the deracination of Algerian Frenchmen, "who, even if they don't have the right to oppress anyone, maintain the right not to be oppressed in turn, or to dispose as they will of the land

¹⁸ I would suggest that the binational split experienced by *pied-noir* French Algerians at the time of the Algerian revolution carries over as a kind of multiple fracturing into the ongoing civil war within Algeria. Conflicting visions of the future nation have pitted Algerians concerned to preserve economic, political and cultural links to France against those committed to an Iranian-style Islamic state.

of their birth.”¹⁹ The distributive grammar of “according this” and “disallowing that,” while implicitly crediting a utopian premise that political cohabitation among French settlers and Algerian natives is an eventual outcome of mutual sacrifice, effectively dodges more difficult questions at the core of Camus’s ideal of French Algeria: What is the national character of the imperial subject who both loves and despises a semi-foreign motherland? What is the cultural identity of the emigrant invested in an expropriated territory yet transnationally acculturated? What is the status of a would-be decolonizer, unable to relinquish assimilationist illusions, including a belief in the implausible politics of benevolent protectionism? How is the hybrid “French Algerian,” or “Algerian Frenchman” tenable given conditions, documented by Camus himself, of irreversible economic inequality? And how might a reparations reading of Camus work to rectify the systematic de-characterization of his Algerian fictional subjects?

It was Conor Cruise O’Brien’s *Albert Camus: Of Europe and Africa*, published in 1970, that was among the first studies to question Camus’s confection of a felicitous French Algerian hybrid. Cutting through the adulation accorded the existentialist Camus during the 1960’s, the book offers a clear, hard look at the colonial legacy within the framework of Camus’s depersonalized, ethics-driven aesthetics. A maverick intellectual, one of Ireland’s great political journalists, the author of a respected study of Edmund Burke, and a significant player in the epic of postwar decolonization in Africa, his extraordinary memoir *to Katanga and Back* records the story of his resignation as U.N. representative in Zaire during the disastrous aftermath of Patrice Lumumba’s assassination. Opening with a letter from U Thant, citing U.N. Staff Regulation 1.5 (dictating discretion after resignation from a top government post), the memoir is full of biting insights into the way in which American Cold War politics took up directly where the European colonial venture in Africa left off.

O’Brien may well have chosen to write a book on Camus because his own biography was so much “of Europe and Africa.”²⁰ With a perspicacity rarely appreciated by literary scholars of Camus (Edward Said being the notable exception), O’Brien points out the glaring contradiction between Camus’s signature theme of estrangement and

¹⁹ Albert Camus, “Avant-propos,” in *Chronique algérienne 1939–1958*, in *Actuelles*, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1958), 28. Further references to this work will appear in the text abbreviated CA.

²⁰ Conor Cruise O’Brien, *To Katanga and Back: A UN Case History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1962).

his contrivance of a raceless Algeria in which Moslems and working-class Frenchmen co-exist without serious tension in the popular quarters of Belcourt. In addition to demonstrating the naivete of canonical critics of Camus such as Germaine Brée, who would have us believe that French, Spanish, Italian, Maltese, Jews, Berbers and Arabs lived together with easy familiarity, “impervious to racial barriers,” O’Brien decries Camus’s “lamentable Mediterranean solar-myth vein” (COB 67), most pronounced in *Noces* and “La pensée de midi” (a section of *L’homme révolté*), but discernible early on in his poem “Méditerranée,” written during his first year at university. Ideologically nourished by the triumphal modern classicism of Gide, Grenier, and Montherlant, this four-stanza verse treats North Africa as the breeding ground of new gods; avatars of a recrudescing Sparta. In its vision of Greco-Africanism, the poem anticipates Camus’s vision of an Athenianized Kabylia, alluded to in his muckraking essay from the thirties, “Misère de la Kabylie.” Here, Camus imagines a federated Algeria composed of micro city-states; perfectible versions of a Rousseauesque “douar-commune,” in which indigenous self-rule is improved by Enlightenment ideals.

Camus’s utopic projection of Algerian democracy shelters another figment of the imagination—pan-Mediterranean man. Caught between his Barrèsian sense of *pied-noir* entitlement to Algerian soil and his status as privileged global citizen of a cosmopolis of letters, Camus invented the figure of a nationless regionalist, at home in the world. Pan-Mediterranean man is set up to become the agent of a new world order that would be neither “national nor even continental, certainly neither occidental nor oriental. It must be universal. . . . It is a form of society where the law is above governments, this law being the expression of the general will, represented by a legislative body.”²¹

Pan-Mediterranean man is that impossible construct; the hybrid cosmopolitan with territorial loyalties and the conscience of the *Volk*. In a lecture delivered in 1937 at La Maison de la Culture, he argued that,

North Africa is one of the few countries where East and West live together, and in this confluence there is no difference between the manner of the Spaniard or an Italian of the quays of Algiers and the Arabs who are around him. The most essential element in the Mediterranean genius springs perhaps from this encounter, unique in history and geography,

²¹ Albert Camus, “Démocratie et dictature internationales,” in *Ni victimes ni bourreaux*, *Actuelles*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), 340–41.

born between East and West. . . . This truth of a Mediterranean culture exists and manifests itself on every point: one, linguistic unity, facility of learning one Latin language when one knows another; two, unity of origin, prodigious collectivism of the Middle Ages, the order of knights, order of religious feudalities, et cetera” (COB 8–9)

To this indifference to difference, Conor Cruise O’Brien proffers a withering riposte:

The interest of these words—in an early and ephemeral statement—lies in their contradictions. At the very moment when he wishes to affirm the unity of the Mediterranean world, the marriage of East and West, he reveals himself as incapable of thinking in any categories other than those of a Frenchman. Although he rejects Maurras’s conception of “the Latin West” with its pro-fascist associations—at this time of Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia—his own Mediterranean truth reposes on a supposed linguistic unity derived from the similarity of Romance languages: and this in a country of which the majority of the inhabitants were Arabic-speaking. (COB 9)

Several pages later, O’Brien puts an even sharper edge into his conclusion, stating that, “when a brilliantly intelligent and well-educated man, who has lived all his life surrounded by an Arabic-speaking population, affirms the existence of a form of unity including the Arabs and based on the Romance languages, it is not excessive to speak of hallucination” (COB 11).

The jury may still be out on how Camusian “unity” should be interpreted. It is certainly a “hallucination” in Conor Cruise O’Brien’s sense; that is, an extraordinary picture of unreality, a blinkered image of regional identity that leaves out what is Arab or Moslem in Mediterranean culture. But it also presages what Emmanuel Wallerstein, following Braudel (arguably the one who gave academic and historical credibility to Camus’s pan-Mediterraneanism), terms “geoculture”—a kind of interstate polity galactically connected to world systems of advanced capital.²² It may equally well foreshadow what Timothy Brennan has recently dubbed the “new cosmopolitanism” of today’s internationalist, “global” writer: “The “new cosmopolitanisms,” Brennan claims, “model themselves on a nostalgia for “democracy” as a vision of pluralist inclusion, a diversity in unity, a global progress based on the Enlightenment, however ambivalently.”²³

²² Immanuel Wallerstein, *Geopolitics and Geoculture: Essays on the Changing World-System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

²³ Timothy Brennan, *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 38.

Whether or not one tries to recoup aspects of Camus's hybrid wish-fulfillment with the help of contemporary models of cosmopolitical citizenship, it seems clear that Camus's political curriculum vitae was at odds with his writing: the former, nursed by antitotalitarianism in the Cold War period, tendered a unity model of culture bolstered by a wildly optimistic faith in franchise (according to Camus biographer Herbert Lottman, "Camus would always believe that Algeria could be saved for France by genuine reforms. He put his hopes in liberalized voting rights for Moslems" [L 356]). The latter, by contrast, portrays *pied-noir* consciousness cocooned in trauma and oblivion; locked in the vise of a repressed-memory-syndrome that it dare not disturb. In *L'étranger*, for example, explicit reference to national fracture is repressed; but it fissures the surface normality of everyday life in the form of unaccountable acts: gratuitous crimes, conjugal abuse, domestic and social autism.

French Algerians, like their counterparts, Algerians living under French domination, emerge in Camus's fiction as characters who are "out of character," in the sense of subjectively "out of pocket"—their credit lines used up, their markets exhausted, their "futures" deemed unprofitable. It is this saga of de-characterization that intriguingly informs Camus's thwarted masterwork *Le premier homme*. Most critics, following cues bequeathed by the author, have assumed that the First Man refers to the dead father of Camus's fictive alter-ego Jacques Cormery. Lottman maintains that the First Man was

Albert Camus's father, who was killed in World War I before Albert was a year old. But it was also Albert Camus himself, growing up in a cultural and historical vacuum accentuated by his family's illiteracy, symbolized by a home without books. "Thus I imagine a first man who starts at zero," he told an interviewer as early as 1954, "who can neither read nor write, who has neither morality nor religion. It will be, if you like, an education, but without an educator." (L, 7)

In the final pages of the novel, the First Man is identified with a "secret part of being," parallel to Janine's discovery of the "obscure part of her being" in *La femme adultère*.²⁴ Here, an originary eco-self, unburying itself as it is pulled through the soil by a magnetic force-field hailing from "who knows where," hatches from the minotaur's sub rosa architecture:

²⁴ In this section I will quote from the recent translation, *The First Man*, trans. David Hapgood (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 278. Further references to this English edition will appear in the text abbreviated FM.

Something in him that through all those years had been blindly stirring like those measureless waters under the earth which from the depths of rocky labyrinths have never seen the light of day and yet dimly reflect a light, come from who knows where, drawn perhaps from the glowing center of the earth through stone capillaries to the black air of those buried caverns in which glutinous and [compacted] plants find food enough to live where any life seems impossible. (FM 278–79)

In what resembles an embryonic dream, the narrator whooshes through the birth canal “yearning to be nobody,” yearning for an “immense country,” an “immense sea,” only to be ejected onto *terra nuova*: “tossed, as if he were the first inhabitant, or the first conqueror, landing where the law of the jungle still prevailed . . .” (FM 279). With “the conqueror” or “colonial First Man,” released into the open, the subsequent history of colonialism is compressed into narrative anecdotes. In one anecdote, a fight breaks out between a Frenchman and an Arab against the backdrop of veiled Algerian women whose “beautiful eyes sensual and soft above the white cloth,” constitute nonetheless “an invisible menace” (FM 280). In another anecdote, a longing for the oceanic maternal body (the foreclosed motherland?) blends into orgasm with a nameless woman whose desire for eternal youth is revealed as painful folly when she returns “to the foreign country where she was born” (FM 283). Though these anecdotes quickly deteriorate into clichés of being “a stranger in one’s own house,” they encrypt the mood of colonial panic—a “nameless dread . . . inside these tangled roots that bound him to this magnificent and frightening land”—regnant at the time of *Le premier homme*’s composition (FM 281).

While granting Camus’s disinherited Conqueror his place as the obvious candidate for titular preeminence, I would also submit that beneath the First Man fantasy of the frontiersman who braves a harsh, insalubrious terrain to create a colony (only to lose it when the imperial venture is abandoned by the metropole), there lies a “first” First Man: an under-characterized “person who was there first,” a displaced or missing subject. This “first” First Man exerts pressure throughout the novel, as if demanding to be released into character-hood. He is on one level the part of Algerian-ness that has seeped into the character of the *pied-noir* and that surfaces in the odd phrase from the notes: “What they did not like in him was the Algerian” (FM 317). On another level he is the utopian agent of a new world order (“Confronting . . . in the oldest story in the world we are the first men—not men on the wane as they shout in the [illegible word]

newspaper but men of a different and undefined dawn" (FM 319). But on still another (and for my purposes more crucial) level, he is an Algerian native, the novel's aborted character *par excellence*.

Merely glimpsed in the notes and sketches appended to the recently published manuscript, the Algerian character must be built up out of paltry material. He poses a veritable challenge to the reader, inviting hypertextual manipulation; the rearrangement of fragments into a hypothetical linear story of the Algerian freedom-fighter where clearly no such story impinges with authority. In several instances, this missing character bears the name Saddok, an insurgent-terrorist, who may in fact have been based on a real Algerian rebel prosecuted for terrorism—Ben Saddok—whose cause Camus was asked to defend shortly before setting out for Stockholm to accept the Nobel prize.²⁵

Saddok may well have been destined to play an important role in Camus's completed *magnum opus*. In one snippet of dialogue, Jacques tries to dissuade Saddok from his revolutionary goal of seizing control of the government, by making the argument that Camus had made famous in *L'homme révolté* about the absolute, corrosive effect of power:

Yes I hate you. For me honor in the world is found among the oppressed, not those who hold power. And it is from that alone that dishonor arises. When just once in history an oppressed person understands . . . then . . .

Goodbye, said Saddok.

Stay, they'll catch you.

That's better. Them I can hate, and I join them in hatred. You're my brother and we're separated . . . (FM 29)

Here the schizophrenia of French Algeria is represented through the familial metaphor of divided brothers (part of a nostalgic vision of

²⁵ According to Lottman, the case of Ben Saddok was the last time Camus would consider an appeal by friends on the left:

The dilemma arose during the prosecution of Ben Saddok (accused of the killing of a prominent Moslem not committed to the rebellion (who had been Vice President of the Algerian Assembly). The defense attorney wrote to Camus to say that his client had carried out a political act, and that he was appealing to Camus as author of "Réflexions sur la guillotine" despite the attorney's connection with political causes that Camus opposed. . . . Camus agreed to make a plea for Ben Saddok if the defense attorney guaranteed that no publicity would be given to the letter he would address to the court. . . . He even drafted a letter for the court in support of Ben Saddok, which his editor quotes as if it had actually been sent, but he apparently left it in draft prior to his departure for Stockholm. On his return he told the defense attorney that he had intended to be of use to the defense, but he had just learned that *France-Observateur* had already publicized his misgivings and conditions, and to his disadvantage. Yet it was not so much political differences as methodology which separated Camus from Ben Saddok's attorney, and now he had been discouraged once and for all. (L 611-12)

the friendships that used to exist between French Algerians and “Arabs” before the outbreak of war). In another fragment, fraternal illusions falter, despite efforts to wash away discord in the swimming pool, before the “terrorism-for,” “terrorism-against” bottom line:

“But why get married that way, Saddok?”

“Should I marry the French way?”

“The French or any other way! Why subject yourself to a tradition you believe is foolish and cruel?”

“Because my people are identified with this tradition, they have nothing else, they stopped there, and to part with that tradition is to part with them. This is why I will go into that room tomorrow, and I will strip a stranger of her clothes, and I will rape her to the sound of gunshots.”

“All right. In the meantime, let’s go swimming.” (FM 313)

If, with Saddok, we are grasping at straws, trying to fill in a characterological void, matters are even harder when all we have to work with is, say, the decontextualized utterance of an FLN commissar: “Yes, I command, I kill, I live in the mountains, under the sun and rain. What do you offer me that’s better: laborer in Béthune” (FM 319), or the barest sketch of a terrorist:

X sees a terrorist fire. . . . He hears someone running after him in a dark street, stands still, turns suddenly, trips him so he falls, the revolver drops. He takes the weapon and trains it on the man, then realizes he cannot turn him in, takes him to a remote street, makes him run ahead of him and fires. (FM 297–98)

Is the terrorist killed when X fires? Isn’t the terrorist’s character the real “X” (in the sense of “unknown”), of this mini-narrative? Is he related to the terrorist whom Camus vowed he would not defend, no matter how justified his acts, if the choice were between the terrorist and his mother? Though the appendices of *Le premier homme* provide little aid in answering these questions, they do figure the mother as the blank slate against which Algeria’s postcolonial future must be projected. “In the last part, Jacques explains to his mother the Arab question, Creole civilization, the fate of the West. ‘Yes,’ she says, ‘yes.’ Then full confession and the end” (FM 309). Here, it seems, the narrator “confesses” to a pessimistic vision of western civilization’s survival in the Islamic world. The “creolized” Algeria presented here is a far cry from the pan-Mediterranean hybrid imagined in his youth; rather, it embodies a mongrel national subject uninterested in preserving western mores or worse, “half-breeds with pointed shoes and scarves who have only adopted the worst from the West” (FM 318).

I will conclude by arguing that Camus's never-never land of French Algeria (an Algeria "made in France"), like so many artificially federated nation-states in the Balkans, was an impossible political artifact. It was an oxymoron in Camus's time, and it remains an oxymoron now, that is, an Islamic nation-state unable to negotiate co-existence with French-identified sectors of its citizenry. The failure of Camus's cosmopolitical hybrid—a vision of French Algeria that collapses in the face of an emergent Algerian nationalism—offers a kind of object lesson for the future of globalization theory or transnational identity-formation. The lesson is simply this: just as you succumb to the illusion of a "global subject" (who, as Bill Readings would have it, moves in a bureaucratic space of eroded nationalism because the "capitalist system . . . offers people not a national identity . . . but a non-ideological belonging: a corporate identity in which they participate only at the price of becoming operatives"), nationalism resurges in a different guise, asserting its particularist claims anew, and, in the case of contemporary Algeria, projecting inherited binational schisms onto the hybrid body-politic.²⁶

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²⁶ Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 48.