

Maternal Metaphor in Kamel Daoud's Textual Grafting upon Camus's *L'Étranger*

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Introduction

In his *Meursault, contre-enquête*, Kamel Daoud performs an exercise in textual grafting upon Albert Camus's foundational *L'Étranger* by giving Meursault's victim a name and a family, and by filling in the blanks in the narrative from the perspective of the victim's brother, whom he calls Haroun. This textual grafting is similar to other literary strategies employed by postcolonial writers, such as the "remake," whose goal is to reclaim their stories as told in canonical Western texts (Ashcroft *et al*). The first line of Daoud's novel begins with the phrase, "Mama's still alive today" (*Meursault* 1),¹ a reversal of Camus's famous opening line, "Today, Mama is dead" (my translation, *L'Étranger* 7).² Daoud's continuation of Camus's novel centers on Haroun's quest—relentlessly spurred on by his omnipresent mother—to reconstruct the past events surrounding the murder of Moussa, the name given by Daoud to the original unnamed Arab in Camus's story. The deceased mother is linked to the unnamed Arab victim in Camus's novel since the questioning at Meursault's trial for the Arab's murder centers, not on his murder of the Arab, but on his treatment of his mother. Camus's Meursault resurrects the ghost of his physically absent mother as he contemplates his past and the inexorable pull she maintained on his existence both throughout his life as a silent yet judgmental presence and at his trial when society's expectations of mother-son filial duty are not respected in his mourning of her death. Daoud reverses this dynamic through the immediacy of the living mother who also exercises control over her son. Metaphorical possibilities within the fictional Maghreb's mother-son dynamic in Daoud's novel abound; however, Daoud's palimpsest of Camus's foundational canonical text constantly calls into question, reverses, or even subverts the symbolic role of the maternal. Besides the psychoanalytic possibilities of reading Camus's mother-son dynamic, Daoud's novel adds fertile terrain for the interpretation of the maternal metaphor through an insistence on re-contextualizing Camus's story within an Algerian history which is missing from this canonical text.

Subversion of the Metaphorical Maternal

Binary oppositions, a feature of Daoud's grafting process, appear immediately in the author's opening line with the resurrection of the mother. At the most basic level, the mother represents a life-giving and nurturing force, and Hédi Abdel-Taouad notes that in Maghrebian fiction, "the mother as saint is a recurrent image in the fiction of both male and female writers" (18). However, in Daoud's novel, the mother actively participates in inciting Haroun to murder a Frenchman in retaliation for her older son's death. Any possible conclusion that there is justice in her maternal rage and call to avenge a child's murder is subverted by the fact that the chosen victim had nothing to do with her son's murder. Haroun also represents a tool for the powerless mother's search for vicarious power through her son, another common trope in Maghrebian writing. As Abdel-Jaouad explains: "In many respects, the Maghrebian text in French—predominantly the story of an Oedipus searching for a Laius to kill—can in fact be seen as the vindication and glorification of motherhood" (18). Yet, Haroun is not searching for and avenging the lost father; he is avenging his older brother, thus setting up a fraternal power struggle for the affection of the mother in a Cain-Abel dynamic. Haroun's identity formation is tied to this family dynamic and he is unable to wrest himself from it.

In addition, the theme of the mother as representing the motherland often becomes what Abdel-Jaouad calls an "overmetaphorization and oversymbolization" of the mother as "the figure of the repressed and also of the subjugated and colonized country" in Maghrebian postcolonial writing (18). One way for the mother/motherland to assert her presence is through the sons' voices in the writing and reclamation of her story/history. Daoud presents two subversions within this mother-son metaphorical dynamic. In order to participate in the (re)writing of Algeria's history, which is lacking due to Camus' silencing, whether it is willful or not, of the unnamed Arab in his fictional story, Haroun must learn French so that he can read the scraps of a newspaper article that his mother is seen clutching throughout the novel. The mother hopes that one day her son will be able to read this article since it may recount some of the details of the brother's murder. Haroun must also learn French to read Camus's novel, itself a novel that may hold clues to his family's (Algeria's) past. Daoud will contrast the orality of the mother's traditional tales, deeply rooted in the country's past, to the written texts of the colonizer.

In learning the language of the colonizer, Haroun participates in the process whereby “the occultation of the mother tongue” results in the “subsequent displacement of the oral by the written” (Abdel-Taouad 24). However, Haroun, like Shakespeare’s Hamlet, acts too late, killing the Frenchman after Independence. More significantly, the process whereby the son writes the mother’s oral (his)story does not happen through Haroun. In fact, not only does Haroun fail to act until it is too late but he also fails to write anything. He merely seeks others who, unlike himself, are actively involved in writing about Camus’s works, including the student interlocutor in the bar with whom Haroun converses, and Meriem, the westernized woman whose search for scholarly material on Camus for her book project has led her to Haroun and his mother. Haroun’s mother becomes a metaphorical figure representing the inexorable pull of Algeria’s past on any effort to go beyond it, to forge something new from the ashes of tragic history. Daoud’s novel opens the way for us to consider the particular events of the story as representing a portrait, albeit fictional, of possible real lived experiences of injustice in Algeria, and to move from that particular portrait to the realm of allegory. For, indeed, Daoud, unlike his fictional character, did and does write about Algeria as a journalist and novelist, and he does provide a counter discourse to prevailing Western canonical depictions of Algeria’s struggle to come to terms with its polyvalent identity.

Daoud emphasizes an Algerian hybrid identity whose oppositional strands, for good or ill, all combined to shape it and must all be taken into account in the process of rebuilding. Through the mother, Daoud sets up a series of binary oppositions, but does not present a dialectical synthesis within the novel’s diegesis. In subverting the various maternal metaphorical representations, Daoud’s novel seems to point to a “Third Space,” as articulated in Homi Bhabha’s theory of cultural hybridity. As Bhabha states, “the *in-between* space” transcends the binary opposites of such categories as oral/written, for “by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves” (38-9). Daoud’s novel does participate in the binary reclamation of history as posited by Edward Said, but that alone is not sufficient in advancing the acknowledgement of Algerian polyvalent identity. Edward Said in his *Culture and Imperialism* calls for this “contrapuntal” rereading and reevaluation of binary opposites, especially in terms of breaking down the hierarchical hegemony that has for so long privileged one term in the binary relationship over another (66). As Said argues,

[t]he point is that contrapuntal reading must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our

reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded—in *L'Étranger* for example, the whole previous history of France's colonialism and its destruction of the Algerian state, and the later emergence of an independent Algeria (which Camus opposed). (66-7)

In resuscitating the dead mother from the first sentence of Camus's novel, Daoud does embark on this contrapuntal enterprise, and forces us to reconsider her relevance not just for the psychological development of Meursault, but also for his (and Camus's) neglect of the personal and historical past. Camus's writings and philosophical ideas are only fully understood when examined through the lens of his identity as a French-Algerian *pied noir* living through a tumultuous time in Algerian history. However, *L'Étranger*, in which Meursault, the main character and a *pied noir* himself, shoots and kills a native Algerian, identified only as an "Arab," has often been analyzed for its commentary on abstract absurdist philosophy within a Western psychosocial context.

This type of myopic Existential, philosophical, scholarly inquiry itself appears absurd to some critics who point out the relative lack of accounting for the historical time and place within which Camus situates his novel, and for the anonymity accorded to the inhabitants of Algeria who seem to be mere props for more metaphysical questioning. Said, for example, points out that readers can easily overlook geopolitical setting, unconsciously accepting that *L'Étranger* is just one of his "French novels about France," because Camus's "choice of an Algerian locale seems incidental to the pressing moral issues at hand" (175). In short, Camus's "novels are thus read as parables of the human condition" (Said 175). Aside from atmospheric conditions, like the heat and blinding sun, Meursault seems completely oblivious to the colonial Algerian world in which he lives. However, the unnamed Arab victim is not the only apparent "prop" in the story that needs to be amplified, for his relationship to his mother is central to a deeper understanding of the blind spots in Camus's historical and cultural optics, a maternal relationship that Louise A. Horowitz characterizes as "semi-abusive" (56). According to Horowitz, who importantly links the dismissive treatment of both Arabs and women in Camus's writings, Camus's readers could become unconsciously complicit in blatant racial and sexual myopia in favor of a concern with the Western male identity quest if they only account for these two forces as mere narrative catalysts (57). Daoud's text certainly builds upon the philosophical themes of existence and absurdity explored by Camus in *L'Étranger*; yet, it also appends missing questions of colonial identity and history to the philosophical question of the absurd. For Daoud's Haroun, both the personal and the Algerian

historical past intersect, the ultimate corrective to Camus's story, though it leaves unresolved the quest for a path to some sort of lasting reconciliation and future rebuilding.

The mother in Daoud's novel also represents the impulse towards a violent retribution for past injustice. However, unlike Meursault's mother, she is not a martyr figure in the shadow of her son's life; she has agency in spurring her son to (belated) and violent action, a violence that seems to represent an absurd perpetuation of violence. According to Daoud, in an interview in *The New Yorker*, the mother-son dynamic in the Arab world is delicate, and this tension manifests itself in his novel:

At the center of this novel is the strong bond between a son and his mother. It's a bond that is complex in Arab culture and in the Mediterranean region. Here, it is strengthened by the characters' shared grief and by the desire for revenge in one and the desire for freedom in the other. The bond between a mother and her son is not always rosy: it's where your bond with the rest of the world is formed. If you stumble here, you will fall wherever you go. In Algeria, this bond also reflects the relationship that many Algerians have with their motherland. I discovered this after writing the book! A man's life is sometimes a long journey toward understanding his own parents, freeing himself from them, and then accepting them. Inversely, the journey of parenthood requires that one accept the independence of others, including one's children. Myself, I think that the bond with the mother is the center of our culture but also the source of our unhappiness and pain. ("This Week in Fiction," Trans. Treisman)

When Haroun's mother sees an opportunity to take vengeance for Moussa's death by murdering the Frenchman, Haroun feels "her eyes on my back like a hand pushing me, holding me upright, guiding my arm, slightly tilting my head at the moment I took aim" (75).³ This time, however, the narrative reversal, which forms the crux of the novel, involves a colonial Frenchman killed by an Algerian, Haroun himself. The violent act of murder upon a Frenchman not involved in the murder of Moussa is absurd in its timing and futility. He commits the murder of the Frenchman, not as an act of fraternity with his fellow Algerians during the War for Independence, but to appease his mother's desire for a more personal revenge, leading to an "eye for an eye" circular justice. One could argue that the French victim serves as a cathartic substitute for all of the French complicit in the colonial exploitation of Algeria and its citizens. Yet, given the anticlimactic results for Haroun's psychological development on the personal plot level, and for any sense that Algeria has been resurrected from the ashes as Haroun wanders through the crumbling ruins of post-independence Algeria, Daoud suggests otherwise. There is no sense that anticolonial violence is a way forward as advocated by Fanon (*Les damnés de la terre*). Camus, living amidst the horror of violence and violent retribution, also took a stand against its perpetuation in the name of peace. However, Camus has been relentlessly criticized for his

call for an “independent” Algeria, but one which would still be inextricably tied to France. His conception of a future path out of the perpetual violence and counter violence towards this still-asymmetrical *rapprochement* between the two countries points to Camus’s shortsightedness in assuming that the bloodshed would end in his conception of a future Algeria still bound to France. In a more sympathetic and nuanced portrait of Camus’s politics based on his short stories and his last unfinished novel, *Le premier homme*, David Carroll states that, “as we know today, and this is not irrelevant to the way we read Camus in a ‘postcolonial era,’ even the departure of the French did not stop the horrible cycle of violence Camus so deplored from continuing” (548). Daoud bore witness to this subsequent violence. Past injustice resolved out of context by present counter injustice is thus not presented as a viable path forward toward reconciliation and peace. In Daoud’s novel, the mother’s constant demands for violent retribution as a form of justice exhaust both her son and the reader. Haroun’s mother presents an obstacle to his quest to go beyond the ghosts of the past and demands vengeance: “For a long time, not a year passed without my mother swearing she’d found Musa’s body, heard his breathing or his footstep, recognized the imprints of his shoes” (37).⁴

The Oral/Written Binary and the “Mother Tongue”

In his character’s quest for the self, beyond the mother, Daoud reckons with another binary: the oral and the written. Valérie K. Orlando explains that ironically embracing the language of the oppressor “is also a way to free himself at last from Mother-Arab-Postcolonial-Nation: a mother that is overbearing, who has hounded him to continue the quest of Moussa’s story” (876). Haroun reveals that “Mama had a thousand and one stories, and the truth meant little to me at that age” (16).⁵ He has learned the maternal lesson of oral narrative embellishment when he in turn must invent details that do not exist in his recounting to her of the two-paragraph newspaper record she carefully guards of her son’s death written in French. Of his oral account to his mother, once he learns to read French, Haroun says, “A fine brief, don’t you think? With two paragraphs, I had to find a body, some alibis, and some accusations” (121).⁶ Mirroring his mother’s oral embellished tales, he says that “it was an incredibly disordered jumble, a kind of *Thousand and One Nights* of lies and infamy” (121).⁷ This reference to *The Thousand and One Nights* reminds us first and foremost of the importance of storytelling itself, Haroun’s and his mother’s in particular, and of narrative in general, for mere existence depends on story. However, Lia Brozgal highlights the irony in the end: so many stories, and still no revealed, definitive truth. She writes, “while the readers *in* the text discover a story [Camus’s] heretofore

inaccessible to them, the reader *of* the text is no more illuminated than when she reached the end of *L'Étranger*" (43; author's emphasis). These embellishments constitute something more momentous nonetheless: a counter discourse to "definitive" truth, as the novel's title invites us to consider. Haroun understands his mother's subjective relationship to the truth, and he does not conceal his own manipulations of it in the retelling of what he sees in French on the written page. Daoud seems to imply that a search for "truth" exclusively through the web of tales of the past does not get us any closer to unequivocal certitude. While the past must not be forgotten, and as many records of it as probable need to be taken into account, paradoxically we will come up short in the end in our search for absolute veracity regarding the past. But search we must. Camus's novel is thus held up as an example of what happens when such revered texts are not challenged for the stories they leave out, as well as for the story they tell. As Wen-Chin Ouyang summarizes in her study of the transformations of the *Thousand and One Nights* in film and narrative, "Scheherazade tells stories in order to save life and country" (404). Thus, resurrecting Camus's tale to examine it from unseen angles through fiction ironically "saves" Algeria from its absence in the original story.

Prior to colonization, Algeria had a recognized plurality, with diverse groups following different traditions and speaking various dialects; however, this diversity was minimalized in an attempt to unite the population under one national identity (McDougall 190-1). Daoud's narrator tells this story in French, but significantly, he does so orally (to an unknown student/scholar of Camus in a bar), as has been done since pre-colonial times, and thus mirrors his mother's storytelling. There is then a synthesis of maternal orality and the French language as a vehicle for truth-seeking. According to Orlando, Daoud defends the French language as being as equally relevant to Algerians as Arabic; she explains that "the mother country is diverse and should celebrate this diversity on all levels: culturally, linguistically and politically" (875).

The lack of recognition of a diversity that existed from the time when the Arabs conquered the mostly Berber regions of Algeria, long before the French colonized the region, ironically hinders Algerian progress toward a united national identity, one which recognizes and celebrates this innate diversity. Before Haroun learned to read French, this language was a symbol of a privileged world that was impenetrable to the non-French speaking Algerians, and linked to the oppression of the imposed language of the colonizer. While Haroun had spent his life learning from the oral tales of his mother, he must synthesize what he has heard from her in his native language with what he has now read in his newly acquired French. Haroun feels shame in hiding both his new knowledge of French, which has enabled him to

read Camus's novel, and the rethinking of his own hybrid identity that this reading inspires in him: "And for a long time, that would make me feel impossibly ashamed of her—and later, it pushed me to learn a language that could serve as a barrier between her frenzies and me" (37).⁸ His mother's relentless stories of the past, presented in an oral language that was certainly "rich, full of imagery and vitality" (37) has nonetheless reduced her to someone who speaks "like a prophet," (37) who "recruited extemporaneous mourners" (37)⁹ and who only contemplates "a husband swallowed up by air, a son by water" (37).¹⁰ Haroun declares: "I had to learn a language other than that one. To survive" (37).¹¹ Haroun retains the orality of his mother through his conversations with those within the diegesis (Meriem and the student-scholar) who will presumably offer their own glossing of the Camus story, but is himself incapable of immortalizing his mother's (Algeria's) story of forgotten grief in writing. In the end, it is Daoud—and not his fictional character—who has succeeded in exposing the two strands in his reconstructed narrative space using Camus's original novel and the French language to construct his palimpsest. Unfortunately, Haroun sees no possible future physical rebuilding or narrative reconstruction using the disparate threads left from the violent past, as he cuts off communication with his mother entirely. In fact, his vision of the future is almost apocalyptic, for he says, "Facing my balcony, just behind the last building on the outskirts of the city, there's an imposing mosque standing unfinished like thousands of others in this country" (139).¹² As Alice Kaplan argues, Haroun "turns his rage to the city of Algiers, which he despises, as much as Camus despised Oran, and to the mosques and the imams and the broken ideals of the Algerian Revolution" (209).

Daoud, on the other hand, in imagining the "other" possible stories left out in Camus's novel and writing them in his fictional graft allows for a forward-looking space that allows both of these novels to represent Algeria's multiple identities. Bhabha summarizes how this realm of the possible exists: "It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity, that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew" (37). Daoud does allow for this "rehistoricizing" and "reading anew." It is important to note that Haroun does show respect for Camus's writing style and philosophical musings, all the while condemning the obvious blind spots that have reduced his brother to an anonymous "Arab" in an unexplored country:

He writes so well that his words are like precious stones, jewels cut with the utmost precision. A man very strict about shades of meaning, your hero was ; he practically required them to be mathematical. Endless calculations, based on gems and minerals. Have you seen the way he writes ? He's writing about a

gunshot, and he makes it sound like poetry! His world is clean, clear, exact, honed by morning sunlight, enhanced with fragrances and horizons. (2)¹³

Haroun thus defines Camus as a master storyteller despite his omissions. Therefore, in banishing him entirely from Algerian history, symbolized in the mother's ignorance regarding Camus's novel and its contents, Daoud suggests that an opportunity is missed, for how can a nation move forward if willful blindness prevents a true accounting for all who have shaped it, however difficult or painful to contemplate? Daoud takes Camus's language as his own, creating a novel whose artistic genius is evident in his masterful choice of words for the purpose of responding to and reclaiming the fictional story told in *L'Étranger*.

Author/Character Conflation and the Slow Forgetting of the Mother

Daoud's postcolonial rewriting is essentially a search for identity. He succeeds in transforming a fictional story, however, into a form of auto-fiction in which Daoud can himself work through this quest. Daoud plays with the notion of the author as one with his character for the purpose of furthering an allegorical search for several layers of the Algerian self following years of colonial rule, postcolonial civil war, and future uncertainty. Daoud clearly confuses the reader by conflating Camus and his character, Meursault. For example, Haroun declares: "I'm going to outline the story before I tell it to you. A man who knows how to write kills an Arab who, on the day he dies, doesn't have a name" (5).¹⁴ Meursault is the murderer in the original novel, but the allegorical implication is that Camus, the gifted writer, also symbolically "kills" the Arab (or all Algerians) in the larger sense by refusing him his (or their) humanity and identity. Kaplan points out that the original name given in the Algerian edition of Daoud's novel is "Albert Meursault" and that "Daoud did this for a reason in Algeria. He wanted to mock a literary climate where people always confuse Meursault, who killed an Arab in a book, with the author of that book, Albert Camus, considered guilty because he did not support the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale in the 1950s" (207). Haroun and Daoud are likewise conflated in a sense, for Haroun's slow exposition of Camus's novel mirrors Daoud's own dissection of the text. Explaining Daoud's insistence that he is not to be confused with his character, Dana Strand argues:

In support of Daoud's position, one could argue that the circumstances of narration discourage us from reading the work as a *roman-à-thèse* or as autofiction. Since Haroun's voice replaces that of his dead brother, his authority over the narrative is already compromised, all the more so since in the first lines

of his convoluted story, he reveals that his mother no longer speaks, although he is convinced that there are still many more stories to tell [...] (453)

However, Strand highlights the fact that “his conflation of Camus and Meursault in key passages seems to invite a similar equivalency between Daoud and his characters, especially since, as a journalist, he has frequently stated his unfaltering stand on certain of the controversial issues raised in the novel” (457). Thus, as Strand argues, Daoud perhaps “protests too much” in seeking this authorial distance from his character (457). In his various journalistic writings and interviews, Daoud hints at the idealized goal of a hybrid Algerian identity, and offers the notion that achieving peaceful coexistence among these multiple identities in Algeria relies on a full acknowledgement of all of them. Importantly, he includes Camus within the complete hybrid story of Algeria’s past, refusing to delete from history all those who have been part of its identity, for good or for ill:

One day, we hope, Camus will come back to us. And Saint Augustine, and the others, all the others, all of our stories, our stones, architectures, mausoleums and beliefs, vineyards and palm trees, especially olive trees. And we will come out of this so alive in accepting our dead, and our land will be reconciled to us and we will live longer than the FLN and France and war and stories of couples. It’s an essential question: the one who accepts his past is master of his future. (my translation)¹⁵

In the end, Haroun slowly separates himself from his mother, eventually losing contact with her entirely. Meursault’s journey is in reverse, for the absent mother of the novel’s opening gives way to a remembered presence at the end as her voice and words of wisdom come back to him. During his trial and imprisonment, it is in memory that Meursault begins to resurrect his mother as he contemplates the trajectory of his life, allowing her to influence his consciousness posthumously. From his prison cell, Meursault looks out at the sky and remembers, “Mama often used to say that one is never entirely unhappy” (my translation).¹⁶ He experiences what could be defined as one of the only moments of happiness in the story. Meursault remembers what his mother taught him about life, especially holding onto her idea that “...one ends up getting used to everything” (my translation).¹⁷ The reader finally has a revelation regarding Meursault’s inner life and apathetic response to life’s vicissitudes thanks to these small remembrances of his mother’s philosophical lessons regarding passive self-resignation. He is indeed his mother’s son. While his behavior towards his mother will forever haunt him, mainly due to societal judgment and not his own self-awareness, he himself is forced to confront the specter of his mother as someone who could have made his life bearable, and who could have given him insight into the

workings of the world, if only he had acknowledged her presence and voice when she was alive. Haroun, on the other hand, has had the benefit of his mother's physical presence and relentless stories throughout his life. He cannot move beyond the lessons of anger and vengeance constantly imparted to him. His movement, in contrast to Meursault's, is thus towards a slow forgetting of her.

The connection between story and life is compelling in Daoud's grafting upon Camus's story. On the plot level, Haroun keeps the fictional story of the murdered Arab alive through the mother's oral tales, but on a meta-level, Daoud keeps Camus's story (both fictional and biographical) alive in the counter retelling. While we are obviously reading a fictional account of a fictional novel, we are nonetheless led to a search for historical elusive "truth." It is important to note that the reader is constantly reminded that Haroun is telling this story to a stranger (a student/scholar of Camus) in a bar, and by implication, the story will be passed on and remain alive in future retellings. The perpetual possibilities for both stories (Haroun's and Meursault's) within the diegesis to be thus told and retold allows for these oral and written stories to remain viable. The reader, on a meta-level, forms a link in the narrative chain, for the anonymous deaf-mute listener in the bar who silently observes Haroun conversing with the Camus scholar/student could be seen as a metaphor for the reader. Yamina Bahi asserts that this "addressee as blurry as he is mute" (my translation) serves "an ingenious pretext to call upon the reader" (my translation).¹⁸ Sarah Horton adds another interpretive layer, linking the deaf-mute to Camus, since he is also afflicted with tuberculosis like the author (297). In addition to allusions to extra-diegetic readers and to Camus himself, we would argue that the deaf/mute listener in the bar could also be viewed as Daoud's resurrection of Camus's own biological mother who was partially deaf and who suffered speech impediments. She was the silent observer of her son's political struggle in Algeria, and the source of great angst when Camus used her as a pretext to defend all forms of retaliatory violence that target innocent civilians in his famous quote about justice.

When Camus was receiving the Nobel Prize in 1957, an Algerian student asked him to clarify his position on Algerian independence. In noting the random violence perpetrated against civilians on Algerian tramways, which his mother often used, he is quoted as replying: "At this very moment, they're throwing bombs in the streetcars of Algiers. My mother could find herself on one of these streetcars. If that is justice, I prefer my mother" (my translation).¹⁹ Within Camus's fiction, Haroun considers the death of Meursault's mother to be the end of the *pied noir's* "last legitimate claim to belonging in Algeria" (Strand 454). This vision is in sharp contrast to how Camus felt about himself and other French settlers who had been there for decades. The deaf-mute could represent an important call to reconsider Camus's loyalty

towards his own silent, but influential, and yet beloved, mother. Camus died tragically in a car accident in 1960, two years before the Evian Accords led to an independent Algeria, and well before the return of violence in the 1990s through the Algerian bloody civil war. He was thus unable to articulate his political position more clearly, and perhaps even modify it in light of later events, in such a way that one quote continued to define him long after his death: his statement about his own mother. The retrospective evaluation of Camus's place in Algerian history perpetually circles back to the quote about his mother and justice, and he has become, in a sense, a prisoner to the recurrent reconsideration of what exactly he meant by it. Once again, the past haunts the present, preventing positive forward movement, in a similar way to Haroun's predicament, with the mother figure firmly at the center of this perpetual return to the past.

In Defiance of the Maternal: Meriem and Algerian Futurity

Haroun's few acts of defiance against his mother—including his development of a relationship with a young woman who represents Western culture, and his eventual loss of contact with his mother—constitute an effort to move beyond in an act of rebellious self-actualization. It is critical that the impetus for Haroun's true mastery of the French language is the arrival of Meriem, the young woman from Constantine who has symbolically synthesized Algerian and Western culture in dress, demeanor and education. She seeks out his family in order to find answers to the questions left unresolved by Camus in her scholarly research on *L'Étranger*. Her assistance represents the potential to strive for a new future, and the fact that she is female, with her own agency in a patriarchal system, highlights this potential new future. Both Camus's Marie and Daoud's Meriem are female figures representing the allegorical possibility of change or renewal. Their characters are in sharp contrast to the mother, who represents continuity, a lack of adaptation, and the past. It is clear that Daoud uses a variation of the name "Marie" in his choice of "Meriem" in order to establish the link between these two youthful women in the lives of the male protagonists, such links as the ones he creates onomastically with other characters too. Her role in helping Haroun glean all the information he can from *L'Étranger* is allegorically important. She represents the possibility of an Algerian choosing his own identity by embracing as a tool of empowerment that which was once a symbol of domination. The pedagogy she offers makes this opportunity clear as she urges him to read Camus's book critically and with an open mind:

She taught me how to read the book in a certain way, tilting it sideways as though to make invisible details fall out. She gave me other books written by that man, and others besides, which allowed me to understand, little by little, how your hero

saw the world. Meriem slowly explained to me his beliefs and his fabulous, solitary images. I gathered that he was a sort of orphan who recognized a sort of fatherless twin in the world and who had suddenly acquired the gift of brotherhood, precisely because of his solitude. (132)²⁰

Daoud allows Meriem to give potential female agency to the story and its future retellings, something that has also been lacking, and that could not be fully realized in his mother's oral tales. As Haroun says, "Until that moment, I'd never looked at a woman as one of life's possibilities. I had enough to do, what with extracting myself from mama's womb, burying the dead, and killing fugitives" (124).²¹ While Meriem is the conduit to the West via Camus's novel, in another reversal of the common male-female power dynamic, she does not represent an emasculating presence for the non-Western male as Fanon has depicted in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, for she confidently embraces and synthesizes her multiple identities. However, the reader who is familiar with the violent postcolonial civil war in Algeria in the 1990s, after the diegetic time of Daoud's novel, is all too aware of the tragic thwarting of these possibilities for a hoped-for future. Haroun says of Meriem that "Her type of woman has disappeared in this country today: free, brash, disobedient, aware of their body as a gift, not as a sin or a shame" (135).²² Having embraced an education, way of dressing, and language closely aligned with that of France and the West, without sacrificing her status as an Algerian, Meriem represents the freedom Haroun desires in his own life forged through a synthesis of multiple identities. Haroun himself reminds us that the independent voice of women like Meriem was silenced in the civil war period. She, too, is a victim of a new form of violence that came to supplant the colonial one, a violence that had silenced his mother before her. Marie, the character resurrected as Meriem in Daoud's novel, similarly represents hope for a positive future, but only in the way it concerns the personal life of the white European colonial male protagonist. She seeks marriage and a future life with Meursault, but he quietly rejects such proposals. Like Meriem, Marie disappears from the story, and Meursault loses this connection to a possible new life, though one that would have been lived within the confines of traditional, socially accepted norms and institutions, unlike Meriem who had represented a stark departure from them.

As Meriem suggests, accepting the human connection to Camus would have opened up the possibility of a brotherhood that Haroun is unwilling to fully embrace in the end. In Camus's work, each person is someone else's "other," an existential idea that Camus suggests here and elsewhere, yet we are all linked nonetheless in our humanity. Lia Brozgal goes so far as to suggest that Daoud subverts his own counter discourse, for "Haroun's ostensible project of repairing colonial violence through naming the Arab is thus undercut: Moussa might be Meursault if one isn't listening carefully" (40).

Moussa, the character whose recounted story is supposed to avenge his absence from *L'Étranger*, “becomes a kind of Algerian ‘John Doe,’ an everyman, a placeholder for an unknown identity” (Brozgal 40), ironically not just because he is an anonymous “other” in Camus’s story, but because Daoud too, as Brozgal points out, gives the name Moussa to a tertiary character in the bar, and further asserts that “Musa was an Arab replaceable by a thousand others of his kind” (48).²³ However, Daoud’s authorial voice, in the form of a fictional recreation, has spoken for silent victims of story and history in forcing us to read the two novels as point/counterpoint. The doubling of characters highlights this universal brotherhood. In fact, when Haroun finally learns French well enough to read Camus’s novel on his own, he exclaims: “This man, your writer, seemed to have stolen my twin Zujj, my own description, and even the details of my life and my memories of my interrogation!” (131).²⁴ His disillusionment with the end of the novel is great, for he realizes that the anonymous Arab’s death in Camus’s novel represents his own and that of all who were left out of the pages of official written history and story. Haroun says, “Those last lines overwhelmed me. A masterpiece, my friend. A mirror held up to my soul and to what would become of me in this country, between Allah and *ennui*” (131).²⁵ Haroun finds himself without a way forward, Bhabha’s third way of sorts, in a move away from both the French philosophizing of Camus (“*l’ennui*”) and the tight grip Islamists have had over Algeria in the aftermath of revolution and civil war (“Allah”). Right after Haroun reads the book and experiences this revelation, he immediately hides its existence and content from his mother, for it will only add fuel to her simmering maternal fire: “I didn’t show the book to Mama. She would have made me read it over and over, endlessly, right up until Judgment Day, I swear to you” (131-2).²⁶ The only “future” he sees in the shadow of his mother is the apocalyptic biblical Last Judgment, for earthly reconciliation eludes him.

The Silence of the Father

What of the missing father in these stories and symbolically in the story of Algeria’s history? The overwhelming power of the mother is in part due to the absence of a strong father who could represent allegorically a more unified and balanced identity. Daoud draws attention to the bonds that link the fatherless characters, for Meursault and Haroun (and in fact, Camus himself) shared this fraternal link. In *L'Étranger*, Meursault admits that he had never known his father, and that “everything I knew of this man, it was perhaps what Mama told me about him then” (my translation).²⁷ Once again, both Haroun and Meursault are tied to the past through the power of the widowed mother, the only one who can provide stories about the missing father.

Meursault, for example, remembers stories his mother told him about his father. One story in particular stays with him: the story of how his father went to witness an execution, a spectacle that caused him to vomit (*L'Étranger* 160-1). Meursault believes he could have surpassed his father if he had been pardoned for his crime and freed from prison, for he would have taken pleasure in witnessing all the executions possible, an Oedipal reference to the desire to obliterate the father definitively. His sociopathic tendencies are exaggerated here, and since he never knew his father or the benefit of his pedagogy, all that remains is a father-son rivalry regarding who could better “stomach” the absurdity of human violence and death, an exaggerated masculinity he creates in his imagination, and one that fills the vacuum of a life dominated by the mother. Symbolic parricide is linked with loss of male identity and historical perspective. Meursault’s lawyer tells him that his trial should be swift, because a pending “parricide” trial is more interesting to the public (*L'Étranger* 121) than his own trial for murder and symbolic matricide. Importantly, both Daoud and Camus stress the inadequacy of the substitute fathers of organized religion within the scenes of their imprisonment. Meursault has nothing but scorn for the priest who serves him platitudes and who is dismayed that Meursault refuses to call him “father.” Meursault responds: “That irritated me and I answered him that he was not my father’ (my translation).²⁸ Daoud rewrites this scene almost verbatim when Haroun is in prison, but this time with an imam as a substitute father. The idea of not just an absent, but inexistent Father God, is the ultimate absent father in both stories, an idea that resulted in Daoud’s condemnation by a prominent imam. Camus’s “justice v. mother” polemic has found its counterpoint in Daoud’s political position, and, as Orlando points out, has made him more famous than his novel in the West: “International newspapers, including the *New York Times*, *Le Monde* and *The Guardian* have covered the Islamist’s ire and the ensuing fatwa that have placed the author in a precarious position in his own homeland” (874). When President Macron recently announced that his government would be unsealing the historical archives regarding France’s use of torture in the Algerian War, as well as records on missing persons, especially the Communist mathematician Maurice Audin, Benjamin Stora declared that this belated action represents “a step away from ‘the silence of the father’ that has characterized France’s relationship to its colonial past for decades” (qtd. in McAuley, *Washington Post*). The unknown or unexamined past is metaphorically cast as a colonial unjust father, and, by philosophical extension, an absurd, absent and unknowable God. If we cannot reckon with the silence of a father/God, we can at least force the oppressive colonial “father” to speak, to allow stories to be revealed in the final quest for truth.

Conclusion

The reader is left to decide, with Daoud's novel set against Camus's, which truth(s) should become part of Algerian identity formation, whose stories matter in the development of this identity, and whose might be lost. The internal listeners in Daoud's novel, the French student and deaf mute at the bar, are explicitly charged with this responsibility. They become symbols representing the possibility of interpretation in the telling and retelling of his story. Just like these two internal listeners of Haroun's story, readers will choose what to take away from the tale and how to respond to it. They represent future interpretations of Haroun's tale, which is now permanently linked to Meursault's. Kamel Daoud's *Meursault, contre-enquête* takes readers on a quest for both personal and national identity in the context of post-independence Algeria through maternal metaphor and palimpsest. In the process, while initially downplaying entirely philosophical musings as presented by Camus, Daoud ironically revisits those very same abstract philosophical questions Camus poses regarding the absurd, for he is "proposing an alternative definition of the absurd firmly situated in post-independence Algeria" (Strand 458). Horton presents the new context of the absurd revealed in Daoud's novel as follows:

French colonialism was unjust, for the colonizers sided with a universe devoid of meaning in which human life has no objective value, but although Algeria has entered a postcolonial era, the universe remains. Daoud's novel is a call (one that is at the same time universal and addressed to his countrymen) to grapple with that reality instead of escaping into absurd certainties of M'ma or naïve believers who see their God chiefly as a ground for objective truth. (297)

In an NPR interview about his novel, Daoud explains that his detailed fiction gives way to a more profound questioning of the absurd. He states:

For me, fundamentally the absurd—Camus's absurd—gave me back my feeling of dignity. I will try to summarize this very simply. I have noticed that people who function within a closed philosophical system are the ones that practice the absurd, and those people are the ones who end up killing others. On the other hand, the man who understands that the world is absurd, he's in a position to make sense of the world, to find meaning. It is because I know that the world is absurd that I'm not going to kill you. But if I somehow figure out that the world has meaning, I can kill you in the name of that meaning. It's called Nazism,

Jihadism, Islamism and the extreme right. ("Novelist Kamel Daoud, Finding Dignity in the Absurd," qtd. in Siegel)

The mother in *Meursault, contre-enquête* becomes a character who lives within such a "closed philosophical system," one that privileges a narrow view of the past and a desire for retribution in the present. *Meursault, contre-enquête* explores a plural or universal self. Daoud shows the need to broaden the Algerian sense of identity, but this question of identity and reconciliation remains unresolved at the end of the novel. The impasse of colonization as neither/nor recalls once again Bhabha's hybrid Third Space as a way out of the binary mindset that has made for a perpetual self/other dynamic. As Michaela Wolf summarizes: "It is in this Third Space between former fixed territories that the whole body of resistant hybridization comes into being in the form of fragile syncretisms, contrapuntal recombinations, and acculturation" (135). Rather than functioning merely as a corrective to Camus's story and philosophy, Daoud's novel serves as a continuation of the broadly philosophical questions addressed in *L'Étranger*, and an invitation to explore other places where history and story have failed to fully address these questions within a third space of interrogation. It is only through this process that a better future for Algeria can begin to be imagined.

Notes

1. "Aujourd'hui, M'ma est encore vivante" (Meursault 11). (unless otherwise noted, all translations of Daoud's novel are from John Cullen's translation of *The Meursault Investigation*).

2. "Aujourd'hui, maman est morte" (7).

3. "son regard comme une main [le] poussant dans le dos, [le] maintenant debout, dirigeant [son] bras, inclinant légèrement [sa] tête au moment où [il visa]" (85).

4. "Pendant longtemps, il ne se passa pas une année sans que ma mère ne jure avoir retrouvé le corps de Moussa, entendu son souffle ou son pas, reconnu l'empreinte de sa chaussure" (47).

5. "M'ma avait mille et un récits et la vérité m'importait peu à cet âge" (26).

6. "Beau résumé n'est-ce pas? Avec deux paragraphes, il fallait retrouver un corps, des alibis, des accusations" (131).

7. “c’était un désordre indescriptible, une sorte de Mille et Une Nuits du mensonge et de l’infamie” (131).
8. “J’en éprouvais, pour longtemps, une honte impossible—plus tard, cela me poussa à apprendre une langue capable de faire barrage entre le délire de ma mère et moi” (47).
9. “riche, imagée, pleine de vitalité,” “comme un prophète,” “recruta des pleureuses improvisées” (37).
10. “un mari avalé par les airs, un fils par les eaux” (47).
11. “Il me fallut apprendre une autre langue que celle-ci. Pour survivre” (47).
12. “Il y a, en face de mon balcon, juste derrière le dernier immeuble de la cité, une imposante mosquée inachevée, comme il en existe des milliers d’autres dans ce pays” (149).
13. “Il [Camus] écrit si bien que ses mots paraissent des pierres taillées par l’exactitude même. C’était quelqu’un de très sévère avec les nuances, ton héros, il les obligeait presque à être des mathématiques. D’infinis calculs à base de pierres et de minéraux. As-tu vu sa façon d’écrire? Il semble utiliser l’art du poème pour parler d’un coup de feu! Son monde est propre, ciselé par la clarté matinale, précis, net, tracé à coups d’arômes et d’horizons” (Meursault 12).
14. “Je vais te résumer l’histoire avant de te la raconter; un homme qui sait écrire tue un Arabe qui n’a même pas de nom” (15).
15. “Un jour, on l’espère, Camus nous reviendra. Et Saint-Augustin, et les autres, tous les autres, toutes nos histoires, nos pierres, architectures, mausolées et croyances, vignes et palmiers, oliviers surtout. Et nous sortirons tellement vivants d’accepter nos morts et notre terre nous sera réconciliée et nous vivrons plus longtemps que le FLN et la France et la guerre et les histoires des couples. C’est une question essentielle : celui qui accepte son passé est maître de son avenir” (“Repatrier un jour les cendres de Camus?”).
16. “Maman disait souvent qu’on n’est jamais tout à fait malheureux” (L’Étranger 165).
17. “...on finissait par s’habituer à tout” (L’Étranger 64).
18. “allocutaire tout aussi flou que muet, “comme prétexte ingénieux pour interpeller le lecteur” (71-2).
19. “En ce moment on lance des bombes dans les tramways d’Alger. Ma mère peut se trouver dans un de ces tramways. Si c’est cela la justice, je préfère ma mère” (qtd. in Gallimard, “Entretien avec Carl Gustav Bjurström”).

20. “Elle m’apprit à lire le livre d’une certaine manière, en le faisant pencher de côté comme pour en faire tomber les détails invisibles. Elle m’offrit les autres livres écrits par cet homme, et d’autres encore, qui m’ont progressivement permis de comprendre comment ton héros voyait le monde. Meriem m’expliqua lentement ses croyances et ses fabuleuses images solitaires. Je compris que c’était une sorte d’orphelin qui avait reconnu dans le monde une sorte de jumeau sans père et qui, du coup, avait acquis le don de la fraternité, à cause, précisément, de sa solitude” (162).

21. “Jusque-là, je n’avais regardé une femme comme une possibilité de la vie. J’avais trop à faire à m’extraire du ventre de M’ma, à enterrer des morts et à tuer des fuyards” (134).

22. “[e]lle appartient à un genre de femmes qui, aujourd’hui, a disparu dans ce pays: libre, conquérante, insoumise et vivant son corps comme un don, non comme un péché ou une honte” (145).

23. “Moussa est un Arabe qu’on peut remplacer par mille autres” (58).

24. “Cet homme, ton écrivain, semblait m’avoir volé mon jumeau, Zoudj, mon portrait, et même les détails de ma vie et les souvenirs de mon interrogatoire! J’ai lu presque toute la nuit, mot à mot, laborieusement” (141).

25. “Ces dernières lignes m’avaient bouleversé. Un chef-d’oeuvre, l’ami. Un miroir tendu à mon âme et à ce que j’allais devenir dans ce pays, entre Allah et l’ennui” (141).

26. “Je n’ai pas montré le livre à M’ma. Elle m’aurait obligé à le lui lire et relire, sans fin, jusqu’au jour du Jugement dernier, je te le jure” (141).

27. “[t]out ce que je connaissais de précis sur cet homme, c’était peut-être ce que m’en disait alors maman” (160).

28. “Cela m’a énervé et je lui ai répondu qu’il n’était pas mon père” (175).

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