

To Be Greeted with Cries of Hate: Albert Camus and the Tragic Impossibility of the Algerian Question*

Ethan Estes

ABSTRACT

The influential writer Albert Camus was born in French Algeria and maintained a close and controversial relationship with the territory throughout his life. Camus's political writings, often more obscure in popular imagination than his novels, sparked controversy in his time and beyond. As such, these writings have motivated intense scholarly debate over the morality and feasibility of the author's positions. Particularly, his simultaneous disavowal of colonial injustice but rejection of Algerian independence alienated him from the contemporary French Left, Algerian nationalists, and "patriotic" Frenchmen. By framing Camus's positions through a lens of passive colonial collaboration and subconscious bias, the seeming contradictions between the author's moral humanism and practical forbearance of French colonial occupation can be better understood. Tortured by the conflict in his homeland, Camus maintained, "Algeria is where I hurt at this moment, as others feel pain in their lungs," with complete sincerity.¹ His situation as a *pied noir*, or French settler in Algeria, added a layer of tragic impossibility to any position endorsing the expulsion of French settlers, but his conscience impelled him to reject, too, the brutality and systematic oppression of French authorities. This paper will show these feelings were a contradiction the author could never fully resolve and that still haunts his legacy today.

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1. Albert Camus, "Letter to an Algerian Militant," in *Algerian Chronicles*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 113. Note: This line is particularly personal to Camus, as he alludes to the effects of tuberculosis he had suffered since age 17.

*"Le temps des colonialismes est fini, il faut le savoir seulement et en tirer les conséquences."*²

For a time, Albert Camus was the conscience of a generation. The anti-nihilistic philosophy the French-Algerian writer articulated in *Le mythe de Sisyphe*, his resistance to Nazi totalitarianism in occupied France, his opposition to all violence, the death penalty, colonialism, and Stalin's Communism all earned him a reputation as a sublime moralist in an age where the advent of nuclear weapons threatened to decimate humanity. But like anything else, this era would not last. Beginning with his decisive public break with Jean-Paul Sartre in 1952 and repudiation by Simone de Beauvoir, over both his anti-Communism and stance on Algeria, and ending with his period of silence in 1958, Camus's reputation was forever changed.³ To some, he remained a voice of conscience. To others, the French left and Algerian nationalists especially, his opposition to Algerian independence blacklisted his name forever. Camus himself, constantly tortured by the moral dilemmas he was faced with, maintained a more ambiguous view toward his own virtue. Ultimately, the question comes down to why one man inspired such varied hatred and admiration. The only way to understand is to analyze what he wrote situated in context to determine exactly how Camus perceived colonialism and the problem of violence. Such a study provides no easy answers. Camus's complex condemnation, yet reformist acceptance, of colonialism seem to stand forever in contradiction yet reveal essential dimensions of the Algerian dilemma.

Camus was torn between a desire to criticize French colonial policy in his native Algeria and a desire to advocate against the removal of French settlers in the name of Algerian nationalism. Consequently, he has been heavily scrutinized, not just by the contemporary French left of his time, but by those studying the Algerian War. His critics have interpreted his politics and literature as little more than thinly-veiled colonial justifications, while others have praised his advocacy of "universal" values. The truth lies somewhere in between. Indeed, there is a robust, and often correct, tradition of critique led by Conor Cruise-O'Brien and Palestinian American academic Edward Said that calls into question some of the colonialist assumptions inherent in Camus's politics. Analysis will reveal the French Algerian author's sometimes misunderstood, at times subconsciously Eurocentric, and often thoughtful analysis to gain a better understanding of the complex forces at play in the Algerian conflict.

These forces cannot be apprehended, however, without first understanding that Camus wrote within the context of his time. To lend particularity to this context, it is worth noting a broad outline of dates and events that are important to the Algerian War and the debates surrounding it. May 1954, for example, is when the French suffered a grievous defeat at Dien Bien Phu in Indochina. This loss was notable because, for the colonized across France's colonial empire, the episode demonstrated beyond a doubt that French forces were not invincible nor were Europeans inherently better; armed resistance could break their will. It is no coincidence that 1954 is the same year the *Front de libération nationale* (FLN) launched the notorious *Toussaint Rouge* attacks in November, earning the original revolutionaries the name of *novembristes*.⁴ These widespread attacks on French police and government in Algeria became known as the official start date of the "Algerian situation," the term French authorities used to inconspicuously refer to their war. These attacks did not emerge from nowhere through a process of spontaneous generation, however, but instead served as the culmination of nationalist unrest that had been incubating as systematic political, legal, and material injustices proliferated (see Figure 1).

In early 1955, Jacques Soustelle, a moderate reformist, was appointed governor-general

2. Albert Camus, *Actuelles III: Chroniques Algériennes*, 302–03; In English: "The time of colonialism is over; we must only know and draw the consequences."

3. Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-62* (New York: Viking Press, 1978), 235-236; Ronald Aronson, "Camus Versus Sartre: The Unresolved Conflict," *Sartre Studies International* 11, no. 1/2 (2005), 302-303, 305-306

4. The FLN was Algeria's revolutionary nationalist party.

of Algeria, but his plans were never implemented. He was sacked in February 1956. Also in 1955, the FLN staged the Philippeville massacres, a brutal campaign heatedly contested within the party leadership that targeted *pied noir* civilians. The attacks, a response to the French policy of collective responsibility, were violent and killed hundreds of Europeans. The French reprisals, however, overtopped the FLN's numbers by thousands. In 1956, Yacef Saadi began the Battle of Algiers when three women placed bombs at Air France, a milk bar, and a popular eatery for *pied noir ultras*.⁵ In January 1957, Jacques Massu's *paras* took over Algiers, instituting a brutal military and torture campaign that ended the insurgency. In 1958, a crisis occurred in France whereby the Fourth Republic collapsed, the military nearly seized Paris, and Charles de Gaulle was returned to power, inaugurating the French Fifth Republic. Despite a prolonged terror campaign by the far-right *Organisation armée secrète* (OAS), which opposed Algerian independence, de Gaulle would ultimately initiate peace talks with the FLN. Talks lasted intermittently from 1960 until 1962, when the second peace talks at Evian resulted in the Evian Accords and French withdrawal from Algeria. That same year, the policy of the new Algerian state initiated both the expulsion of nearly all one million French settlers—remembered by the phrase *la valise ou le cercueil* (the suitcase or the coffin)—and reprisals against Muslims perceived as collaborators with the French. The tortured attempts of Camus to reason through this tumultuous and violent decade resound with the echoes of these calamities. The French-Algerian writer despaired to find a solution as one tragedy followed another in a war, like any other, with no happy ending.⁶

Figure 1
Decisive Legal and Political Occurrences in Colonial Algeria

Occurrence and Date	Description
1830	Agreement between the Dey (ruler of Regency of Algiers) and July Monarchy allowing natives to abide by Islamic rather than French law, despite the régime de sabre installed after conquest.
Constitution of 1848 (Decree of 4 March)	Made Algeria an integral part of the French métropole, dividing it into the three départements of Oran, Constantine, and Algiers. ⁷
<i>Sénatus-Consulte</i> , 22 April 1863	Deconstructed the native land system and severely damaged tribal structures by subjecting Algerian land to privatization and European laws, resulting in the colonization of large tracts.
<i>Sénatus-Consulte</i> , 14 July 1865	A law propagated under Napoleon III designating Muslim Algerians as French subjects but not citizens unless they renounced their rights and duties under Islamic law. Remained in force until after WWII. ⁸
<i>Crémieux Decree</i> , October 1870	Granted citizenship to Jews across the French Empire. This decree would be perceived as a source of injustice to Muslims still denied citizenship rights.

5. The term “ultras” referred broadly to virulently anti-independence or racist settlers who often joined militias or perpetrated acts of terror against native Algerians or the French government. See: Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, 56, 148-49, 181-82, 299.

6. Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, 568-569.

7. James McDougall, *A History of Algeria* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 103-04.

8. Michael Brett, “Legislating for Inequality in Algeria: The Senatus-Consulte of 14 July 1865,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 51, no. 3 (1988), 441.

"Code" l'indigénat, 1881*	A loosely defined set of practices, rather than official law, the <i>regime l'indigénat</i> commonly included a lack of due process for "natives" (<i>indigènes</i>), arbitrary fines or imprisonment, and property confiscation. These regulations to control the colonized were codified in no single legal text yet came to be represented by a 28 June 1881 law that increased the power of administrators over natives. ⁹
Blum-Viollette Plan, 1936	A moderate reform plan that would have granted political equality to a narrow class of Muslims. It was nonetheless fiercely protested and defeated by <i>pied noir</i> protests. This episode ended assimilationist aspirations, provoking moderates like Ferhat Abbas to become more nationalist.
Ordinances, 7 March 1944 and May 1946	The <i>indigénat</i> was ended, voting rights extended to male Algerians over twenty-one, and all Algerians were made citizens of the new French Union under the Fourth Republic. ¹⁰
Statute of Algeria, 1947	Created the double electoral college system, whereby 532,000 European electors were granted political power equal to 1.3 million Algerian voters representing a population eight times larger than the <i>pied noirs</i> . ¹¹
Election Fraud, 1948	Algerian Assembly elections were effectively and blatantly rigged via arrests, ballot tampering, and military intimidation. Any remaining faith in electoral politics was shattered.

Camus was born in Modavi, French Algeria in 1913 and emerged as a novelist in the 1940s, particularly after the release of *The Stranger* in 1942. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957 at the age of 44.¹² Beyond his novels, however, and what especially concerns this enquiry, he was a prominent journalist and political activist. In 1939, he gained renown for his reportage revealing the French colonial administration's treatment of the Kabyle population in his native Algeria. The series, titled *Misère de la Kabylie* (Misery of Kabylia), appeared as a sequence of articles in the socialist newspaper *Alger républicain* from June 5 to 15, 1939. He further cemented his political reputation when he served as *rédacteur en chef* of the underground

9. James McDougall, *A History of Algeria*, 125; John P. Entelis, *Algeria: The Revolution Institutionalized* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986), 32; Michael Brett, "Legislating for Inequality in Algeria: The Senatus-Consulte of 14 July 1865," 459.

10. James McDougall, *A History of Algeria*, 183-84.

11. Ibid., 184.

12. Albert Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death: Essays* (Vintage, 2012), "Introduction," Kobo eReader.

newspaper *Combat* from Fall 1943 to 1947, during the Nazi occupation of France.¹³ *Combat* was the mouthpiece of the United Resistance Movements (including *Combat*, *Libération*, and *Franc-Tireur*), had a print run of nearly 250,000, and all involved with its publication risked their lives by speaking out against the Vichy Regime and German occupiers.¹⁴ His celebrity status was thus enlarged after the liberation of Paris in August, 1944, and he would at times use his outsized voice or at others his silence to criticize the colonial policy of the French and advocate for equal rights and political representation across the French Empire (later the French Union). Controversially, however, Camus maintained that French colonies should be integrated or federated, not granted independence. He died in a car accident in 1960. Therefore, tragically, his reaction to Algerian independence will never be known. Nonetheless, by analyzing his views during the years of the Algerian War from 1954 to 1958 based on a selection of twenty-three essays collected in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* and more comprehensive materials in the *Algerian Chronicles*, I can crystallize the core arguments driving the Algerian conflict and introduce the problem of violence.¹⁵

As Camus makes clear in his “Appeal for a Civilian Truce,” and in many other instances, he categorically opposed violence in all forms, whether it be the violence of the French colonialist or bombs placed by an FLN *fida'iyya* (urban bomber). For this reason, and others, Camus refused either to support Algerian independence or French colonial rule outright. As Tommaso Visone notes, “recognizing the “*longue erreur*” of French rule that had led the Arabs towards terrorism,” Camus perceived the latter as “a “*sanglante*” mistake,” while “the subsequent French repression was “*aveugle et imbécile*,” inspired by totalitarian principles and destined to radicalize the conflict even further.”¹⁶ Thus, while Camus opposed Algerian independence, and therefore could be said to support colonial interests in practical terms, he remained consistent in his stance on violence. He refused to condone the “reprisals against civilian populations and the use of torture...in which we [the French] are all involved” while maintaining “no cause justifies the death of the innocent.”¹⁷

Aside from his condemnation of violence in any form, there are other dimensions to Camus’s argument: one which is shockingly prescient and one which is personal. As a *pied noir*, Camus had family still living in Algeria and was appalled by the idea of a nationalist expulsion of French settlers, numbering nearly one million, to create an “Algerian” state. Such an expulsion was a key part of the FLN’s platform. For this reason, he questioned the role and responsibility of the intellectual, asserting “when the fate of men and women of one’s own blood is bound, directly or indirectly, to the articles one writes in the comfort of the study, one has a right to hesitate.”¹⁸ This statement stands in deliberate contrast to ideas expressed by those who supported Algerian Independence, such as Frantz Fanon, as well as Jean-Paul Sartre in his preface to Fanon’s work *Wretched of the Earth*. These philosophers, in contrast to Camus, maintained that action holds a higher value in ending colonial oppression than the vacillating contemplation of intellectuals. While Camus claims “the intellectual has the role of distinguishing...the respective limits of force and justice...to clarify definitions in order to disintoxicate minds and to calm fanaticisms, even when

13. Tommaso Visone, “Neither Dominant nor Dominated: The Decolonial Federalism of Albert Camus,” *History of European Ideas* 49, no. 8 (October 2023), 1360.

14. Peter Lowe, “Resistance and Rebuilding: The Wartime Writings of George Orwell and Albert Camus,” *English Studies* 90, no. 3 (June 2009), 310.

15. Originally published in 1958 under the title *Actuelles III: Chronique algériennes*, the text was part of a series of Camus’s collected journalistic work. Selected essays were published first in English as *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* translated by Justin O’Brien, but a more complete version and better translation by Arthur Goldhammer was released in 2014.

16. Visone, “Neither Dominant nor Dominated,” 1363.

17. Camus, “Preface to the Algerian Reports,” in *Resistance, Rebellion, Death*, and “Appeal for a Civilian Truce.”

18. Camus, “Preface to the Algerian Reports.”

it is against the current tendency,” Fanon might counter that the role of the intellectual is to think themselves to death and never to act.¹⁹ Camus perceived himself as a neutral, cool-headed force for good while the Algerians and French alike were consumed by unconsidered passions. Fanon, on the other hand, observes that an intellectual, once exposed to the suffering of a colonized people, will realize “precious time has been wasted in useless commentaries of the colonial regime...the changeover will not be a reform, nor a bettering of things.”²⁰ The intellectual cannot fix a colonial regime by reform, as Camus imagines. Oppression must be dismantled by revolutionary, not political, action.

This divergence in revolutionary theory between Camus and Fanon finds itself based first and foremost in a deeply personal element of Camus’s life. Camus, as can be noted in his literature, found himself in a unique position as a French Algerian. Neither considered fully Algerian by the natives nor fully French by those in the metropole, the *pied noir* was, from the outset, alienated. Nonetheless, Camus maintained a stance against Algerian independence. This opposition set him apart from both Algerians and the radical French left, while criticizing colonialism othered him from mainstream French positions, at least as expressed in foreign policy. David Carroll, quoting French-Tunisian writer Albert Memmi, describes this dilemma as the “colonialist who refuses,” one who ““is considered a traitor by other colonizers and yet who “places conditions” for his cooperation with the colonized in their struggle for justice. This is what leads to his “political ineffectiveness” and solitude: “Everything confirms his solitude, bewilderment and ineffectiveness. He will slowly realize that the only thing for him to do is to remain silent.””²¹ Camus established for himself a neutral third position concerning the Algerian situation which, supported by an idealistic and unlikely, yet not invalid, vision, was endorsed by few and doomed to be lost in the chaos of more absolute positions. Camus, particularly from 1956 to 1958 and after, would leverage this alienation of the moderate voice by exercising his own silence. The first silence can be accounted for by the failure of his attempt to call for a “civilian truce” after bringing prominent Algerian leaders together.²² The second silent period followed critical disinterest to the release of his collected writings on Algeria in 1958 until his death in 1960.²³ The silence of an influential voice like Camus’s, far from ineffective, made a substantial statement, even if the writer’s vision for Aleria never manifested.

Fundamentally, the French Algerian author could never move past the basic personal bias that his connection to the land and his family left him with. In a famous quote, Camus remarked, “People are now planting bombs in the tramways of Algiers. My mother might be on one of those tramways. If that is justice, then I prefer my mother.”²⁴ Frequently polemicized as some variation of “Between justice and my mother, I choose my mother,” this quote cuts to the tragic impossibility of Camus’s position as a *pied noir* and the internal conflict of conscience he suffered. He frequently returns to the argument that many *pied noirs* were poor and born in Algeria, unwilling or unable to move elsewhere. This argument, however, fails to appraise the basic injustices of the colonial situation and the gulf separating the colonizer from the colonized. In an ideal world, freedom of movement would be a realizable good, yet the colonial situation was far from ideal. Further, by the end of the colonial era and particularly after Sétif in 1945, the point of reconciliation had been passed. Camus made repeated calls for such reconciliation and dialogue, including when he predicted he “shall be told...it is too late,” yet he was never willing to adapt his own dialogue and

19. Ibid., 18.

20. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 126.

21. David Carroll, “Camus’s Algeria: Birthrights, Colonial Injustice, and the Fiction of a French-Algerian People,” *MLN* 112, no. 4 (September 1997), 520.

22. Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, 124-126.

23. Alice Kaplan, “Introduction,” in *Algerian Chronicles*, by Albert Camus, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 4-5.

24. Camus, *Algerian Chronicles*, 216.

make concession to Algerian independence.²⁵ He nonetheless remained consistent in the noble hope “that in the end words will prove stronger than bullets.”²⁶ To understand exactly how Camus’s approach toward Algeria was mistaken despite his moral consistency, one must first be familiar with the alternatives he proposed.

In the first place, Camus made cogent and important criticisms of French colonialism. For example, his work exposing famine, poverty, and the injustices of political disenfranchisement in the Kabylia region directly placed blame on French imperialism before discussions of the “Algerian situation” had entered the mainstream. For writing *Misère de la Kabylie*, Camus was blacklisted by the French authorities and *de facto* exiled from Algeria, while the controversy contributed to the shuttering of the *Alger républicain*.²⁷ Camus’s main critiques concerned the massive poverty and overpopulation of the region, the injustice of political disenfranchisement under the *communes mixtes* system, low wages, criminally stupid distribution of funds and food, and the lack of accessible public education. These critiques may seem obvious now, but it was controversial and considered “unpatriotic” in 1939, liable to provoke French vitriol. Camus’s series of articles are full of moving prose, statistics, and his own political suggestions for reform, but, in his words, “I despair of ever being able to convey them all.”²⁸ It suffices to say that Camus truly sought to do what he thought was right. He opposed colonialism. He considered *Misère de la Kabylie* and the personal consequences of its publication to be statements of his anticolonial sympathies, yet he could not conceive of it in its full terms. Too often, he vacillated and consoled himself that French authorities could merely do better. Nor could he conceive France without Algeria. While it would be convenient for critics to believe Camus was firmly a colonialist, as many in Algeria who boycott his work postulate, it is simply not true. Whatever injustice the author passively condoned, he always believed, “the misery across the way placed the beauty of the world under a kind of ban.”²⁹

Regarding the Algerian War itself, in his “Preface to the Algerian Reports” he noted, Torture has perhaps saved some, at the expense of honor, by uncovering thirty bombs, but at the same time it aroused fifty new terrorists who, operating...in another place, will cause the death of even more innocent people,” concluding “such fine deeds inevitably lead to the demoralization of France and the loss of Algeria.”³⁰ This second element, the prescient side of Camus’s argument, ironically serves as a counterpoint to his own conclusions. The intensity of French repression is ultimately what started and lost the conflict for the colonial authorities. The violent response to protests in Sétif and Guelma on 8 May 1945, after which around 20,000 Arabs were killed in reprisals was, “counterproductive, as it turned out, as this incident became a symbol of French colonial repression and a rallying point for the insurrection.”³¹ The protests included many returning Algerian war veterans who were angered by a return to inequality despite war service, as in many decolonial instances. Further, although around 103 European settlers were murdered, some in brutal fashion, the protests were largely nonviolent and the French response was hugely

25. Albert Camus, “Letter to an Algerian Militant,” in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, (Kobo e-reader); see also *Ibid.*, “Preface to Algerian Reports,” “Appeal for a Civilian Truce,” and “Algeria 1958,” where the idea of reconciliation is repeated.

26. Albert Camus, “Toward Dialogue,” *Neither Victims nor Executioners* (November 30, 1946), in *Camus at Combat: Writing 1944-1947*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 276.

27. Kaplan, “Introduction,” in *Algerian Chronicles*, 15.

28. Albert Camus, *Algerian Chronicles*, 46.

29. *Ibid.*, 46.

30. Camus, “Preface to the Algerian Reports.”

31. Visone, “Neither Dominant nor Dominated,” 1361, and Russell Grigg, “The Trial of Albert Camus,” *Sophia* 50, no. 4 (December 2011), 596.

disproportionate.³² Even though he would never see the end himself, Camus understood that the loss of credibility France suffered, both at home and on the international stage, could ultimately lead to the end of the conflict. Camus appreciated the material and social conditions of repression that breed acts of terrorism and that acts of violence are only likely to exacerbate.

Nonetheless, Camus remained firm in his refusal to support Algerian independence from the French state. He proposed two core alternatives, changing from one to the other during distinct periods in his life. Visone identifies how Camus initially argued for a “democratic reformist” or assimilationist approach but, after 1945, shifted to a federal approach to address the growing problem of nationalism and support his idea of a “Mediterranean” culture. Essentially, the first system involved granting Arab and Berber citizens equal rights and integrating them into the French system. While nominally an improvement on the colonial system, the overarching sentiment, as reflected in his literary work from this period, was that citizenship would be first and foremost *French* citizenship. Equal rights did not require integration on terms that preserved culture but required that Algerians be turned “into French citizens without challenging the structure of the Empire.”³³

Camus’s experience in WWII, however, made him aware of the dangers of nationalism and inspired an approach based in federalism, as well as a “Mediterranean internationalism.” The federal approach emphasized a system of semi-autonomous provinces with local governments representative of natives and settlers that would ultimately be subservient to the French national government. Carroll argues that Camus conceived this idea of transcendent culture as early as 1937 when, at a speech in Algiers, he praised North Africa as “one of the only lands in which Orient and Occident cohabit what is most essential in Mediterranean genius springs perhaps from this meeting.”³⁴ Thus, in the idealized version of Algeria that Camus would frequently return to in his writings and speeches, one could imagine a world in which neither colonial injustice nor the French language predominated but, in which, because of shared values and history, cultures could meet and, from this meeting, thrive. This idea was the core of Camus’s federal system, yet the author was wrong to imagine over a hundred years of injustice could be forgotten in a decade or the bonds of nationalism overcome so easily. While dreams of internationalism would improve the world, the scars of colonialism and war are anathema to fraternity. The question therefore rises, why would Algerians accept a system where their interests were federated and subject to a foreign power when they could have complete autonomy? Algerians sought an independent government untethered from a country that, in all the time since 1830, had never provided a reason it should be trusted.³⁵

While liberal Frenchmen such as Camus may have had good intentions in advocating colonial reform, their solutions were ultimately too moderate and too late to rectify the past. After the 1946 Constitution maintained the inferiority of *‘outremer’* French citizens, the 1947 statute established the double electoral college, and a 1948 vote killed aspirations to an Algerian assembly, trust in political solutions crumbled.³⁶ To apprehend why Camus nonetheless persisted in a reformist approach, his literature, thought-provokingly criticized by Edward Said in *Culture*

32. John Lejeune, “Revolutionary Terror and Nation-Building: Frantz Fanon and the Algerian Revolution,” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 13, no. 2 (January 1, 2019), 12.

33. Visone, “Neither Dominant nor Dominated,” 1360.

34. Albert Camus, “*La culture indigène, la nouvelle culture méditerranéenne*,” in *Essais*, 1324-2, quoted in Carroll, “Camus’s Algeria: Birthrights, Colonial Injustice, and the Fiction of a French-Algerian People,” 522.

35. Visone, “Neither Dominant nor Dominated,” 1366. Note: The proposed system would have entailed, “a regional Algerian assembly [that] expressed the specific character of Algeria while a federal senate, where Algeria is represented, is able to hold legislative power for all that which (military and foreign affairs, for example) concerns the federation in its entirety [translation my own].” Albert Camus, *Actuelles III. Chroniques Algériennes*, 393.

36. Ibid., 1362.

and Imperialism, merits mention. Camus's most prominent 1942 novel, *L'étranger* (The Stranger) recounts the story of Meursault, a dispassionate Frenchman living in Algiers, French Algeria. Narratively, the story begins with the death of Meursault's mother and is divided into two distinct parts: at the end of the first, he kills an unnamed Arab, throughout the second he is put on trial and ultimately executed. The structure and events may seem meaningless, yet careful analysis yields layers of complexity.

While the universal existentialist dimensions of the novel are usually acknowledged, including by Said, the colonial dimensions remain disputed. For example, one of the most damning elements of Camus's novel in the eyes of its ideological critics is that the Arab killed by Meursault, and in fact all Arabs and characters aside from those who are distinctly French, are notable for their "blankness and absence of background," meriting only the French proper noun for "Arab."³⁷ It is these nameless characters who play an essential role in the story (after all, "the" Arab is who Meursault kills), yet who, despite outnumbering French settlers nearly 9:1 in French Algeria, remain strangely absent from the story in substantial ways. The same is true of Camus's version of Oran in *La peste* where "in the novel only 'the local color of the facades of their houses remains.' The Arab population is thus evoked...only as an exotic background...with both its existence and disappearance irrelevant."³⁸ Similarly, in *L'étranger*, the Arabs are largely absent, present only as silent, ominous sentinels and ultimately killed by a casual and inhumane burst of violence. Meursault unloads several rounds into an Arab, feels no remorse, and yet, even at trial, the crime itself is mentioned less than Meursault's unnatural reaction to his mother's death.

Can these trends in Camus's writing be explained, as Said argues and Grigg summarizes, because "Camus' consciousness is that of Western dominance, and his conscience is its symptom," or is there an alternate reason for these omissions?³⁹ Is Camus, who so abhorred violence in any form in his political writings, subconsciously endorsing its colonial variety in the savage killing of the Arab? And is Camus's Oran an imagined colony cleansed of the non-French or an allegory for WWII, the Algerian context superfluous? The most extreme conclusions seem unlikely. One of the goals of imperialism in its basic form is to remold the colonized territory in the colonizer's image until the natives, rather than the settlers, become the outsiders, ostracized by law and an imbalance of power. Grigg argues that by becoming a stranger himself, Meursault actually becomes like an Arab. Under normal circumstances, it might seem that a French colonist would be favored by the justice system over an Arab and that consequences would be minor for such a murder in the colonial system. This is not the case in *The Stranger*. Meursault is tried and executed, yet "It is as if he would have a better chance of getting off the charge of killing another man than of failing to show appropriate grief at his mother's funeral."⁴⁰ Meursault is indifferent to the death of his mother, as well as to his crime. He is an atheist and fails to uphold the supposed values of a Frenchman. To become a French citizen, it was almost always necessary for an Algerian to be a Christian. Based on these facts, and the fact that most of Meursault's fellow inmates are Arabs, Grigg argues that to become a stranger is essentially to become Arab.

This rationalization, while with merits, stretches to produce an argument that Camus did not fully intend to make. To start, it is impossible to completely explain away the absence of characterization and identity received by Arabs in Camus's works. Even in Camus's wider works, there are no especially developed Arab characters. Examples include the voiceless, but at least acknowledged, Said in the short story *Les muets* ("The Mutes") and the side characters in the posthumously published novel *Le premier homme* (The First Man). Alice Kaplan observes that a 1938 article "Men Stricken from the Rolls of Humanity" is the only time in Camus's

37. Grigg, "The Trial of Albert Camus," 595.

38. Carroll, "Camus's Algeria: Birthrights, Colonial Injustice, and the Fiction of a French-Algerian People," 524.

39. Grigg, "The Trial of Albert Camus," 595.

40. Grigg, "The Trial of Albert Camus," 601.

work he demonstrates he hears or understands Arabic.⁴¹ His imagined version of Algeria always predominates with Frenchman, and Said's critiques are correct in the sense, even if subconsciously, that Camus favors a distinctly French citizenship and society in his Algeria.

Stripped of its native characteristics, one wonders why Camus even chose Algeria over any other nondescript setting. There are plenty of examples of the unjust legal system in colonial Algeria, so there hardly seems a need to invoke the theme in such an indirect way, much less considering Meursault is a character with legitimate moral flaws. It would be more accurate to argue that *The Stranger* is an argument against the senseless violence and indifference Camus experienced in his time. The reader is meant to reject Meursault's inexplicable outburst of violence, hence his execution. Meursault rejects any value system. He "opens himself to the gentle indifference of the world," and wishes that spectators at his execution greet him with "cries of hate."⁴² Meursault neither values his own life nor those of others. Consistent with Camus's frequent and unequivocal condemnations of all violence, then, one must assume the reader is meant to feel a natural revulsion to Meursault's indifference. For Camus, this apathy represents the excesses of existential freedom. Thus, while *The Stranger* could indirectly serve as a colonial critique, in that it is a critique of violence and colonialism is always violent, it hardly serves as a blanket condemnation of all manifestations of imperialism.

It would also be accurate to argue that Grigg glosses over some of the key arguments put forward by Said. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said sets forth several goals: to show that there always existed some form of resistance to Western imperialism (an assumption carried over from his work, *Orientalism*), to refute the notion that the source of the world's significant thought and action lies only with the West, and to elucidate how culture, particularly literature, has been inextricably intertwined with a colonial tradition, narrative, and justification. He also has a secondary focus to connect imperial legacies with modern problems of isolation, separation, mass displacement, and nationalism. He observes that national tendencies to reject global society and elevate their culture as the best, refusing to integrate or be in dialogue with immigrant populations, are a flaw of political conscience in both postcolonial and Western states. Thus, for Said, aside from slavery, land expropriation, and mass violence, one of the great injustices of imperialism is to impose one culture over another. This suppression of culture and reimagining of identity, necessary to an imperializing mission, is carried out largely through artistic mediums and, for the French and British, primarily the novel.⁴³ It would be fair to say also that Said chose widely beloved authors, such as Jane Austen and Camus, to make his point more uncomfortable and impactful without denying the creative genius of the works themselves. These works, he clarifies, are made more, not less, interesting by the complex motivations or subconscious biases of their authors.⁴⁴

Said's goal is to focus on novels read "first...as great products of the creative or interpretive imagination," but to situate these novels in their historical context and experience. Camus, who is an example of "passive collaboration...on the part of intellectuals, artists, journalists, whose positions at home are progressive and full of admirable sentiments, but the opposite when it comes to what is done abroad in their name," should be read, Said asserts, as part of a tradition of literature and empire stretching back to 1830.⁴⁵ Camus's colonial impulse is characterized as "extraordinarily belated", in that postcolonial revolutions were happening around the world. History would prove also that French implantation in Algeria could not be extended

41. Kaplan, "Introduction," in *Algerian Chronicles*, by Albert Camus, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, 16.

42. Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Matthew Ward (New York: Vintage International, 1988) 69-71, 123.

43. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), xii-xxii, 173.

44. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xiv.

45. Ibid., xxiii, 176, 184.

indefinitely. Nonetheless, Said makes convincing arguments connecting Janine from “*La femme adultère*” (“The Adulterous Woman”), *Meursault from l'Étranger*, and even the cast of *La peste* (The Plague), to this colonial tradition. Algeria is construed as a blank, rugged landscape—presumably wiped clean by French imperialism—where exiles and adventurers may go to find themselves, enrich themselves, or start anew. Janine escapes her husband to engage in a sensual ritual of communion with the land. Rieux works to save a city from plague, tallying casualties, who must undoubtedly include Arabs, yet none but the French are ever mentioned. Camus’s works, even if subconsciously, undeniably reconstitute Algeria as French, connect French narratives as inseparable from the land, and as Camus would explicitly do in his political writings, deny any possibility of Algerian independence.⁴⁶ Considering the unavoidable presence of French power and oppression in Algeria, which no Algerian writer would exclude, a lack of this domination in Camus’s work can only be construed either as denial or as a deliberate “last great clarification” of the imperial mission before “ruin overtakes it.”⁴⁷

Taken altogether, Camus’s discourse on the Algerian Revolution amounts to a complex, yet ultimately flawed, attempt to combine humanistic and nonviolent values, colonial justification, and a distinct Eurocentrism. Camus makes many important and valuable contributions to understanding the root causes of violent revolution; however, his humanism falls short when, through advocating inaction, it passively condones the status quo of a colonial system. Furthermore, Camus’s entanglement with the *pied noir* population, itself a more powerful political bloc than the entirety of the much larger (although mostly disenfranchised) native population, inflected his rhetoric with a deeper familial bias—one he even acknowledged.⁴⁸ Any attempt to separate Camus from colonial influences deprives the work of crucial context. Therefore, while it is essential to analyze the perspective of such an influential, complex, and enduringly brilliant writer as Camus, it is also necessary to acknowledge his shortcomings and connections to a colonial legacy situated amidst the complex collision of the Algerian Revolution and the philosophical currents of the modern age.

46. Ibid., 176, 182, 184–185.

47. Ibid., 185.

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