

## The Meursault Investigation: A Contrapuntal Reading

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*How will the author teach Kamel Daoud's The Meursault Investigation in an undergraduate class on postcolonial literature and theory? With this pedagogical perspective in mind, this essay attempts a contrapuntal appreciation of the intertextual relationship between Daoud's The Meursault Investigation and Albert Camus's L'Etranger. On the basis of Daoud's novel, this intervention critically rehearses and reformulates the many crises and dilemmas that constitute post-colonial theory: postcolonial asymmetry and counter-memory, the predicament of secular nationalism, decolonization of the mind, humanism and the relationship of ontology to politics, and the future of third world literature.*

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Some are born intertextual. Some achieve intertextuality. Some have intertextuality thrust upon them.<sup>1</sup> What then about the ineluctable intertextuality of Kamel Daoud's *The Meursault Investigation* with Albert Camus's *L'Etranger*?<sup>2</sup> Before I begin my own counter-mnemonic reading of Daoud's attempt to produce his own counter-mnemonic intertextuality from a "given" intertextuality, I would like to make a confession about my first momentous, and dare I say, transformative encounter with the Camus text. I was a seventeen-year-old undergraduate in Madras, now Chennai, in India, when I read *The Stranger*, and not *L'Etranger*, and I was never the same again. I thought I had found a brother, a long-lasting comrade in Camus, not Meursault: a crucial distinction between author and persona. It is outrageous, even unconscionable, that I did not befriend the nameless Arab who got bumped off namelessly.

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1 I am referring, of course, to the famous lines from William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*.

2 Kamel Daoud, *The Meursault Investigation*, trans. John Cullen (New York: Other Press, 2015). Albert Camus, *L'Etranger* (Paris: Gallimard, 1942).

To a seventeen-year-old, recently turned secular atheist, who was profoundly critical of his “given” Hindu Brahmin, ritualistic, fundamentalist casteist, patriarchal, misogynistic, Islamophobic filiation, the philosophy of the absurd with its “benign indifference of the universe” was a source of comfort, a form of radical existential rupture from his own entrapment in his personal history. The absurd philosophical existential rebellion without a cause seemed like the ultimate Nietzschean transformation of all values: an enviably immaculate second-order revolution that had transformed everything philosophically without having changed anything in particular historically. Looking back now, I laugh at the illiterate naivete of that teenager. Here I was a postcolonial teenager, and I was in solidarity with the philosophical subjectivity of the *pied noir*, and totally out of tune with the forced anonymity of the scapegoat Algerian Arab. How ugly and disgusting!

My seduction by the Camus text had been irreducibly philosophical. The urgency of the philosophical-ontological-allegorical register of *The Stranger* was so smooth and felicitous that it had not mattered one bit to me (the same me who had found the Islamophobia in my given culture so reprehensible) that the Arab who was killed did not even have a name. Given the tenor-vehicle modality of allegorical/philosophical formation, I might even have gone to the extent of saying that the “anonymization” of the vehicle was necessary for the thematization of the tenor; and maybe there was even some glory in such erasure. I guess I was in a state of colonial mystification: I had not yet evolved into postcoloniality. Philosophically minded readers seem to have no problem, seem to experience no twinge of conscience, when they bracket history and circumstantiality to achieve philosophical acuity. The assumption is that the philosophical insight would automatically and without contradiction trickle down and manifest itself as political and historical insight as well. In this case, the philosophy of the absurd parades itself automatically as a universal statement about the human condition, a condition that supposedly speaks happily both for Meursault and the nameless Arab, for Camus as well as for all Algerian Arabs. Not only does philosophy presume to speak for history (the high-minded ethical allegorical fiction of J. M. Coetzee comes to mind here), but it also renders all history *atopic*. Why and how does philosophy/philosophical fiction unmark its own ideologically anchored perspectivism to achieve the transcendent effect of universalism? Is all philosophic thinking complicit in such ideological duplicity, or just those forms of philosophy that derive themselves from dominance: Eurocentric, colonialist, patriarchal, Brahmin, and so forth? Would a Fanonian new humanism articulated from the point of view of a black native postcolonial body achieve a different alignment between historical particularism and universalism? Is Daoud’s rewriting of Camus, if that indeed is what it is, as philosophical as it is political, as allegorical of the human condition as it is historical? And if it is, how is the philosophical register derived in this instance from the perspective of the political?

And yet, having said all this, I have to confess unabashedly that I remain a great fan of Camus and I think for the right reasons. Having read *The Stranger*, I was on fire and in no time I had hunted down every Camus volume that was available in English; to this day Camus continues to be an important landmark in my intellectual formation. The issue here is that my solidarity with Camus and my critique of Camus constitute, shall we say, two different ledgers or accounts, which is to say, that the two

accounts neither neutralize each other nor do they add up to one unified statement of undifferentiated credits/debits. My concern then as a teacher would be *not* to set up *The Stranger* as a prefabricated target for postcolonial resentment or critique, but as a nuanced and multivalent text that deserves a differentiated response. Even as French colonialism informs this text fundamentally, there are other macro- and micropolitical forces at work behind this text: the predetermined moral profiling of the criminal as an ontological type (an eminently Foucauldian theme); the *dispositif* of the court system and the discursive production of various types of criminality and culpability; the general malady of alienation or “outsider-ness” with more than one etiology; the ongoing dialectical and often non-dialectical tension between the *ethical* and the *political* even as these two terms are typically hyphenated into mutual consent as the dimension of the *ethico-political*; phenomenology and the critique of the Enlightenment from within; the phenomenon of anomie now that God is dead (Nietzsche, Dostoevsky), the famous Camus–Sartre divide over the relationship of politics to ethics; the humanist predicament in the context of Fascism, Nazism, the Holocaust, the disillusionment with Marxism, Stalinism, and the Gulags; the Yogi and the Commissar dilemma; and much else. To contextualize *The Stranger* in and by itself is already a complicated task riddled with contradictions; and when you add Daoud to Camus, the *problematic/conjuncture*, in the Althusserian sense of the term, defies any sort of unidirectional polemical clarity or conviction.

The Camus–Daoud nexus is an excellent site to enact symptomatically the many challenges that bedevil all conjunctural and intersectional analyses. How should the reader assign priorities within the conjuncture/intersectionality? What should the relationship be between specificity and conjunctural/intersectional generalizability? How to avoid the trap of benign fungibility within the conjuncture, and yet, at the same time create conditions of translatability and mutual legibility among the variables that constitute the conjuncture? All of this is a way of saying is that as a teacher I would look forward to my students struggling and agonizing over how to judge and evaluate each text, each author, both autonomously and differentially, integrally and comparatively. I would encourage them to enlarge and intensify the stage of their dilemma to enable them to factor in every possible fact and circumstance before they dare to totalize, synthesize, or unify their understanding in the name of evaluation and judgment. I would encourage my students to evaluate both texts and their mutual conjuncture along multiple axes: political, aesthetic, ethical, historical, and ontological. I would ask them if all the different judgments added up or if they constituted a world of contradictory coherence. Which parts of the text did you include in your judgment, and why? Which factors emerged as major and which receded into minor status, and why? What did you perceive as the relationship among the different themes in both novels as well as in the intertextual fabric? Did one theme naturally subsume or speak for another, and if so, why? Rather than move toward polemical resolution or political, ethical, or epistemological correctness, I would exhort them to cultivate a rigorous and inclusive ambivalence or multivalence before they attempted a final and definitive summing up.

My objective in this brief essay is to offer the reader a programmatic account of how and why I would teach this text in an undergraduate class on postcolonial literature and theory. As someone who has always opposed the literature/theory

compartmentalization, I have argued consistently that literature has always done the work of theory, or to be more precise, the work of theoretical and critical thinking, albeit on a different generic register. Daoud's fiction is one such example: deeply engaging as fiction and at the same time trenchant and profound in its ability to raise fundamental metafictional issues with deceptive simplicity. My pedagogical intention in teaching Daoud would be to work out a number of dilemmas and theoretical challenges and aporias that have been haunting postcolonial theory. I would look forward to reading Daoud's fiction conjuncturally with postcolonial and African American theory: Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'O, Partha Chatterjee, Gayatri Spivak, Achille Mbembe, Abdelkebir Khatibi, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Edward Said, to name a few. Here is a tentative list of themes and issues: postcolonial counter-memory, postcolonial asymmetry, contrapuntal humanism, secular nationalism, postcolonial derivativeness, the valence of the "post-" in postcoloniality, the chronic problem of binary thought, deconstruction and the strategy of "dismantling the master's house with the master's tools," the predicament of double-consciousness, postcolonial affirmation and negation, the statute of limitations on the *longue duree* of colonialism, the problem of freedom as such and "freedom from" the colonizer, decolonizing the mind (Ngugi), paranoia and identity formation, onto-political thought and the new humanism, subaltern as perspective, traveling theory. Are you kidding me? I would never get to all of this agenda, neither in class nor in this essay.

After having shared with my class the nature of my exposure to Camus when I was a teenager, I would begin with a discussion of intertextuality with reference to postcolonial counter-memory. If postcoloniality is indeed a definitive break from the regime of colonialism, why on earth does Daoud "choose" this intertextual braiding with Camus? For what conceivable reason would he want Camus as his interlocutor? Why would he want to extend the *longue duree* of colonialism as a prerequisite for his own emergence into the postcolonial? Why indeed at this point in history is Camus's text still relevant? At this point, I would initiate my class into the polemic battles that were waged in academia with the advent of the term *postcoloniality*. There was the perception that this coinage that had supplanted earlier categories such as third world, anglophone, Francophone, *et cetera* was a purely metropolitan fiction that was no more and no less than a capitulation to Eurocentric "high" theory. In other words, it was the meretricious need for "high" theory that had made false a common cause between the "post" in postcoloniality and the "post" in poststructuralism and the "post" in postmodernism. Critics of postcoloniality detected in the term a built-in depoliticization of the third world and a baleful forgetting of a militant third world Marxism in favor of easy seduction by poststructuralist theory. And sure enough, I would refer to Anthony Appiah's influential essay on this problematic of a floating "postal" condition.<sup>3</sup>

There was also the critique that the term *postcolonial* created the illusion that a break, both epistemological and political, had been effected from the regime of colonialism, whereas the truth on the ground was that the third world was in a state of

3 See Anthony Appiah, "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?" *Critical Inquiry* 17.2 (Winter 1991): 336–357. See also R. Radhakrishnan, "Postmodernism and the Rest of the World," *Theory in an Uneven World* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003).

neocolonialism. There was a different kind of criticism that pointed out that the term *postcolonial* in its very desire to flee from colonialism was paradoxically highlighting and monumentalizing colonialism as the canonical point of departure. Germane in this context would be the vibrant debate between Mohandas Gandhi, the *mahatma*, and Rabindranath Tagore, the poet, about the nature of freedom: a true philosophical freedom that was autonomous and autotelic (defended passionately by Tagore) and an exclusively “political freedom” (espoused strategically by Gandhi) that had to be reactive and therefore parsed obsessively as “freedom from the British.” Whereas Tagore was committed to a politics of ecstatic aye-saying or affirmation, Gandhi, from the poet’s point of view, seemed entrenched hopelessly in critical negativity, in saying nay to the colonizer. What for example is Daoud affirming in his fiction, and what is he negating? Moreover, can we as readers discern easy passage between critical negation and proactive affirmation?

Here is a dilemma. How would I communicate intertextuality to my class? Would I obligate myself to include the Camus text in my syllabus? One of the blurbs of the book opines that “in the future, the two texts will be read side by side.” Whose or which future, I would instigate my students to ask. In my own pedagogical strategy, would I rather forget to remember, or remember to forget Camus and Meursault? Would I create a split screen and stage both texts? Would I just paraphrase the earlier text whenever the Daoud text made a reference to *The Stranger* and thereby control and administer intertextual “contamination”? Would I be faithful to both texts? How would I distribute and manage my textual loyalty as intertextual obligation? Would I display open bias in the staging of the split screen? And here is an important “pre-post-erous” question? If I did decide to teach both texts, *ha ha*, which one would I teach first, and which next? And with avoidable or unavoidable consequences? I would share all these meta-pedagogical dilemmas with my students. This particular predicament would enable me to talk to my class about the relationship of primogeniture between texts. Does the latter text genuflect to the antecedent text seriously or parodically? To bring in Jacques Derrida and the economy of deconstruction, does the secondary text function as that “dangerous supplement” that eviscerates the sovereignty of the anterior text? Is Daoud deconstructing Camus from “within”? Is the historicity of this “within” chronically ambivalent, like the figurality of the Moebius strip? If the temporality of the postcolonial testifies to the reality that different times, as Salman Rushdie would have it, “have leaked into one another,”<sup>4</sup> how should Arab Algeria, Islamic or secular, be separated from its French colonial imbrication? What geopolitical space are we as readers “in” as we read this text: inside Algeria, within the realm of Francophone literature, in a hybrid or unitary domain?

This would be an opportune moment for me to ask my class what they thought of one of the blurbs, from the *New Yorker*, on the back cover of the text. “Daoud has said that his novel is an homage to Albert Camus’s *The Stranger*, but it reads more like a rebuke.” So, what is it: tribute or rebuke, or is it a substantive rebuke masquerading as tribute, or a substantive tribute in the guise of rebuke? How does one, and from what point of view does one, parse this ambivalence? Why this ambivalence in the first place? To be more specific, why even start with the problem of the Arab’s

4 Salman Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* (New York: Modern Children, 2003), 38.

namelessness in Camus's fiction when Daoud knows that of course the Arab has a name, and a family, and a history? Why should the name of the Arab as Musa be made to function as a reactive, and in that sense, a paranoid rectification, of his namelessness in Camus's fiction? Was Achebe, for example, chronicling in loving detail the rich substantiality of Nigerian life in *Things Fall Apart* just to demystify, castigate, and correct Conrad's racist/ethnocentric blindness; or was he just celebrating African life proactively, nonreactively, affirmatively? My question is: Why consent to being framed by a false polemic and in the process render one's own story sound like a defense, an act of talking back, a ritual of credentialization to silence the colonizer? Why not literally annihilate colonial history by neglecting it altogether as an erroneous, but alas, historically factual point of reference? Here I would create a parallel between this situation and the Palestinian predicament with the Balfour Declaration and the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. In this instance, Palestinians were being forced to recognize the brutal facticity of the creation of Israel but recognize it as a day of mourning. They had to recognize a reality that had no right to be real.

I would ask the students what they thought of the mimicry going on in Daoud's novel, beginning with the inaugural sentence: "Mama's still alive today." Would they read this strategy of echoing the original as an act of acquiescence? Or would they perceive it as an agentic and intentional act of framing the framer, and as a political performance of returning the gaze and criminalizing the seeming innocence of the original narrative? Strategically conflating the murderer with Camus, a conflation that cashes in on the ambiguity of the first-person narrative, Daoud writes as himself and as the brother of the dead Arab Musa, to make the point that the fiction written by a *piéd noir* somehow acquired the density and the flesh and blood of a real life, whereas the real life of an Arab became mere fodder for a philosophy that was no more than a piece of European fiction. To put it differently, just by virtue of having unilaterally and gratuitously given himself "permission to narrate," a phrase developed brilliantly by Edward Said, the fictional persona of Eurocentric fiction acquires worldliness and authors an entire philosophy of life, whereas the real Arab in the same fiction is jeopardized and sacrificed twice over. The abjection of the Arab is twice told: both a nameless Arab in someone else's story and an Arab incapable of narrating his own story in his own land. In other words, European fiction as fiction is capable of formulating truth claims that step outside the pages of fiction even as a real Arab is fictionally instrumentalized and made to yield his life namelessly so that a fictional European character in a novel may become the celebrated author of a philosophy about the world. As the text would have it: "Why does the other guy get left out? Well, the original guy was such a good storyteller that he managed to make people forget his crime, whereas the other one was a poor illiterate god created apparently for the sole purpose of taking a bullet and returning to dust—an anonymous person who didn't even have the time to be given a name."<sup>5</sup>

Commenting directly on Camus' influential "theory of the absurd" as voiced by Meursault in *The Stranger*, Daoud offers the reader a different account of the "absurd." "The absurd is what my brother and I carry on our backs or in the bowels of our land,

5 Daoud, *The Meursault Investigation*, 1.

not what the other was or did. Please understand me, I'm not speaking in either sorrow or anger. I'm not even going to play the mourner. It's just that . . . it's just what? I don't know. I think I'd just like justice to be done. That may seem ridiculous at my age . . . But I swear it's true. I don't mean the justice of the courts, I mean the justice that comes when *the scales are balanced*" (6). Deftly, in this passage, Daoud makes his countermove when he makes the claim that the Arab body in the very act of embodying the absurd is abjected of its own truth. The colonial condition is absurd historically, physically, empirically. Arabs and Algerians have been reduced to absurdity, in their own land, by French colonialism; and yet, this is what is galling, the French storyteller, just because he is a felicitous storyteller, not only absolves himself of the horrendous guilt of having "absurdified," that is, deprived of all meaning, the Algerian Arab in his own native land, but claims this very absurdity as his philosophical formulation on behalf of the entire universe. Mystified by the Algerian sun, Meursault just kills, and *ergo* becomes the founder of a new philosophical episteme. It is all about him even though he understands nothing, and his subjective nothingness is more real ontologically than the Arab body that has been made not to matter. Clearly, there is a parallel here: the black body has to be seen as that fundamental nothing that is beneath conceptuality so that Euro-modernity can achieve its politico-epistemological plenitude. The contributions of Orlando Patterson, Lindon Barrett, Saidiya Hartman, and Hortense Spillers come to mind here. This would be a rich opportunity to read the Arab body *vis a vis* the black body, with reference to colonial modernity. To what exactly does Africa, or pan-Africa return to after colonization: African roots, Arab roots, or both in hybrid fusion? Will the African nation states to come be African, Arab, Arab-African, or just secular in abeyance or strategic suspension of the Arab and the African nomenclatures? Fanon pays great, if not always satisfactory, attention to this problem.

I would also exhort my class to consider this question: How should Daoud have managed his double-consciousness? How should he have celebrated Algeria's freedom as its own even as he acknowledges the unfortunate historical fact that this freedom had been taken away by colonialism? How should his narrative have dealt with the debilitating effect that the celebrating of one's own indigenous freedom is made to seem as the effect of wresting it from the colonizer? How can a decolonizing nationalist consciousness (not to mention the "pitfalls"<sup>6</sup> thereof that Fanon warns us of) be rid of its constitutive pathology and at the same time enabled not to repeat the horrors of colonial settler nationalism? One after all should not be a settler in one's own land. I would also invite them to think what it might have meant for Musa's brother or Daoud to envision a return to a precolonial Arab Algerian reality, as though colonialism hadn't happened at all. Some of Toni Morrison's work, with reference to slavery, is germane here. In others words, consider colonialism as factual but as an erroneous history not to be taken into account. Would the forgetting of colonial history in the name of Algerian Arab indigeneity have amounted to a glib forgiveness of the horrors of colonialism? I would go back to the text and focus on the italicized words, *the scales are balanced*. Daoud is talking not about the justice offered by courts that are already structured in dominance, but a deeper structural justice that would

6 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox, (New York: Grove, 2004).

rectify a fundamental asymmetry between the colonizer and the colonized. Given the reality of colonialism that violently annexes Africa and Asia into the sovereignty of European history, it only stands to reason that after decolonization, France and England, too, have the ethico-political imperative to conceive of themselves as post-colonial, like India, like Algeria. But not quite so fast. This postcolonial relationship between France and Algeria is necessarily asymmetrical. It is this asymmetry that has to be rectified, like the scales of a balance that have gone awry, scales that have been perverted by the rapacious violence of colonialism: both France and Algeria postcolonial, but in not quite the same way. I would also encourage my students to ask why the narrator maintains that he is not speaking in anger or sorrow.

So, why neither anger nor sorrow? Isn't that unnatural, even undesirable and apolitical, considering the dire colonial specificity of the novel's context? I don't think so. I would like to make the case for my students that this text makes an attempt to produce spaces of the postpolitical even as it deals punctiliously with the conditions of its inescapable political origination. But rather than accept the thesis of total predetermination by political context, Daoud's text imagines a different cartography after the sorrow and the anger of the political after all these years. And this gesture is not that of a simple-minded humanistic truth and reconciliation ritual. I would argue that in an ironic and poignant way, it becomes the strange task of the subaltern to up the ante and generalize, against all odds, but from its given historical perspective. In other words, as the eminent subaltern historian Veena Das has suggested: open up subalternity as perspective rather than suffocate it with the rectitude of a pregiven knowledge or ideological content. Daoud's perspective has the obligation then, on the one hand, to realize an organic and synchronic connection between, what Walter Mignolo has effectively termed "places of living" and "places of thinking,"<sup>7</sup> and on the other hand, liberate thinking through an act of deterritorialization. Let postcolonial Algerian transcend Algeria on the basis of its subaltern perspective. Yes, of course, this is Algeria, and where else can it be? And at the same time the postcolonial cogito diasporizes or disseminates Algeria as perspective beyond the straitjacket of political determination. To bring Edward Said strategically into the conversation, the purpose of thematizing postcolonial asymmetry is not to monumentalize it, but to enable the postcolonial subject step beyond the paralyzing framework of the mutual "politics of blame and guilt."<sup>8</sup> Said's position, and I am aware that Said's position is not shared by all postcolonial thinkers, is that of a postcolonial cosmopolitanism that refuses to compartmentalize the world chronically into the Us and the Them: the excolonizeds and the excolonizers. I would ask my students if they see Daoud's text as cosmopolitan, and if so, is it metropolitan cosmopolitan or vernacular cosmopolitan?

What then should be the postcolonial perspective, and who is the addressee of that perspective? (I would remind the class here of Sartre's famous Preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* where he warns Europe: Beware! of Fanon's passionate brilliance). Is Daoud's text, from within its intertextual double bind, addressed to an Algerian audience,

7 Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

8 Edward Said, "Intellectuals in the Postcolonial World?" *Salmagundi* 70/71 (spring-summer 1986): 44–64. See also Said on Camus and Algeria in *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994).



a French audience, to both equally and simultaneously? Or is addressed primarily to one and then to the other as necessarily and consequently secondary? If indeed there is some register or scale to be imagined as postcolonial universalism or postcolonialism, then it becomes incumbent on postcolonial narrative to actualize a double-voiced articulation of history as both intra-identitarian and inter-identitarian, intra-historical and inter-historical. The intra-Algerian salience of the novel should in no way delegitimize its general and translocal legitimacy; conversely, its cosmopolitan appeal cannot be at the expense of its local/Algerian relevance. Most significantly, does the novel, on the basis of its doubleness, create a new readership and a new cartography of geopolitical location? This question is also about the politics of framing. Is the reciprocal framing of each text by the other historically immanent? Or is there a tacit meta-geopolitical frame of the world order, the “center elsewhere,”<sup>9</sup> as Derrida would put it, that dictates the immanent play of intertextuality from above or beyond?

Here’s the rub, I would remind my students. If you are defining *justice* as the balancing of the scales with Algeria on one side and France on the other, then there is no way Algeria can secede from its double-consciousness, its reality and fate within the history of colonialism. Even a radical project of Algerian revisionism will have to route itself via a counter-mnemonic reading of the pages of colonialism. Gramsci reminds us that to understand the history of the present, we need to compile an inventory of all the historical traces that have led up to the present.<sup>10</sup> Of course, the traces constitute a palimpsest, and for sure, the trace of colonialism is one of the many traces, the most immediate, and for that reason it commands and demands critical attention. Walter Benjamin’s impassioned appeal to read history “against the grain” does not get rid of “the grain” altogether.<sup>11</sup> The question that torments the postcolonial imaginary is this: how to negotiate, adjudicate, prioritize, and choose among the many traces that have constituted one’s past (none of which are historically false) and compile an inventory that will not end up as a tautological repetition of history. It has to be a critical, perspectival inventory, and the compilation of such an inventory is a prolegomenon to the project of initiating a change, a revolution. A revolution undertaken, in this case decolonization and the formation of a revolutionary postcolonial nationalism, without a rigorous understanding of the history of the present will only be fatuous and profoundly misdirected. Hence, for Daoud and for Musa’s surviving brother, unless they want to live in denial, there is no choice but to produce an oppositional, contrapuntal, deconstructive reading of colonialist historiography that has consigned them to anonymity: where, as Adrienne Rich would famously declare in her magnificent poem “Diving into the Wreck,” “our names do not appear.”<sup>12</sup>

For an excolonized subjectivity, this project is a must: a precariously ambivalent project of revisionism that has to achieve a carefully balanced double articulation.

9 Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

10 Antonio Gramsci, *The Modern Prince and Other Writings*, trans. Dr. Louis Marks (New York: International Publishers, 1957).

11 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968).

12 Adrienne Rich, *Diving into the Wreck*. See also my analysis of this poem in “Revisionism and the Subject of History,” in my book, *History, the Human, and the World Between* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

On the one hand, it must lay bare, from its critical perspective of decolonization (I would point the class here toward the work of Achille Mbembe), the mechanisms of colonial oppression and subjugation, and on the other hand, it has to wean its affirmation away from its negative-critical entanglement with the horrors of colonialist historiography. Of course, the Arab always had a name; needless to say the Arab always spoke for him-/herself and his/her people and produced knowledge about his/her people and culture. And yet, and here is the gut-wrenching irony, this very affirmative, proactive precolonial truth has to be produced all over again within the conflictual, antagonistic mode necessitated by colonialism. The language of affirmation has to be necessarily routed via the pathological rhetoric of negation. What was already one's own, ontologically, historically, politically, and culturally, has to be realized and performed as an act of what Partha Chatterjee has eloquently termed "derivative discourse."<sup>13</sup> Daoud's narrative is forced to "make its own" what was already one's own, prior to colonial interruption and deracination.

Daoud's text thematizes this issue in the following passage:

I'll tell you this upfront: The other dead man, the murder victim, was my brother. There's nothing left of him. There's only me, left to speak in his Place, sitting in this bar, waiting for condolences no one's ever going to offer. Laugh if you want, but this is more or less my mission: I peddle off-stage Silence, trying to sell my story while the theater empties out. As a matter of Fact, that's the reason why I've learned to speak this language, and to write it Too: so I can speak in place of a dead man, so I can finish his sentences for Him. The murderer got famous, and his story's too well written for me to get any idea about imitating him. He wrote in his own language. Therefore I'm going to do what was done in the country after Independence: I'm going to take the stones from the old houses the colonists left behind, remove them one by one, and build my own house, my own language. The murderer's words and expressions are my *unclaimed goods*. Besides, the country's littered with words that don't belong to anyone anymore. You see them on the facades of old stores, in yellowing books, on people's faces, or transformed by the strange creole decolonization produces.<sup>14</sup>

Daoud captures here the challenge envisioned carefully by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*. In a perverted and distorted historical situation where the colonized peoples of the earth are constrained to find and valorize their freedom as the direct and palpable function and product of decolonization, Fanon insists that the project of decolonization has to take on as its adversary the entire machinery of colonialism and its pan-African scale of operation. In this phase, the perspective of the "native revolutionary" has to be on the same stage as the colonizer and destroy that theater of operation perspectively. This is the stage of radical, implacable antagonism. This is to be followed analytically by the temporality where the native African becomes her own free and untrammelled protagonist: the time when native forms of art and culture and music return in unabashed, nonreactive, nonparanoid, nonpathological

13 Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* 1986. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 1–2.

14 Daoud, *The Meursault Investigation*.

celebration of their own capacity to be affirmative. These two phases need to be conceived and practiced as a continuum even though they are to be understood and analyzed as two discrete chapters in an emerging single narrative. Daoud's fiction also does justice to the other aspect of Fanonian thought, that is, its psychiatric and psychoanalytic complexity. There is the Fanon of *The Wretched of the Earth* who comes across as a *mujahid* in the cause of decolonization and African nationalism, and there is the psychoanalytically oriented analyst of *Black Skin, White Masks*. Different as the two Fanons may sound, the two Fanons, as Ato-Sekyi Otu has demonstrated persuasively, are in a dialectical relationship with each other as they deal with the temporality of the political as well that of psychoanalysis. If the overtly political Fanon is dealing with the violent Self-Other dynamic of the slave-master and the colonizer-colonized, the psychoanalytic Fanon opens up the temporality of Alterity, Otherness with the capitalized O to bring home the insight that political victories, even those brought about by decolonization, need to do more than merely turn tables on the master-slave binary by making the slave the new master. Thus, the political Fanon sounds like a problem solver, arguing passionately for a decolonized native nationalism as the answer, whereas the other Fanon insists that he should be a body that is made up of nothing but questions. His momentous declaration, "The Negro is not. Any more than the White Man"<sup>15</sup> has for its goal nothing short of the total destruction of the binary apparatus, and not just the short-sighted political celebration of the slave's seizure of the master's pole within the binary colonial apparatus. What makes Fanon's call for a new humanism special is the fact that it is an onto-political call and not just a political manifesto.

I will most likely end this discussion with the claim that the strength of Daoud's fiction is also its weakness: that is, its formal virtuosity, despite its antagonistic or critical intent, is parasitic. Wow! Daoud has excelled, outstripped Camus at his own game! That is for sure, but that sort of virtuosity has very little to say or communicate about an independent postcolonial Algeria whose ongoing struggles warrant a different narrative voice and a different generic perspective. Having made this magisterial judgment, I would, in the spirit of critical ambivalence, step back from my own certitude and tell my class quite candidly that I am still unresolved about the *ultimate* rather than the *proximate* significance of Daoud's work. Given that Algeria achieved independence in 1962 and Daoud's book appears a good fifty-plus years after that, what should have been Daoud's sense of the history of the Algerian present in the early twenty-first century within the overall context of where Algeria was and should be heading? In other words, in choosing the Camus context as a relevant point of entry *now*, so much later after decolonization, is Daoud knocking down a straw opponent or flogging a dead horse? Sure enough, the choice of contrapuntal narration offers Daoud an unprecedented opportunity for fictional virtuosity, but is this aesthetic choice in sync with Algeria's present? In terms of its political effect, and not just the aesthetic or fictional effect, does *The Meursault Investigation* function as revolutionary counter-memory, or does it perpetuate colonial memory? If the temporality of Algerian nationalism, with all its volcanic problems and crises, is well underway in its protagonistic phase, why the need for that earlier colonial conjuncture for the sake of diagnostic clarity and proper self-recognition?

15 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

I would have my students thinking along with me the complexity of the following questions. On what basis does a culture or an art form decide that a certain *longue duree* has indeed expired or been effectively buried, thus making way for the emergence of new forms, or the revisionist new return of old and subjugated forms of knowledge and self-expression? When and how will the decolonization of the mind announce itself historically, politically, empirically? If the contrapuntal counter-mnemonic conversation with the ex-enemy necessitates a certain “formal” engagement with and “love” of the enemy (i.e., deconstruction functions as ideological revolt precisely because it embodies itself as formal subversion of the dominant form), does not such an ongoing engagement occlude the possibility of the emerging new and native forms of expression? What about the death or the superannuation of European genres of abstract thought that Fanon talks about and his joyous welcome of the return of African modes of storytelling, singing, drumming, and dancing? How should we think about the alignment of the aesthetic with the political, especially in the context of a colonialism-inspired double-consciousness that threatens to be chronic despite every effort at total decolonization? Yes, it is one thing to warn humanity: Never forget the past, keep it alive as a memory even as you erase it; and quite another to allow this ongoing memory to impede actively in the creation of a new and different script and language. So, what is form and what is content in postcolonial literature; what is formal negation and what is ideological affirmation? Take a good look at the opening pages of Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, where he imagines nationalism as a shell that can then be peopled, embodied, and filled out in tune with the needs, consciousness, intentions, and agency of the decolonized people. But why, despite his ferocious and implacable hatred and condemnation of Europe as nothing but horror and crime, past, present, and future, does he hold on to the “given-ness” of the shell? How is this given-ness of the national morphology any different from the modularity of nationalism as theorized by Benedict Anderson?<sup>16</sup> What should Algerian postcolonial writing look like and sound like (given the inescapable question of which language, French or Arabic) fifty years after flag-waving decolonization and independence? How should culture, Algerian national culture, develop a mode of analysis capable of calibrating and evaluating, with granular precision, the quality of the cathexis of the aesthetic/the literary/the cultural with the political? Is it possible that a work like Daoud’s that formally engages with Camus could be politically more progressive than an Arab work that eschews all and every connection with European and Eurocentric genres?

Isn’t it significant that Daoud’s narrative ends by highlighting the unreliability of the narrator?

Do you find my story suitable? It’s all I can offer you. It’s my word. I’m Musa’s brother or nobody’s. Just a compulsive liar you met with so you could fill up your notebooks. . . . It’s your choice, my friend. It’s like the biography of God. Ha, ha! No one has ever met him, not even Musa, and no one knows if his story is true or not. The Arab’s the Arab, God’s God. No name, no initials. Blue overalls and blue sky. Two unknown persons on an

16 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

endless beach. Which is truer? An intimate question. It's up to you to decide. *El-Messou!*  
*Ha, ha.*

I, too, wish them to be legion, my spectators, and savage in their hate.<sup>17</sup>

So, what exactly is happening here? What is being affirmed, and what negated? In a novel with a political purpose and direction, why is the veracity of the narrator so joyously problematized by way of a performance of blithe self-reflexivity? How many veracities are there: the truth of reality, the truth of history, the truth of fiction, the truth of philosophy, and so on? Is truth a generic property that the genre is free at any time to claim and disavow? Is the narrator making a double-voiced declaration? Yes, what he is saying is true but only on the basis of the fact that the truth is an epistemic function of the act of storytelling. On the other hand, storytelling is what it is: storytelling and no more. I would ask the class to keep in mind that the narrator makes an ontological distinction between the foreigner, who was good at telling a story, and his nameless brother, who could not tell his story. The capacity to tell a story is valorized both as an inherent ontological property and as a credential or talent that produces ontology as effect or function. In this story, Daoud, now that he has permitted/empowered himself to produce a narrative, claims his identity as his skill and his skill as his identity. In loosening up the relationship between knowing and being, between epistemology and ontology, he affords himself the comfortable naturalness of the colonizer, comfortable both as real and fictional. Is his claiming of this right any different modally from the right of the narrator in Camus's fiction?

There is a further point to be made. Postcolonial literature is not an automatic extension of postcolonial politics, constrained to repeat the truth of the political in abject heteronomy. It can have its own will to fabulate against its own veracity, or celebrate or ironize its own veracity as factitious and playfully apocryphal or blasphemous. The interesting questions are: How is this autonomy performed, that is, via what techniques of narrative performativity? Is this technique indigenous, or is it borrowed from the west? Readers of Camus will recognize in the ending a deliberate miming of the unreliable narrator of Camus's *The Fall*. Such miming is consistent with the rest of the text's leaning on Camus. In this sense, the text belongs fair and square to literary modernism. But is that all it is? Could this technique have another name and a different genealogy in the Arabic tradition? I am reminded here of Barbara Christian's essay, "The Race for Theory,"<sup>18</sup> where she argues that there is nothing new about theory. Theory by some other name has been happening for a long time in other traditions and under different circumstances: the griot, the trickster figure, the signifying monkey, and so forth. It is a matter of recognition, and theory is after all a contingent name given to a certain kind of thinking within a certain tradition: nothing timeless or taxonomically binding about it.

It is revealing, though, that the novel ends with a consolidation of the *doppelganger*, the alter ego effect. The two narrators are intertwined, braided into a figural solidarity even as the truth claims of the two narratives are presented as mutually

17 Daoud, *The Meursault Investigation*, 143.

18 Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Cultural Critique* 6 (Spring 1987): 51–63.

contradictory, perhaps incommensurable. Daoud's narrator as his parting coda leaves the reader with a pattern that is as much an identity in difference as it is a difference in identity. The last sentence reiterates the theory of the absurd, perhaps as parodic excess or as mimetic lack. "I too would wish them to be legion, my spectators, and savage in their hate."<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the two narrators are in the same boat, but got there on different ships. To the reader is granted the freedom, the obligation, to make an ethico-political choice not in the name of truth but in the name of a particular version of truth, not in the name of reality, but in the name of one of two verisimilitudes. It is up to the reader to decide. Is the decision a verdict, an act of judgment? Should the judgment be political or literary, or both? What if one of the narrators is more persuasive but not truthful? What would be the aegis of the judgment: Francophone literature, Algerian literature, African or Arab literature, postcolonial literature, or world literature? Is it a matter of judgment or of interpretation? What then is the relationship of interpretation to judgment? Would a postcolonial French reader by definition decide differently from a postcolonial Algerian reader? In this context, it would be useful to read the exchange between Abdelkebir Khatibi and Jacques Derrida about the relationship between language and national sovereignty, between mono- and bilingualism.<sup>20</sup>

These are open-ended questions for my students to think about from the point of view of their location and subject position. I would leave class with the insistence that a certain epistemological undecidability (that does not preempt or disarm advocacy and partisanship) has to be kept alive so that ethico-political choices are not suborned by ideological opportunism or so-called political positivist common sense that censors opposition and difference. I would ask my class to think about hybrid forms: How would they evaluate which hybrid postcolonial forms are substantive and politically anchored, and which merely cosmetic and epidermal? What should be at stake for the class in this discussion is the very status of the political? What we call politics is never self-evident; it has to be constantly reimagined without any given guarantees of correctness. Any revolutionary context, like that of the postcolonial, offers a rich opportunity to envision possibilities of freedom by way of politics as well as a deeper freedom that takes the form of "freedom from the political."<sup>21</sup>

### Questions and Issues for the Class to Think About

What are the limits of any kind of contrapuntal structure of narrative? Should there be a statute of limitations? Once Algeria is totally independent and colonialism is at best a bad memory, will there be an internal Other, the Other within one's own nationalism that will necessitate a contrapuntal dialogue? Doesn't nationalism, even if it is in one's own African or Arab name, create minorities and become the instrument of an internal oppression? Is the notion of the "contrapuntal" as developed by Edward Said from the musical category of "counterpoint" a political category, an aesthetic category, or both?<sup>22</sup> Is the relationship between point and counterpoint antagonistic

19 Daoud, *The Meursault Investigation*, 143.

20 Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other, or the Prosthesis of the Origin*; Khatibi, *Love in Two Languages*.

21 R. Radhakrishnan, "Flights of the Human as Flights from the Human," *sympleke* 23.1–2 (2015): 173–200.

22 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993). See also, R. Radhakrishnan, *Edward Said: A Dictionary* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

or symbiotic? Do point and counterpoint depend on each other formally or substantively? If, despite their modal difference, both point and counterpoint are part of the same structure, isn't the oppositional force of the conversation already tamed within the normativity of the contrapuntal rationale? Would this constitute an aestheticization of politics?

There are passages in Daoud's text, especially when it comes to a secular critique of the truth claims of religion, where the narrator seems to sympathize with Meursault's indifference to religion. Is it conceivable that there may well be a common ground between Meursault and Daoud's narrator when the issue is the interrogation of religion by secularism? Is secularism a one-size-fits-all template for all nations and peoples? Or does the very shape and content of secularism vary with reference to where it comes from? Is it conceivable that secularism could harden into a kind of fundamentalism? Is it an imperative that the decolonized Algerian nation to come should be valorized in the name of secularism? Would the very category of an Islamic nation, or for that matter a Christian or a Jewish nation, be a contradiction in terms? Can a distinction be made between the politics of secularism and the epistemology of secularism? Is it coherent to defend secularism unreservedly at the level of politics and at the same time keep alive an epistemological critique of secularism? Please read the following theorists: Talal Asad, Edward Said, Saba Mahmood, Charles Taylor, William Connolly, Partha Chatterjee, and Ashis Nandy.

How is the murder in Daoud's book both reminiscent of and different from the killing in the Camus text? Why does Daoud's text uncannily invoke the original text during carefully chosen moments and contexts in the story? What is the politics of repetition at work here? Why does it matter when the Frenchman is killed in Daoud's novel? When is "killing" a sin, a crime, a meaningful and heroic act in the name of freedom? What exactly is a senseless act that is devoid of all intentionality? Why does the horizon of the apolitical haunt differentially the world of both narrators?

What does writing in one's own language mean for Daoud? Is language here a metaphor for one's own perspective, worldview? Or does it refer literally to invoke the agelessly significant debate between Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'O, to specific languages such as French, Arabic, and so on? Please pay special attention to the twin phenomena of the vernacularization as well the nationalization of languages. Read Khatibi's *Love in Two Languages* and Derrida's *Monolingualism of the Other*.<sup>23</sup>

Why does Daoud use the dialogic form of narrative, constantly addressing the reader as his imaginary interlocutor? Is this a way of what Said would call "the staging of narrative" and along with it a theatrical context? Or is Daoud again mimicking Camus's narrative strategy in *The Fall*, where the narrating voice as *raconteur* is confessing to the reader and manipulating the reader's attention continually? I would also suggest to my class that they read Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* and Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter* as examples of carefully crafted dialogic narratives. Is the narrator a reliable narrator? What is reliability under different

23 Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Love in Two Languages* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1990). Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other, or the Prosthesis of the Origin* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

political regimes? To back all this up, I would tell them to plunge into Mikhail Bakhtin's magisterial work, *The Dialogic Imagination*.

What do you make of the Self-Other structure that connects the two narrators? In Daoud's novel is the Self-Other binary instantiated exclusively as the colonizer-colonized divide? What then happens to the racist divide of white/black? Within the "omni-historical" (Althusser's coinage) temporality of the binary apparatus, does the colonizer-colonized divide automatically and organically address the white/black binary as well? The chances are that Musa and his family are not black? Does Daoud's text deal effectively with the Arab-African dimension of the Algerian context? Within the binary, is the antagonism substantive and the structural identification formal? Or is it the other way around? What does structure mean in this context? Is it an *a priori* impermeable to human agency? (For example, think of race, social death by slavery, and the passion of Afro-pessimism.) Think both fictionally and historically (all the more so because Daoud astutely troubles these two categories in his fiction as he creates a porous relationship between persona and person, narrator and author, the truth claims of fiction and those of history and reality) about the kind of story Daoud might have come up with if he had not chosen Camus as his interlocutor? Has Daoud been fully interpellated by Camus? Or is Camus's hail non-ideological? Now that he has involved Camus in his project, for good or bad, how is he both constrained and enabled in his project of postcolonial affirmation? Is he now forced, now, despite the trajectory of his political will, to acknowledge and valorize common ground with the murderer? Why, for example, does the character of Meursault remain eloquent and provocative despite colonialist crime and culpability? The narrator in Daoud, too, is capable of "indifference" to the political in his own way? What is the "difference of his indifference" from Meursault's amoral and apolitical apathy? Is it weak-minded and politically pusillanimous to understand Meursault both as criminal and victim within the simultaneity of the same thought? Clearly, indifference can be parsed and unpacked as political indifference, ethical indifference, epistemological indifference? Are these forms of indifference mutually constitutive? Are they fractals? Are they concentric? Are they hierarchically structured? Is there a primary indifference that is reiterated as secondary, tertiary, and so on? If so, which specific indifference is originary?

Meursault lives the absurd but does not know his existence as absurd. Indifferent to everything, he is indifferent to politics, to his situation as a settler colonial. It would appear that in his case, because he lacks self-reflexivity, he has been spoken for *tout court* by the ubiquitous circumambient indifference of the universe. He does not produce a syllogistic understanding of the absurd with ontological absurdity as the major premise and the political as the minor. Camus speaks for him. The intentional consciousness of the narrator in Daoud's text is differently structured with respect to meaning and meaninglessness, political or ontological. Is there any coeval connection between Meursault's indifference and the caliber of indifference in Daoud's text?

### **What Role Do Gender and Sexuality Play in Either Fiction?**

Are both narrators male/masculist? What do these terms mean in either culture, and how are they derived? How do women, their bodies, their sexuality get played out



in the interregnum between colonialism and the Algerian nation to come? Would Algerian nationalism be masculinist: secular or Islamic masculinist? Read Fanon's *Algeria Unveiled*, Fatema Mernissi, and Ranjana Khanna's postcolonial feminist work. What is the difference between the two mothers? Is the mother figure enabling or oppressive, or both? In a way, each work seems to address/dedicate itself the mother figure, dead or alive. Keep in mind Camus's famous/infamous insistence that his solicitude for his mother would prevail over any political loyalty or commitment.

Make it a point to see the film *The Battle of Algiers*. How are the battle lines drawn in the movie between the FLN guerrilla insurgency and the *pied noir*? Crimes are committed by both parties in this classic text. How would you ethically and politically differentiate between the different acts of violence? Meursault's crime is made to seem the result of the desert sun: a meaningless pulling of the trigger in an absurd world, whereas the act of killing in the Daoud text is badly timed and thereby loses political meaning. Both characters come across as antiheroes but for different reasons. Just imagine for a moment and hypothetically transfer our two characters into the history of the present of *The Battle of Algiers*. Would they have been motivated differently to act, to intend, and find meaning in and for their lives? Please pay attention to the category of the quotidian, the everyday, and its relationship to historicity and temporality.

I would recommend that my class familiarize themselves with the works of some of the following Algerian writers and thinkers: Assia Djebar, Taos Amrouche, Kateb Yacine, Malek Alloula, Ferhat Abbas, Djamel Amrani, and others.

Finally, all the more so because the text ends with an appeal to the discrimination and judgment of the reader, I would ask my students to mark their own location as readers. Who do they think they are as they read this text? What biases, baggage, as well as legacies and assets do they bring to their reading? Do they feel like taking sides? Do they feel neutral or ambivalent? Would they rather position themselves "between" the two texts? Is "between-ness" a viable location?<sup>24</sup> How do texts like this help us think about the relationship between solidarity and critique? Who are insiders, and who are outsiders? Does solidarity disarm critique, and does critique defer solidarity endlessly? How does one distinguish between the critique of the insider from that of the outsider?

One last request to my students: In your class and instructor evaluation, please let me know if in my teaching of this text I 1) was tendentious and didactic, 2) was way too open-minded and *laissez-faire* in my pedagogical stance, 3) sacrificed literature to politics, 4) made a pretext of the literary text and did not achieve enough close reading of the text, 5) provide enough historical background without letting context inundate the text, and 6) persuasively illuminate theory through the text and *vice versa*.

24 Edward Said, "Criticism between Culture and System," *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983). See also chapter 2 of my book on Edward Said in *History, the Human, and the World Between*.