

THE ALGERIAN ISLAND IN THE NOVELS OF ALBERT CAMUS:
THE END OF THE *PIED-NOIR* ADVENTURE TALE

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

Arts & Sciences in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Pittsburgh

2004

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH
FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

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ABSTRACT

Albert Camus's novels provide insight into the worldview of the *pieds-noirs*, Algerian-born descendants of European settlers facing ever-increasing pressure to abandon what they saw as their homeland as decolonization accelerated after the Second World War, when Camus was writing. This study examines Camus's four main novels, L'étranger, La peste, La chute, and Le premier homme in their colonial context. Through a careful analysis of Camus's use of the tropes and imagery associated with the robinsonnade, or island adventure tale, and its inherent connection to colonialist discourse, this study nuances our understanding of Camus's position on the subject of Algeria. We will argue that Camus's fiction suggests mixed feelings about the colonial project in Algeria and furthermore that he clearly anticipated the impending end of the French-Algerian experiment.

In L'étranger we see how the Algerian landscape is defined by impenetrable borders, forcing mutually antagonistic groups into violent encounters within narrow spaces. In La peste we examine the islanding of the city of Oran due to the plague outbreak, and we note how the functioning of the city is laid bare due to the pressure of quarantine. La chute shows us that Camus was fixated on an insular Algeria even when writing of northern Europe. Le premier homme provides final proof that the island Algeria portrayed in Camus's novels is associated

with the colonial adventure of the *pieds-noirs*, and that this adventure will end, as in all robinsonnades, with a return to the mother country.

The novels of Albert Camus were read as expressions of universal existentialist truth until Conor Cruise O'Brien pointed out the importance of considering them in the colonial Algerian context. Subsequent criticism of Camus has been largely shaped by O'Brien's approach and by that of the late Edward Said, who followed up O'Brien's critiques with an even stronger indictment in Culture and Imperialism of Camus as being in "outright opposition to Algerian independence" and in assuming that the French colonial project in Algeria is immutable. We will more clearly analyze Camus's perspective on the French colonial endeavor in Algeria as it is expressed in his novels.

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PREFACE

I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation for each member of my dissertation committee. Their encouragement, excellent suggestions, and unflagging support of my project resulted in this document ultimately seeing the light of day. Special thanks go to my dissertation director, Phil Watts, for ten years of inspiration, guidance, and patience.

My family constantly inspires me to strive for the best. My parents and grandparents have supported and encouraged me throughout all of my studies, and my brothers' disparate interests have helped to keep me focused on my own. Finally, without my wife Noémie Parrat's motivational and editorial input, I believe that I would never have finished this dissertation at all, so I dedicate it to her.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the following study, we will attempt to deepen and nuance our understanding of the relationship between the *pied-noir* and the Algerian space as this relationship plays out in the fiction of Albert Camus. In order to accomplish this goal, it will be necessary to define precisely what, or who, is a *pied-noir*, and it will also be useful to examine the current critical atmosphere in which Camus and Algeria are studied. We will also examine the legacy of the nineteenth-century island adventure text, or robinsonnade, for it seems that Camus knew this tradition and used its tropes, its stock of metaphors and its freight of imperial connotations when describing the Algerian space as it affects the French Algerian, or *pied-noir*, characters who are the focus of the bulk of Camus's fiction. Even with the intense critical interest in reading Camus's novels from a post-colonial perspective, no one has yet explored the centrality of the robinsonnade intertext in his work.

The critical response to Albert Camus has fluctuated in several waves over the forty-odd years since his death. At first Camus was taken as a sort of unreligious saint, or "just man," in the Sixties, at least partially because of the tragedy and sense of unfulfilled destiny caused by his untimely death in a car accident in 1960. A decade later, Conor Cruise O'Brien wrote what is probably the most significant intervention on Camus, particularly in light of politics, specifically those pertaining to colonialism. In his Albert Camus: of Europe and Africa O'Brien systematically studies Camus's writing over his literary career as it was available in 1970,

showing that the Algerian context of much of Camus's fiction was integral to an understanding thereof. His ultimate conclusion that Camus was incapable of distancing himself from the political positions of the *pied-noir* culture in which he was steeped, while simultaneously emerging as a wholly French cultural figure, has held sway since it was published. The second most influential set of remarks on Camus are those of Edward Said, who devotes a short chapter to Camus in Culture and Imperialism. Said, who it must be said spends several orders of magnitude less time and energy studying Camus before making his conclusions than did O'Brien, basically echoes O'Brien's criticisms of Camus's political positions as seen in his literature while suggesting that O'Brien was too easy on Camus. O'Brien suggests that Camus was incriminatingly silent on colonialism and the moral problems associated with it, for example in his much-cited analysis of the Arab quarters of Oran in La peste, in which said quarter is "curiously deserted"¹ to the point of having been the sight of a literary final solution. Said goes so far as to state that Camusian fictional works are "interventions in the history of French efforts in Algeria, making and keeping it French."² Where O'Brien can envisage the possibility that Camus struggled with new ways of imagining the relationship between the French, the *pieds-noirs*, and the Arab- and Kabyle-Algerians, Said sums up Camus's work as steeped in "belated, in some ways incapacitated colonial sensibility."³ In many ways, the critical efforts which examine Camus and Algeria after Said's comments are largely attempts to answer his analysis with a more subtle, nuanced reading of Camus that is closer to that author's texts and less reliant

¹ Conor Cruise O'Brien, Albert Camus: of Europe and Africa (New York: The Viking Press, 1970) 53.

² Edward W. Said, Culture and Imperialism (1993; New York: Vintage Books, 1994) 175.

³ Said 176.

on prevailing impressions of what Camus was about. Indeed, Christine Margerrison suggests that there is currently such a rush to resituate Camus and his works in their Algerian context that this has led to some misappropriation of scholarly research concerning Camus and his contemporary Muslim-Algerian literary colleagues.⁴ We will study a representative sample⁵ of such criticism in order to set the stage for our own intervention, which we hope will combine the better insights therein with an insistence on studying Camus's fictional texts for the best chance to understand the *pied-noir* point of view as it is expressed through characters and scenes which, while undoubtedly not crafted for just such an effect, nevertheless provide the clearest possible glimpses of a group that was greatly affected by a growing globalization which ultimately left them behind.

1.1. The *Pied-noir*

Who or what precisely is a "*pied-noir*"? This Frenchman born in Algeria seems to be a collection of contradictions, embodying a rather diverse group of people that nevertheless are all lumped together in discussions of Algeria before and after its independence from France. The *pied-noir*, or 'Blackfoot,' is in many ways the *bête noire* of the Algerian scene of the 19th and 20th centuries, associated as he is with the violent terror campaigns of the OAS, racism, and economic hardships in France and Algeria. He can be seen as the foot soldier of the French imperial endeavor in North Africa, laboring to bring Algeria firmly into the French empire and nation and subsequently to keep it there. The very etymology of this term has given rise to a great deal of speculation, and the manifold folk etymologies add to the richness of the

⁴ Christine Margerrison, "Two Recent Studies of Camus," French Studies Bulletin: A Quarterly Supplement 83 (2002): 17.

⁵ Many of these were assembled in a special edition of Johns Hopkins University's MLN in a special issue in 1997, edited by Marc Blanchard, entitled "Camus 2000."

expression. Seen from the perspective of the Arab-Algerians who are claimed to have given him this name, his most immediately apparent physical feature is his black boots, underscoring the idea of the *pied-noir* as a jack-booted thug of imperial conquest. The blackness of his feet, implicitly contrasted with the whiteness of the rest of his body, reminds one that part of his way of life involved trampling the ‘Blacks’ under his feet. This etymology has the added advantage of serving as a constant reminder that the *pied-noir* does not, and cannot, have roots leading down into the soil of Algeria, as he is shown to be insulated from that red soil by a layer of European technology.

If one accepts that the term *pied-noir* came from Europeans, on the other hand, it would seem to be a denigrating expression evoking feet permanently dirtied by the mere contact with a primitive, if rich, soil. From this perspective, the *pied-noir* seems a sort of bare-footed bumpkin, stained black from too much contact with the non-White world. One easily understands that the *pied-noir* cannot simply wash his feet in order to remove this stigma. Whereas the metropolitan French would like to associate themselves with philosophy, high culture, and urbanity, these country cousins are shown to be forever tainted by their intimate contact with the savage and dark continent of Africa. Adding to this association of the *pied-noir* with the less-cultured people-groups of the world would be the fact that any Europeans fond of tales of the American West might be expected to associate these European-Africans with members of a ‘primitive’ tribe from that other, exotic, frontier space of colonialization.

Ordinarily, a quick glance at a dictionary would resolve the lingering question of which folk etymology is, in fact, a linguistic one as well. Unfortunately, or rather fortunately for the polysemic richness of the term, each dictionary seems to have its own favorite etymology as well. For example, the Nouveau Dictionnaire Etymologique, published by Larousse in 1969,

authoritatively reports that the expression is tied to the habit of those living in Algiers of walking barefoot all the time.⁶ (This etymology is still accepted according to the 1993 edition of the same dictionary.) So here the dictionary would seem to agree that a defining characteristic of the *pied-noir* is his relative lack of sophistication when compared to the Metropolitan. The Dictionnaire Historique de la Langue Française, in 1992, provides what it claims is the definitive etymology, however noting that “[l]e mot a donné lieu à diverses étymologies fantaisistes,”⁷ simultaneously stamping down and calling attention to the ways in which this term has been explained over its lifespan. We will cite the entire entry, as its complexity is impressive: “n. m. (1901) a d’abord désigné un chauffeur sur un bateau, par allusion au fait qu’il travaillait pieds nus dans la soute à charbon; de ce que les chauffeurs qui effectuaient le service, sur des bateaux français en Méditerranée, étaient en général des Algériens, le mot a servi de surnom péjoratif pour un Algérien (1917), avant de prendre son sens actuel revendiqué de “Français né en Algérie” (1955), excluant à la fois les Algériens autochtones et les Français de la métropole.”⁸ In this startlingly complex history of the term “*pied-noir*” we find a microcosm of the French imperial presence in Algeria, with the steamships tying the Algerian Departments to the Mainland, the service of the “Autochtones” in dirty, demeaning, stigmatizing labor, and finally an appropriation of the identity of the dirty-footed Algerians by the “Français né[s] en Algérie.” This reversal, in which the term for the French Algerians is shown to have originally been a

⁶ “*Pied-noir*,” Nouveau Dictionnaire Etymologique et Historique, 1969 ed.

⁷ Keling Wei notes, apparently authoritatively, that this term refers to these “Français nés en Algérie” who “du fait du port des chaussures qui les distingue, ne touchent pas directement la terre.” (“*Le Premier Homme*: Autobiographie Algérienne d’Albert Camus,” Études Littéraires 33.3 (2001): 125.

⁸ “*Pied-noir*,” Dictionnaire historique de la langue française, 1992 ed.

pejorative name for the Arabs and Kabyles from Algeria, further enriches the expression, for it now is freighted with the appropriation of the landscape and its associated features, such as servitude to the French hegemony. The Trésor de la langue française, in 1988, repeats the association between coal-driven steamships and those called *pieds-noirs*, adding several literary uses of the term starting at the beginning of the 1960's.⁹ The Litttré, normally the last word in literary French vocabulary, chooses not to deign this term with an explanation, leaving an exhilarating freedom of meaning open to it. In any event, the expression "*pied-noir*" has been in use at least in Algeria since the latter part of the nineteenth century, and by the time of Albert Camus's death it was a completely mainstream part of the French vocabulary when used to refer to the French of Algeria, strongly implying that it was already in use among the inhabitants of Algiers at the time Albert Camus was writing, if not even during his childhood.

After Algerian independence, the *pied-noir* undergoes a traumatic displacement to the supposed mother-country (although the *pied-noir*'s mother, as he would tell you, was born in Oran or Algiers), a cold, dark place full of pigeons, as Camus would have it, and he finds himself with nothing left of his Algerian experience but his memories and his sobriquet. Not surprisingly, the *pied-noir* is not seen in the same way once he becomes a refugee in France rather than a colonial master in French Algeria. 'Back' in France, the *pied-noir* is one of a large group of minorities with deep nostalgia for Algeria: rubbing elbows with Maghrébins, or Arabes, or Beurs, he finds some familiar faces in this cold land, but he does not find the same relationship with these formerly carefully subordinated North Africans. Perhaps the *pied-noir* is aware of the presence of Harkis, tucked away in a protective, albeit smothering, custody, but it is

⁹ "*Pied-noir*," Trésor de la langue française: Dictionnaire de la langue du XIXe et du XXe siècle, 1988 ed.

unlikely that he finds much social interaction possible with this other group of expatriated Algerians. The *pied-noir* discovers in metropolitan France what he had suspected while still in France d’outre-mer: he is not considered French by the French French, and he is certainly not considered Algerian by the French of Algerian extraction. Furthermore, his presence in Marseille, or Lyons, or Paris is a constant reminder to the ‘real’ French of the embarrassing defeat they just suffered at the hands of a seemingly inferior foe, and therefore he knows that he is hardly welcomed in ‘his’ country.¹⁰ The *pied-noir* finds that he reminds, in an even more discomfiting manner, of the excesses committed by the French in that same unsuccessful military campaign, so reminiscent of what the Gestapo had been up to a few years earlier while they occupied France. In our study, we will find that the isolation of the *pied-noir* , founded in the coal-bins of the French Imperial navy, will effectively place him in a pseudo-insular environment in which the boundaries of the island, and of the southern littoral of the Mediterranean, are constantly reinforced. The very landscape of Algeria, as it is presented in the novels of Albert Camus, will help us better understand the world-view of a sub-group of the French, and arguably Algerian, people.

Albert Camus fits all the categories for being a *pied-noir* except that he did not live long enough to be forced out of Algeria at Independence. Nevertheless, Camus had already begun to live in France, where he seemed to think of himself as a sort of exile. It is certainly not axiomatic that Albert Camus is an Algerian writer; James Le Sueur points out that while former Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver thought of the Martinican-born Frantz Fanon as a “great

¹⁰ For a detailed study of the impact of the ‘return’ of the *Pieds-noirs* to mainland France, see Jean-Jacques Jordi’s very well-researched book on the subject: 1962: l’arrivée des *Pieds-noirs* , Paris: Éditions Autrement, 1995.

Algerian,” he wonders if Camus, born in Algeria, would have received such a title.¹¹ Le Sueur goes on to argue that “No one would mistake Camus, especially today, for an Algerian,” even though he then goes on to enumerate the many reasons why Camus is more Algerian than Fanon.¹² However, Assia Djebar, whose opinion on this matter we feel must be given significant weight, considers Camus to be one of the great figures of Algerian literature.¹³ Camus maintained family ties in Algeria until his death, while participating in French society as a Frenchman, but he mentions in an introduction to Jean Grenier’s Les Îles that he never stopped thinking about his youth on the sunny South coast of the Mediterranean throughout his writing career. Camus, then, would seem to define himself as a Frenchman of Algeria, living in the Metropole but mentally still inhabiting the landscape of Algeria. Jean Daniel, a fellow *pied-noir* who knew Camus personally before breaking with him after 1956, states unequivocally that “Pour lui [Camus], il n’y avait pas des Français et des Algériens, mais des musulmans et des non-musulmans.”¹⁴ This impression notwithstanding, we will proceed in this study from the point of view that inasmuch as a *pied-noir* culture and identity can be coherently posited to exist, Albert Camus must be implicated in that culture, and indeed seems to speak for it through his novels. As Ali Yedes eloquently put it, Camus’s literary output “is at the same time an intervention in and a reflection of his European-Algerian community which was composed

¹¹ James D. Le Sueur, “Beyond Decolonization? The Legacy of the Algerian Conflict and the Transformation of Identity in Contemporary France,” Historical Reflections/Reflexions Historiques 28.2 (2002): 277.

¹² Le Sueur 278.

¹³ Assia Djebar, Le blanc de l’Algérie, (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995) 272-274.

¹⁴ Gunther Verheyen and Jean Daniel, “Un entretien avec Jean Daniel sur Albert Camus et Rachid Mimouni,” Französisch Heute 4 (1996): 295.

mainly of settlers from France, Italy, Spain and Malta, living in an Arab/Berber, North African setting.”¹⁵

1.2. Brief Review of Camus Scholarship

David Carroll, in a very carefully-worded reinterpretation of Camus in light of O’Brien’s and Said’s interventions, shows that some of Camus later works, notably the short stories in L’exil et le royaume as well as the posthumously-published, and apparently largely autobiographical, Le premier homme, which was not available when Said and O’Brien were forming their impressions of Camus, show a much greater ambiguity on the position of the “French Algerian” vis-à-vis the Algerian people and space than had been observed by O’Brien and Said. Carroll argues that throughout these later works by Camus one finds that the author seems to be dominated by the Algerian soil, by the very “terre” that his supposed mother country had been dominating for the past one hundred years. Carroll points to a “cult of the land”¹⁶ that wields an extremely heavy influence on Camus’ characters and on the author himself. Carroll shows that Camus’ depiction of French Algerians describes them by “their simultaneous rootedness and exile from their birth land,”¹⁷ and points to various descriptions of the Algerian landscape to confirm this hypothesis. Carroll confirms through his examination of the Algerian land that possesses the French Algerians and Arab Algerians alike in Camus’s fiction that it is an “imaginary place,”¹⁸ albeit strongly rooted (and the term here is key) in the physical Algeria in

¹⁵ Ali Yedes, “A North African Reading of Camus,” diss., U of California, Davis, 1999, 5.

¹⁶ David Carroll, “Camus’s Algeria: Birthrights, Colonial Injustice, and the Fiction of a French-Algerian People,” MLN 112 (1997): 529.

¹⁷ Carroll 531.

¹⁸ Carroll 517.

which Camus was born and always attached by ties of family and concern throughout his career. Because the Algeria in question has an imagined side, Carroll argues, and we wholeheartedly concur, that “It is in his literary texts that Camus presents [...] the problems associated with the multiple and most often contradictory, confused “identities” of French Algerians.”¹⁹ The suggestion that it is in Camus’s fiction that his descriptions of political realities are the most clearly expressed is echoed by Wayne Hayes when he states that “In prose [...] form, Camus mapped the frontier between individuals and the state, or, more specifically, between the individual and power.”²⁰ Indeed, we will find in examinations of Camus’s fictional works that the soil of Algeria, as well as its beaches, rocks, sunshine, and even architecture, all have a great impact on the manner in which Camus’s French Algerian characters will interact with the space they inhabit and those with whom they share that space.

While we agree with Carroll’s reasoning behind the link between textual descriptions of the Algerian space and its effect on various “French Algerian” characters, we find that his conclusion that, for Camus, Algeria was “an Algeria of infinite horizons and possibilities and intense sensations which is the site of a freedom more basic than any political or social principle or right,”²¹ misses the mark in a fundamental manner. Carroll supports this idea with a citation from “La femme adultère” in the scene in which Janine is confronted by the desert landscape which seduces her. However, this very citation can be easily read against Carroll’s understanding of a limitless Algerian space, for in fact Janine is shown to be isolated in the

¹⁹ Carroll 531.

²⁰ Wayne Raymond Hayes, “After Albert Camus’s Fall: Reframing Post-colonial Criticism,” diss., U of Wisconsin-Madison, 1999, 4.

²¹ Carroll 533.

middle of a featureless plain, and the “infinite possibilities” to which Carroll refers are actually situated, by Camus, “at the place where the sky and land meet in a pure line,” that is, on the horizon which delineates the end of the supposedly limitless, but in fact clearly circumscribed, Algerian space. It seems that Janine’s hopes reside in a starkly limited area consisting of an Algerian desert space whose boundaries she can see with the naked eye from the lofty perch of the ruined fort in which she is standing. In short, Janine finds herself in a deserted, isolated space of quite limited expanse, and as in many other descriptions of Algeria that we find in the fiction of Camus, it seems clear that she actually inhabits a sort of desert island space, and is therefore subject to an enormous weight of earlier island narratives which will inevitably color the interpretation of her experience. The isolation recurrently experienced by the French Algerians in the fiction of Camus is parallel to that felt by various Robinsons on hundreds of 19th century islands.

Carroll helpfully cites Daru, from “Le hôte,” as his next example of French Algerian isolation, and in the very lines he cites we find reference to a space in which “Bare rock covered three quarters of the region,” far more evocative of a desert space than of one with infinite richness of possibility. Carroll’s conclusion regarding Daru, that his “solitude [...] is presented as both a punishment and a reward”²² once again seems to throw this tale into the context of a literature of desert spaces used as prisons but which frequently prove to be the savior of their unwilling inhabitants. (Lest it be argued that we are engaging in false analogies, let it be noted that Camus referred to Algeria as an island specifically upon multiple occasions in his fiction, usually justifying this metaphor by evocation of the sea to the north and the sea of sand to the south. We will cite many examples of this in the following study.) Therefore, when Carroll

²² Carroll 533.

states that “[t]he most extreme hostility and the most open, total hospitality thus coexist and constitute the contradictory dominant traits of the Algeria of first men,”²³ we can only concur and then point to the fact that this statement is equally true of the island space defined through over a century of robinsonnade texts.

Raymond Gay-Crosier, in an insightful study of Albert Camus’s marginality in light of his Algerian birth and upbringing, shows that Camus lived and worked in the margins, leading to what he calls the author’s “optique de séparé.”²⁴ We argue that Camus’s work is particularly fascinating and useful for examining the worldview of the *pied-noir* because the main characters of Camus’s novels, apparently in parallel to the author himself, are neither wholly French nor wholly Algerian, but seemingly caught somewhere in the middle. Camus’s detachment from absolute identification with any of the traditional identities associated with France and its overseas possessions, what Gay-Crosier here dubs his “optique de séparé,” lends Camus’s prose its apparently flat affect, leading to characters accepting calmly, in a detached manner, fates and outcomes that the reader might expect them to vociferously protest. This unusual point of view, exhibited by Camus in his novels and here remarked by Gay-Crosier in letters from Camus’s correspondence with Jean Grenier, will be important for our study of Camus’s relationship with Algeria as it sets up the idea that Algeria was central to the development of Camus’s fixation on boundaries and separation. Gay-Crosier posits that Camus’s physical and emotional marginalization, both in childhood and in adulthood, the results of political realities such as colonialism and physical factors such as tuberculosis, led to the major themes of Camus’s works,

²³ Carroll 543.

²⁴ Raymond Gay-Crosier, “Albert Camus: algérienité et marginalité,” Australian Journal of French Studies 27.3 (1990): 283.

namely the absurd, indifference, revolt, “étrangeté,”²⁵ and exile. While we prefer not to draw one-to-one correlations between biographical details and literary output, it seems quite defensible here to accept that growing up in Algiers in the particular socio-economic situation that we know was the case for Camus seems to have impacted at least what he would later choose as subject matter for his novels, all but one of which will be set in Algeria, frequently featuring prominently the less affluent of the *pieds-noirs*. Gay-Crosier points out that Camus must have realized, through reflection on his situation as a perpetual outsider, that “une fois placé en marge, on n’y échappe plus.”²⁶ Our later examination will show that this idea is applicable not only to Albert Camus, but perhaps to French-Algerians in general. Importantly for our understanding of Camus and the cultures he describes in his novels, Gay-Crosier reminds us that one aspect of the marginality he is studying in Camus is that of the “Français d’Algérie cantonnés dans leur monde de colons,”²⁷ which in addition to its clear reference to the pseudo-military nature of the colonial presence also reminds us how insulated the French Algerians were from the majority they dominated in Algeria, and how limited was any communication between the (at least) two groups of “Algerians.” Indeed, Gay-Crosier notes the ignorance of the language and culture of the colonized on the part of the colonials, calling ironically into question the effectiveness of the so-called “mission civilisatrice.”

Delving more specifically into Camus’s use of the Algerian landscape in his works, Gay-Crosier points out that Camus projected a spiritual and sentimental geography onto Algeria’s physical features. He quotes Camus as finding a lesson on “dénouement” and “amertume” in “ces

²⁵ Gay-Crosier 283.

²⁶ Gay-Crosier 283.

²⁷ Gay-Crosier 283.

paysages désolés et desséchés.”²⁸ It is interesting to note that the landscapes here serving as the basis for Camus’s lyrical lesson are shown to be blasted and empty wastelands, which nonetheless are a rich source of poetic inspiration. Gay-Crosier ties this reverence for the outlands to Camus’s own marginality, concluding that “si la vie en marge et à l’écart devient [...] une nécessité créatrice chez Camus, ce besoin de solitude conduit [...] à une solitude participatrice.”²⁹ (285) The oxymoronic participatory solitude here evoked will be shown to be central to Camus’s descriptions of Algeria and the various communities calling it home in his novels, as the actions of members of these communities, and even the very landscapes themselves will actively push the characters into isolation. The isolation, or solitude, actively sought out by Camus’s characters and landscapes, will drive some of the most disturbing scenes in Camusian fiction, perhaps most notably with the shooting of an Arab on the beach.

Gay-Crosier examines the various places making up the Algeria of Camus’s experience, and he notes that Camus was, above all else, an Algérois, whose principal Algerian space was that largest of cities. Nevertheless, he reminds us that Camus had strong impressions of Oran, namely that he felt it was a desert without an oasis, and finally he points out that Tipasa, with its ruins and its proximity to the ocean, seems to have been a privileged space for Camus. Camus brags about being born “sur les collines de Tipasa,”³⁰ and seems to have chosen this place as the central, emblematic marginal space in Algeria. Gay-Crosier concludes that there is no separating the centrality of marginalization in Camus’s work from the author’s experiences in Algiers and

²⁸ Gay-Crosier 285.

²⁹ Gay-Crosier 285.

³⁰ Gay-Crosier 288.

Algeria.³¹ He also points out that Camus's style reflects the marginalization of Camus's background and geographical underpinnings, citing the "éloignement" from stylistic affectations in Camus's prose. Finally, Gay-Crosier sums up his argument in the following manner: "Albert Camus, Français d'Algérie, a dû et a su trouver dans la tension entre l'exil de la culture et le royaume de la nature une marge personnelle et publique difficile qui fut aussi sa source créatrice principale."³² We will further examine the evocative power of marginality and separation throughout this study, and continue to flesh out the relationship between the various boundaries, and the internal spaces they delimit, in the Algerian landscapes of Albert Camus.

Mona Fayad, in a study of Camus's "The Renegade" and Conrad's "Heart of Darkness," situates Camus's short story, and by extension his prose in general, in what Christopher Miller has dubbed "Africanist discourse," that is to say as representing Africa as Europe's repressed or dark side.³³ Fayad points out that, like Conrad's to England, Camus's relationship to France was quite marginal, resulting in his work being received as everything from colonial dogma to championing Algerian rights. Examining the specifics of the landscapes in these short stories, Fayad states that Taghasa, the village of salt in Camus's story, is "removed from external referents in time and space"³⁴ and that it represents for Camus a "sterile wasteland" characterized by blowing sand, a sea-like expanse of sharp rocks, and knife-like mountains.³⁵ Thus

³¹ Gay-Crosier 288.

³² Gay-Crosier 289.

³³ Mona Fayad, "The Problem of the Subject in Africanist Discourse: Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" and Camus' "The Renegade," Comparative Literature Studies 27.4 (1990): 300.

³⁴ Fayad 302.

³⁵ Fayad 304.

marginalized from the larger context, which is presumably still Algeria, the strange events of this tale can unwind without hindrance from the greater political realities of the real world. Nevertheless, Fayad states that Camus's text provides us with more rigid barriers between the Africanist "other" and the self-identity of the protagonist, developing in what Fayad sees as a Freudian universe of a particularly cruel father figure who would literally remove the voice (in the story, the tongue) of the bad boy whose desires were focused in a forbidden direction.³⁶ Fayad concludes that Camus, with the benefit of fifty years of historical developments separating him from Conrad, "succeeds further in erasing the boundaries" of the established binary oppositions typical of Africanist discourse, such as civilized/savage and master/slave, but ultimately proves unable to "escape the discourse [he] seeks to satirize."³⁷ Fayad's approach to Camus's marginality as a factor enabling him to begin to erode the Africanist conceit provides support for our position that the "optique de séparé" which operates throughout camusian fiction is a window into an aspect of this fiction that has been until now overlooked, particularly inasmuch as it shows a greater degree of ambiguity regarding the inviolability of the various dialectics inherent in Africanist discourse. Fayad hints at some cracks in Camus's solid appurtenance to the Africanist club, while concluding that his attempts at escape were ultimately unsuccessful; we will further examine the maneuvering around the many boundaries that we find throughout the fiction of Camus and attempt to show a pattern of marginality leading to ambiguity, hopefully resulting in a better understanding of how this writer, physically, socially, politically, and philosophically marginalized, turned the many frontiers he faced into a comprehensive worldview in his fiction.

³⁶ Fayad 307.

³⁷ Fayad 311.

Marc Blanchard, noting that Camus's work has not received the sort of sustained critical interest he feels it merits, has turned to an examination of the Carnets to better suss out who exactly this author was and what he may have been trying to do throughout his literary career. Pointing out that as a "dead senior white male" Camus's Algerian birth has left him with weaker post-colonial status than Fanon, Genet, or any number of Maghrébin authors who have entered the scene, Blanchard feels that it is necessary to turn to Camus's non-canonical writings in order to have a chance to approach the author with a less jaded eye.³⁸ In fact, Blanchard finds that the Carnets are where Camus is able to most clearly speak out about the shortcomings of the intellectual community of which he was always a fringe member, for in a forum designed for Camus to dialogue with himself he can be brutally honest about experiences, both physical and intellectual, that in a more polished form he might feel a need to decorate or elaborate more thoroughly.

In contrast to the heroes of his or some of his contemporaries' novels, in the Carnets Blanchard finds a side of Camus that "is attractive to us precisely because he suffers from not wanting to be only an intellectual hero."³⁹ In an analysis that will prove quite useful for our argument, Blanchard points out that in Camus's Carnets he finds that physicality is every bit as important as intellectuality for Camus, and that man's intersection with the physical world is a key concept with which Camus is grappling in his writings. Far from being mental masturbation, Blanchard finds the carnets are more "*annotations to a life being lived.*"⁴⁰ This emphasis on the brute state of life, the natural aspect of humanity, is further refined by the careful juxtaposition of

³⁸ Marc Blanchard, "Before Ethics: Camus's *Pudeur*," MLN 112 (1997): 666.

³⁹ Blanchard 674.

⁴⁰ Blanchard 674.

writer and the natural world: “Nature [...] stands in the way of daily subsistence and can cause pain and suffering: not only labor but the time and hardship of doing labor in tasks that are too close to nature: mining, working the soil, transporting. The subject has to deal with the earth before he can deal with men.”⁴¹ Blanchard, by juxtaposing Camus’s writing and his physical existence, specifically an existence rooted in the working poor, whose understanding of nature is necessarily different from that of an aristocratic aesthete like so many of Camus’s literary contemporaries, here underscores how one aspect of Camus’s Algerian birthright, his poverty, continues to affect his writing throughout his career by shaping the way in which he frames the human/earth interface. He cites the Carnets themselves: “Si je veux écrire sur les hommes, comment m’écarter du paysage?”⁴² We will see that in Camus’s fiction, landscape features seem often to dictate the ways in which human interactions are able to proceed, and that Camus’s characters, particularly his protagonists, are frequently anchored very firmly in the earth from which they spring. Camus, according to Blanchard, exploits a visceral connection with the physical world (forged, presumably, from an impoverished childhood playing in the dust of Algiers and then the brutal realization that tuberculosis can lay low the best footballer in the world) to better address the most difficult of themes, such as death, murder, and suicide, because these will best enable him to disprove the notion that the world can be made to make sense to readers of a description of it in a text.⁴³ Engaging the physicality of nature in a non-romantic fashion and coupling this with human actions of the sort listed above result in some of the most poignant passages in camusian prose. Blanchard posits that the Carnets allow Camus to clearly

⁴¹ Blanchard 681.

⁴² Blanchard 681.

⁴³ Blanchard 679.

express how he can simultaneously immerse himself in the world and yet remain apart from it, engaging with nature in “an intermediate stage between love and fear.”⁴⁴

Confronting the decades of critical silence on Camus broken only by O’Brien and Said, Blanchard finds in the Carnets what we will study in the novels, namely “the unsuspected sweep, the unreflected brilliance and the delicate nuances of a thought unjustly neglected and canonized.”⁴⁵ Instead of just another dead white senior male with nothing new to add to this post-everything environment, the Camus revealed in the fragmented, private, and intimate passages of the Carnets is a “man on the brink.”⁴⁶ Camus’s marginality, here given a different flavor, continues to be an important factor in the way his work will be reopened to interpretation by this study, as the insights Blanchard has had concerning Camus’s notebooks will prove very relevant to further examination of the novels whose earliest drafts were often crafted in that very forum.

Emily Apter condenses O’Brien’s reading of Camus in regards to the political situation in Algeria near the end of the colonial era in a study of the author’s Mediterranean utopian ideals and their confrontation with emerging Algerian nationalism. She argues that the hybridity evoked by Camus was, as O’Brien put it, a “hallucination,” and goes on to argue for a binational model for Algeria near the end of the French colonial presence there. Opening her argument with the statement that “Albert Camus’s vexed relation to his Algerian *terre natale*, remains

⁴⁴ Blanchard 681.

⁴⁵ Blanchard 667.

⁴⁶ Blanchard 682.

unfinished business,”⁴⁷ Apter invites her reader to acknowledge that “it has now become impossible to abstract Camus’s writings from their Algerian backdrop.”⁴⁸ While we could not agree more with her starting point, we will part ways with Apter before she arrives at the conclusion that the binational experience of the *pieds-noirs* “carries over as a kind of multiple fracturing into the ongoing civil war within Algeria.”⁴⁹

Apter sums up what she finds disturbing in Camus’s fiction as the “systematic nullification of Arab characters, particularly evident in L’*étranger*, La peste, and the short stories included in L’exil et le royaume.”⁵⁰ Strangely, it is in these very works that we will find that Algeria and its non-European inhabitants were the driving force in much of the intrigue crafted by Camus, and furthermore that certain “Arab” characters will be shown to occupy crucial positions in the narratives of Camus, particularly in regards to the space of Algeria and the relationship to this space of the *pied-noir* characters. While we acknowledge that the “Arab” characters are nameless, their actions will be shown to have enormous impacts on the outcomes of the various narratives, and they will even be shown to possess singular descriptions, so we cannot accept the notion that they are systematically nullified. Similarly to her claims regarding the nullification of the “Arab” characters in Camus’s fiction, Apter states that “Camus presents colonial unease in a metaphysically abstract worldscape.”⁵¹ We will show, to the contrary, that

⁴⁷ Emily Apter, “Out of Character: Camus’s French Algerian Subjects,” MLN 112 (1997): 500.

⁴⁸ Apter 501.

⁴⁹ Apter 508.

⁵⁰ Apter 502.

⁵¹ Apter 503.

the landscapes in which the attentive reader can indeed discern colonial unease (from the perspectives of the colonized *and* the colonizer) are hardly metaphysically abstract, but that they are concrete, in the sense that concrete's composite materials of rock, sand, and water have all been carefully set into the texts by Camus in such a way that their specificities will lead us to precise conclusions.

Apter then goes on to dissect what she calls "Camus's notion of French Algeria as a consummate oxymoron."⁵² While we might be tempted to quibble with her attribution of this concept to Camus, nevertheless we are largely in agreement with her that the Algeria under French domination that was Camus's "terre natale," as she put it, was in fact more accurately described in post-modern terms as binational rather than hybrid, in the sense that there were several communities existing side by side rather than one overarching, multiethnic community of shared culture. (Tri- or even multinational might be more accurate, as a dozen European cultures and at least that many different Maghrebian cultures were actually sharing the North African littoral during the 130 years of French domination.) Citing several non-literary statements made by Camus, Apter is able to state that Camus was "implicitly crediting a utopian premise that political cohabitation among French settlers and Algerian natives is an eventual outcome of mutual sacrifice."⁵³ We will find, however, through extensive examination of Camus's fiction, that in fact the author was able to acknowledge through that medium, if not in his journalism and interviews, that this premise was, as Apter has stated, "utopian," in the sense that it was not to be. We will see that Camus manipulates the concrete manifestation of Algeria's landscape in such a way as to show the extreme unlikelihood of such a pluralistic society continuing much

⁵² Apter 506.

⁵³ Apter 509.

farther into the future. We will also see that Camus directly confronts, as Apter here does not, the ramifications of the term “Algerian natives,” which in its most straight-forward interpretation would have to include, not specifically reject, the majority of the *pieds-noirs* in the last decades of the French domination of Algeria.

Apter also looks into the ““first” First Man”⁵⁴ referenced in Camus’s seemingly autobiographical novel that was published two generations after his death. She argues that this even more first man, that she understands as someone who predates the European settler in Algeria, is a fundamental actor throughout this novel. Toying with several possibilities for the identity of this precursor to the so-called first man, she ultimately concludes that “he is an Algerian native, the novel’s aborted character *par excellence*.”⁵⁵ What we find astonishing in this analysis is that Apter is able to comment upon “the mood of colonial panic”⁵⁶ apparent in the novel’s treatment of latent and overt violence between the various “nations” of Algeria and to reference the “tangled roots” tying the *piéd-noir* to Algeria, while simultaneously able to toss out the expression “Algerian native” with absolutely no hint that this could be anything other than a non-European in the context of North Africa in the middle of the twentieth century. Camus, as Apter points out, is quite concerned with his roots in Algeria, specifically when compared to his seeming lack thereof in Europe, as a comparison of the burial scene of Maman in L’étranger and the graveside visit in Le premier homme should make rather clear. We will show that the binational model of pre-independence Algeria is quite applicable to the complex portrait of this land and its inhabitants painted by Camus through his fiction, while arguing that what Apter calls

⁵⁴ Apter 513.

⁵⁵ Apter 514.

⁵⁶ Apter 513.

“Camus’s never-never land of French Algeria”⁵⁷ was neither wholly the invention of Camus nor the oxymoronic hallucination she purports it to be.

Early in his career, Alec Hargreaves tried to come to grips with the different ways “liberal-minded observers”⁵⁸ of the Algerian War dealt with this particularly nasty, brutal conflict. To this end, he chose a representative of the three main communities involved in the war and compared their intellectual interventions, or lack thereof, in the era of the Algerian War. To represent the Metropolitan French he chose Pierre-Henri Simon; for the Algerian Muslims, Mouloud Feraoun; and, of course, the representative of the “liberal-minded” *pieds-noirs* could only be Albert Camus. Hargreaves contends that these three intellectuals were predisposed towards finding a peaceful solution to the conflict, but that they ultimately found themselves “squeezed into silence”⁵⁹ in the uncomfortable middle ground.

Simon, arguably the most comfortably-placed of the three, was able to address the Algerian War as a Frenchman’s Frenchman, and he did so through a novel based on the life and career of a French general who asked to be excused from his command in Algeria due to his discomfort with the brutal manner in which the war was being conducted. This officer, increasingly disillusioned by succeeding French wars in which the goals and the methods become less and less Christian, ultimately retires from active duty and returns to his home in France to “cultivate his garden.”⁶⁰ Hargreaves sees in the political underpinnings of this novel

⁵⁷ Apter 516.

⁵⁸ Alec Hargreaves, “Caught in the Middle: The Liberal Dilemma in the Algerian War,” Nottingham French Studies 25.2 (1986): 73.

⁵⁹ Hargreaves 73.

⁶⁰ Hargreaves 76.

by Simon a reflection of the mainstream French position on the Algerian War, namely a desire to wash their hands of the whole business and shift their worries to land they truly feel a deep kinship with. Of course, Feraoun and Camus, both born in Algeria, will not have the luxury of such a position.

Studying Feraoun's Journal, which was apparently intended for publication in France after the war, Hargreaves traces the evolution of the thought of this Algerian Muslim intellectual who had received the most thorough cultural integration available to the French way of thinking, having studied in and then taught in French schools in Algeria. Hargreaves shows that while Feraoun became increasingly convinced of the justification and need for Algerian independence from France as the wartime atrocities revealed the oppressive nature of the colonial system, he refused to join actively in the struggle for independence due to a "deep personal revulsion at the use of violence and fears about the habits of mind that a violent transition to independence might instil in Algeria's future rulers."⁶¹ Here we can see the crux of Feraoun's intellectual plight, for his ideals seem to be in conflict, driving him to remain silent on the war, which inevitably led the Muslim freedom-fighters to view him as toadying to the French while the French simultaneously assumed that his silence hid criticism of what they were doing in Algeria; as Hargreaves puts it, "In this eerie world of suspicion, treachery and sudden death, even silence could be dangerous."⁶² Feraoun's tragic murder by the O.A.S. mere days before the Evian cease-fire shows all too clearly the reality of the plight of the "liberal-minded observer" of the Algerian War.

⁶¹ Hargreaves 77.

⁶² Hargreaves 78.

Finally, Hargreaves addresses that most (in)famous of Algerian/French intellectuals silent on the Algerian War. Studying the Essais, Hargreaves details Camus's few overt statements regarding the war, and explains that Camus justified the paucity of these comments by the fact that French intellectuals were "constantly reinforcing the extremes at the expense of the middle ground with which Camus wished to be associated."⁶³ Pointing out the much-observed idea that Camus's silence was probably also due to a desire to avoid calling down reprisals on his mother, who, unlike Camus, still lived in Algiers, Hargreaves nevertheless muses that Camus's silence may have been that "of a man unwilling to contemplate fundamental political change in Algeria."⁶⁴ Hargreaves ultimately tempers his stance on Camus, arguing that Camus was making his few public statements on the matter from a position characterized by a continuing belief in reconciliation in Algeria through assimilation of the Muslims into mainstream French secular culture.

Ultimately, Hargreaves argues that Simon's fictional soldier, Feraoun's journal entries, and Camus's "evasive dealings with the French and international press"⁶⁵ were incapable of putting into words a liberal solution to the 130 years of oppressive, divisive French rule in Algeria. The title of his article, "Caught in the Middle: The Liberal Dilemma in the Algerian War" points to a feature that we will carefully analyze, not in Camus's speeches and journalism, but in his fiction, wherein we find that his characters are precisely "caught in the middle" of various situations seemingly beyond their control and power to solve. We will see that Camus's (in)famous silence on the situation in his native land is much less complete when he is writing

⁶³ Hargreaves 79.

⁶⁴ Hargreaves 80.

⁶⁵ Hargreaves 82.

fiction than when he is obliged to speak openly on political matters. His characters, *pieds-noirs* for the most part, and the situations in which he places them, in fact point to a far more complex understanding of the political realities of Algeria at the end of the French domination than he was ever willing, or perhaps able, to express without the intellectual freedom inherent in the crafting of fiction.

Also grappling with Camus's silence on the Algerian War, Lawrence Kritzman examines Camus's non-fiction for clues into this problematic political stance. Based on readings of the Essais and L'homme révolté, Kritzman concludes that Camus's lack of engagement in the Algerian War was due to his humanistic ethics of measure and what Kritzman calls Camus's "politics of love."⁶⁶ Pointing out that Camus based his ethics on the primacy of the value of human life, Kritzman argues that while Camus was uncomfortable with the injustice of colonial rule, he was equally unwilling to condone the violence, and thus the refusal to protect the value of human life, that he felt was inherent to revolution. Kritzman, using to an extent some concepts from Benedict Anderson, suggests that Camus's idea for resolving the problem of Algeria "was situated in the exercise of human judgment culminating in the formation of an "imagined community" whose sense of togetherness was based on a belief in harmony and justice."⁶⁷ Instead of denying the evils of the past, the self-selecting members of this "imagined community" would enter an "ethical imaginary" which would enable them to depoliticize and dehistoricize the situation, allowing progress to be made through the common desire for a just

⁶⁶ Lawrence D. Kritzman, "Camus's Curious Humanism or the Intellectual in Exile," MLN 112 (1997) 550.

⁶⁷ Kritzman 550.

world.⁶⁸ Kritzman shows that Camus wants, not the past, but violence, to be forgotten, leading to a “future upon which a solidarity emanates from the implementation of a homogenized ethic.”⁶⁹ While this may seem utopian, it is important to remember that Camus’s discourse was primarily in competition with Marxist rhetoric which Camus was beginning to reject for its own quasi-utopian nature and, especially, for its deep ties to violence as the only means of moving forward. Kritzman concludes that “Camus’s sense of justice [...] exists by maintaining a balance between the excesses of extremism and [...] the belief that intellectual discourse which lays claim to a transformative or ethico-political force can only produce nefarious results.”⁷⁰ We notice that Kritzman, in trying to sum up Camus’s idea of justice, falls into the pattern we will find so often in Camus’s fiction, “entre *x* et *y*,” once again pointing to how prevalent is the concept in Camusian thought of this constant balancing act, of constantly being somewhere between the more frequently expected, and more easily defined, positions. With Camus decided to avoid the Sartrean role of intellectual whose statements impact history, we begin to understand Kritzman’s explanation for Camus’s silence on the Algerian War.

To respond to Edward Said’s “rather negative attitude toward Camus”⁷¹ Kritzman proposes, as we will in this study, to examine Camus’s works of fiction for a better understanding of the author’s point of view as regards Algeria and the troubled relationship with that land of the *pieds-noirs*, and presumably Camus himself. Said’s belief that Camus was merely reifying the colonial presence of the French in Algeria notwithstanding, in order to show

⁶⁸ Kritzman 552.

⁶⁹ Kritzman 560.

⁷⁰ Kritzman 554.

⁷¹ Kritzman 567.

that “Camus struggles with and sincerely opts for an idealized version of reform that would include all those committed to non-violence and divorced from the totalizing impulses of nefarious ideological imperatives,”⁷² Kritzman turns to two short stories from L’exil et le royaume, “La femme adultère” and “L’hôte.” Arguing with Said’s statement in Culture and Imperialism that Camus’s fictions “narrate the result of a victory won over a pacified, decimated Muslim population whose rights to land have been severely curtailed,”⁷³ Kritzman first analyzes the relationship between Janine, the eponymous adulterous woman, and the Algerian landscape. In a quick examination of the short story, Kritzman rightly points out that Janine seems to find her environment hostile and claustrophobic, and her (mostly imaginary) interactions with the Muslim inhabitants of the space seem to show Janine as being less empowered than Said’s “pacified, decimated” Muslim population. Janine is shown to be less at home in the desert environment she transits, and Janine’s life seems to lack a certain familial warmth that is evident in the Muslims she sees. Kritzman shows, furthermore, that Janine’s attempt to commune with the Algerian night is ultimately sterile, leading to what he calls Janine’s “‘still-born’ spiritual rebirth.”⁷⁴

In a short analysis of Daru, the main character of “L’hôte,” Kritzman shows that Daru, like Camus, refuses to take a specific stand on one side or the other of the contentious split in Algeria. The school teacher, whom we first see as a sort of humanitarian aid worker, and who is clearly defined as a *pied-noir* since he is of European stock and yet was born in Algeria, is recruited by a Corsican policeman to guard an arab prisoner. Kritzman focuses on the fact that

⁷² Kritzman 564.

⁷³ Said 181.

⁷⁴ Kritzman 571.

Daru is reluctant to take on the role of prison guard, and that Daru ultimately refuses to force the man to go to prison. Daru returns to his isolated school, having in a sense betrayed the police by not personally delivering his prisoner, and finds that he is now under threat from the Muslim inhabitants of his region because he is assumed to have given up the prisoner to the forces of power. Daru, then, chooses not to choose, which “isolates him even further and makes him a total stranger in a country he considers his own.”⁷⁵

In a great deal more analysis of the situations of various *pied-noir* characters throughout the fiction of Camus, we will discover that the troubled, doomed relationships with Algeria of Janine and Daru are repeated in many of Camus’s fictions. Isolation, a key concept which Kritzman here brings to the fore, will be shown to be an integral part of the *pied-noir* identity as it is portrayed by Camus in his novels and short stories. Kritzman’s efforts to show the shortcomings of Said’s very widely-read opinions about Camus will also be strengthened by our continuing the sort of analyses that he initiates in this article, as Camus’s position will be shown to be far more complex than the summation of Said would indicate.

Raquel Scherr Salgado, approaching Camus’s posthumous, autobiographical novel Le premier homme from a feminist, post-modern perspective, indicates that she was originally put off by “the word “man” in the title.”⁷⁶ When she eventually discards this first reaction as *ad hominem* (her pun) she discovers that this “European white man”⁷⁷ author has produced a hybrid work, somewhere between fiction and memoir, that she enjoys sinking her teeth into. She remarks that “Camus’s Le premier homme anticipates the condition of crisis our generation feels

⁷⁵ Kritzman 574.

⁷⁶ Raquel Scherr Salgado, “Memoir at Saint-Brieuc,” MLN 112 (1997): 576.

⁷⁷ Scherr Salgado 576.

and provides, better than any works [she has] read, a model narrative for our *critical* moment.”⁷⁸ She arrives at this conclusion by remarking how the subject of Le premier homme is effectively the account of an author’s search for a form for memory and for a center from which to write; the fragmentary nature of Camus’s final text, and especially the editorial remarks we still find in this larval text, inform Scherr Salgado’s investigation of the memory of the poor in this work.

Scherr Salgado will compare some of the key moments of Le premier homme with Camus’s best-known novel, L’étranger, to better come to grips with the authorial struggle she finds in the former. Taking the scene in which Jacques Cormery visits the grave of his father, dead in France when Jacques was still an infant, Scherr Salgado recounts Cormery’s reaction when he suddenly realizes that as he gazes at his father’s tombstone he is older than his father was when he was placed below it. She finds in this scene Camus’s most powerful moment, stating that it shows “that life is contained in the moment of its recognition and not, as Camus’s earlier novels suggested, in its fullness, its youth, its presence—at the moment of its being plucked.”⁷⁹ Scherr Salgado will link this realization to her ideas on the narrative of memory, arguing that Camus here has produced the real beginning of his narrative, and that the epic, novelistic tone of the first beginning of the story is shown to ring false, while this moment of revelation, summoned by the ringing of a bucket against a tombstone, marks the moment in the narrative where the narrator will begin seriously interrogating his past.

Comparing this scene to the central scene of L’étranger, Scherr Salgado remarks that the effect of the landscape is quite different. Recalling how the personification of the landscape in

⁷⁸ Scherr Salgado 577.

⁷⁹ Scherr Salgado 587.

L'Étranger “pushes Meursault inch by inch towards murder,”⁸⁰ Scherr Salgado remarks that the function of the landscape “becomes, on the one hand, a reminder of the narrator’s own feelings of alienation and chaos and, on the other hand, the “remainder” of these feelings, an explosion outward of what he tries but, ultimately, can’t control.”⁸¹ What he is trying to control is the very flow of narrative/memory, which has begun to follow its own volition, forcing the narrator (who is here conflated with his character, Cormery) to continue staring at himself in the new light of the realization of this shocking discordance of relative ages. Scherr Salgado sees in this moment a function of landscape remarkably different from that of L'Étranger or even of the earlier, epic sections of Le premier homme. Having suggested that “Camus’s narrator is *le premier homme* because he has no past,”⁸² Scherr Salgado asserts that the graveyard scene defines the undertaking in Camus’s last novel, or, for Scherr Salgado, his memoir. “Unlike L'Étranger where Meursault redeems himself in the end by hoping that a large crowd will be there to watch his execution, here the shift into memoir begins and remains unfinished. The narrator becomes “the other,” the Stranger, and his chance of redemption lies in this very personal act. In the retrieval of memory, he becomes Le premier homme.”⁸³ It is through this self-alienating quest that Scherr Salgado is able to find a fellow marginal in Camus, who will thus force himself to engage his marginality and alienation in order to come to grips with the fleeting memories called into focus by that very alienation. In studying Camus’s struggle with memory, Scherr Salgado

⁸⁰ Scherr Salgado 592.

⁸¹ Scherr Salgado 592.

⁸² Scherr Salgado 580.

⁸³ Scherr Salgado 590.

seems to feel a kinship to this fellow orphan of orphans, and is surprised by the clarity this “European white man” brings to the post-modern search for the center.

Simone Debout compares the reactions of Camus and Sartre to Hiroshima, noting that Camus reacted more swiftly, arguing that with this new technical ability mankind was going to have to choose, eventually, “entre le suicide collectif et l’utilisation intelligente des conquêtes scientifiques.”⁸⁴ Once again we underscore the recurrence of the rubric “entre *x* et *y*” in Camus’s expression, particularly when he is describing the plight of man. Camus’s take on the atomic bomb as Debout reads it in this commentary seems to avoid extremes, since it shows that he was open to positive as well as negative possible ramifications of this frightening upgrade to the human race’s destructive arsenal. Debout compares this to Sartre’s response, some two months later, saying that “[l]’événement pour Sartre, vaut apocalypse: catastrophe sans remède et révélation.”⁸⁵ Debout shows that by their differing reactions to the world-altering news of August, 1945, Camus and Sartre were no longer seeing the world in the same optic; Sartre continues to adhere to his ideas of the primacy of the “néant,” while Camus will strive to create a middle ground, perhaps less defensible philosophically, but, we would argue, more coherent when placed in the context of Camus’s frequent efforts to synthesize seemingly opposing viewpoints in his descriptions of the world and his characters in his fiction.

Debout will explain that Camus remains “isolé⁸⁶ parmi ceux qui disposent de l’arme pacifique des mots, et des moyens de se faire entendre,”⁸⁷ because of his sensitivity. Unable

⁸⁴ Simone Debout, “Sartre et Camus, témoins de la liberté,” *MLN* 112 (1997): 600.

⁸⁵ Debout 602.

⁸⁶ We note with pleasure this example of how critics constantly have recourse to the language of the robinsonnade when discussing Camus and his politics.

and/or unwilling to view the atomic destruction of Hiroshima as the end of the world, as Sartre would have it, Camus will continue to remain sensitive to the possibility of happiness, manifesting “un appétit qui se saisit du plaisir des jours, du soleil en éclats sur la mer, du vent ou de la pluie, de la ferveur des amours [...]”⁸⁸ Here Debout shows that Camus’s sensitivity to the physical pleasures of existence in the world did not allow him to sink into the sort of fugue that Sartre and his movement were favoring after the Second World War. She states that the very evident differences in the reactions of these two men to the Hiroshima explosion “dévoile[nt] entre Sartre et Camus une rupture dans les profondeurs, aux sources de l’être et de la pensée”⁸⁹ which would become much more public and bitter after the publication of L’homme révolté and the polemics which ensued. Where Camus seems to have viewed this moment as a watershed for humanity, offering the possibility to “choisir entre l’Enfer et la raison,”⁹⁰ Sartre viewed the choice as having been made when the bomb was dropped. Camus’s consistent practice of summing up the human condition as being between two states, which we will study in depth through analyses of his fiction, is shown here to be fundamental to his philosophical outlook, even to the point of contributing to his falling out with Sartre and the rest of the mainstream Existentialists at this midpoint in his literary career. As Debout explains, “Du sensible et de la pensée de la chair, il induit une morale, libre d’interdits, pluraliste et par là-même politique. Il tente de recréer, contre le monologue inflexible des idéologies totalitaires, le dialogue

⁸⁷ Debout 602.

⁸⁸ Debout 606.

⁸⁹ Debout 606.

⁹⁰ Debout 601.

indissociable de la vie et de la liberté.”⁹¹ We will show through study of Camus’s fiction that this drive for dialogue is not only central to the rupture between Sartre and himself, but indeed to his thought as it is represented in his fictional texts. Caught between opposing, menacing points of view, Camus’s fictional characters, like the author himself as described by Debout, will find themselves obliged to explore the middle ground, even though this may not be the most comfortable position. We will further argue that this middle ground, and the arguments that spring from it, may to an extent mirror the thought of the *pied-noir*, or at least of a certain subset thereof, as this group, to which Camus certainly belonged, was unquestionably in between most of the most readily recognized groups involved in Algeria at the very historical moment that inspired the split between Camus and Sartre, the end of the second world war and the beginning of decolonization.

Jack Abecassis approaches what he feels is unique to the writing of Camus from a conviction that the two halves of L’*étranger* simply do not work well together, an observation that he suggests has been made by undergraduate students and their professors alike for decades. Abecassis notes that the first half of the novel is characterized by “a minimalist description, dry and flat, of an existence devoid of sense, culture, history, and dominated by sun, heat, sweat.”⁹² From this promising foray into the physicality of L’*étranger*, Abecassis will attempt to prove that Camus’s most famous novel “is the Pulp Fiction of metaphysics, and, like Pulp Fiction it toys with language and convention as if they were placed outside the gravitational field of culture.”⁹³ Unfortunately, Abecassis ultimately fails to demonstrate the veracity of his compelling idea, as a

⁹¹ Debout 607.

⁹² Jack Abecassis, “Camus’s Pulp Fiction,” MLN 112 (1997): 625.

⁹³ Abecassis 640.

tendency to exaggerate the completeness of various modes of existence exhibited by Meursault saps the textual foundations of his argument.

Abecassis suggests that nominalism, defined as “a doctrine of language which affirms that common concepts and ideas are nothing but words to which correspond no other realities but those in the daily human world,”⁹⁴ is the best summation of Camusian language in the first half of L'étranger. However, in trying to prove that Meursault's lack of references to any culture outside his daily physical existence place him in the nominalist, and thus “stranger” category, Abecassis turns to the narrative episode of the funeral cortège of Meursault's mother. Examining this scene, he argues that because he was cut off from “narrative, rituals, religion, Meursault melts under the unmitigated radiation of non-sense.”⁹⁵ Of course, even a cursory examination of the passage in question shows that it is the road-surface, rather than Meursault, which can be shown to have melted, and that run-of-the-mill solar radiation, rather than the radiation of the absurd here referenced, seems to be the cause of this phenomenon. In fact, in ascribing the sun's radiation to “non-sense,” it seems that Abecassis is departing the nominalism which he defined and stated was the operating language in the passage concerned and moving into a more poetic reading than his own suggestions would encourage in this text.

To demonstrate the extent to which Meursault is cut off from interaction with the various characters who populate the narrative alongside him, which he will eventually argue goes farther towards denying links between men than even Sade had dared to go, Abecassis turns to the scene in L'étranger in which Meursault spends the day watching his *quartier* go by from the lofty

⁹⁴ Abecassis 629.

⁹⁵ Abecassis 631.

perch of his balcony. Abecassis rightly places this strategy of “spatial estrangement”⁹⁶ in the context of a French tradition going back to Descartes and Pascal, in which such scenes suggested a split between the observer and the observed, but in which the “fundamental solidarity between the I (eye) and others ultimately remains intact.”⁹⁷ However, he goes on to state that in Camus, “[t]he abyss separating the narrator from the people below is unbridgeable.”⁹⁸ While Abecassis bases this conclusion on the way the narrator talks to himself/his reader of what the people in the neighborhood say about a certain man who passes on the street, thereby demonstrating a certain distancing of the narrator from the actual communication in question, Abecassis’s unbridgeable abyss seems to be far less forbidding than he sees it, since in this very scene there is communication between Meursault and people on the street. Meursault occasionally waves to people he recognizes, and victorious soccer fans even bring Meursault into their celebrations by specifically telling him of their team’s success on the field. We will argue that the “cultural vacuum”⁹⁹ in which Abecassis seeks to situate Meursault, Jacques Cormery from Le premier homme, and, by extension, Albert Camus himself, is at most a culturally-impoverished space, but nevertheless a space with its own, very specific, culture. While the very possibility is dismissed by Abecassis as a “persisting myth” tied to “the physical sensuousness of the Mediterranean landscape and climate,”¹⁰⁰ Meursault, Jacques, and, indeed, Camus by extension do in fact inhabit a particular space, peopled by a particular group of men and women who, though of

⁹⁶ Abecassis 633.

⁹⁷ Abecassis 634.

⁹⁸ Abecassis 634.

⁹⁹ Abecassis 637.

¹⁰⁰ Abecassis 638.

course isolated from classical French culture by various factors including the lack of steeping therein mentioned by Abecassis, do have a culture of sorts of their own. What Abecassis terms “Meursault’s total indifference”¹⁰¹ is not total, but relative, especially when placed in comparison with a representative of more mainstream French culture, for example Meursault’s boss. We will show that what Abecassis interprets as a total disconnect from culture is, rather, crucial to the defining of a sub-culture whose blurry portrait Camus’s fiction paints for the observant reader. The scene of the funeral, cited by Abecassis to show how Meursault purportedly melts down from exposure to non-sense will be shown to contain the key to identifying the culture Meursault represents, as his specific *pied-noir* subgroup is denoted by the very moment of meltdown that caught Abecassis’s eye.

A more subtle, and successful, reinvestigation of Camus and specifically his relationship with Algeria is available in a study of Le premier homme, and to a lesser degree La chute, in light of shame, by E. L. Constable. Starting from the position that shame and its associated emotions and actions, such as self-loathing or ridiculing others, are predominant throughout Camus’s writings, Constable sets to analyzing the function of shame as it appears in Camus’s fiction and some non-fiction, particularly as this impacts upon the ways Camus discusses Algeria. Constable ties the prevalence of shame in Camus’s works directly to the Algerian question by noting that the highly venomous atmosphere in French intellectual circles surrounding the issue of Algeria led to the “mobilizing of contempt of the other” that was “tantamount to a denial of reciprocity, mutuality, and dialogue.”¹⁰² Constable argues that such silencing of dialog by shaming one side through effectively removing that side from an equation

¹⁰¹ Abecassis 638.

¹⁰² E. L. Constable, “Shame,” MLN 112 (1997): 642.

in which both sides have value, ultimately results, for Camus, in an inability to even discuss alternatives to the apparently looming, and bloody, Algerian independence from France. Constable notes, and we underscore, that Camus's discomfort with this strategy of shaming one side of an argument into silence stemmed, at least partially, from his insistence on the mutability of the needs of the other side, and a refusal to ignore the possibility, or probability, that these needs must change as time wears on. Constable will examine moments in Camus's writing where humility and humiliation, brought about by shame, are apparent in order to better understand the "mutability and change *in* and subsequently *between* both self and other."¹⁰³ Constable suggests that the moments to be studied will reveal in Camus's writings the author's strategy of "renegotiation and reconstruction of boundaries and barriers structuring relations between individuals and groups."¹⁰⁴ Thus, through Constable's optic of shame we will discover a more nuanced point of view on the troubled relationship between the various groups concerned by the Algerian question. This analysis will tie in nicely with the larger examination we will perform regarding the very boundaries and barriers Constable here references, with an even greater focus on the specific "individuals and groups" represented by Camus in his fiction as inhabiting Algeria.

Studying some key moments in Le premier homme, Constable shows that Jacques Cormery's principal inheritance from his father is a strongly developed sense of shame. This shame is figured in the scene which recounts Jacques's father's traumatic reaction to observing the public execution of a servant who had viciously murdered the *pied-noir* family he once worked for. It is tied at its very root to the contentious relations between groups in Algeria, and

¹⁰³ Constable 643.

¹⁰⁴ Constable 644.

hints at the possibility of a nuanced position on the part of the Cormery males; Constable suggests that the young Cormery was convinced that he was to be executed. Constable goes further in his development of shame as it is found in the fictional character of Jacques Cormery, suggesting that one's principles are shaped and changed by a "double shame: that of understanding the causes of the other's humiliation, and that of one's own indignity at allowing that humiliation to occur to the individuals, groups, or causes, one respects."¹⁰⁵ Here we see how shame is turned inwards and deepened through complicity, albeit passive, in the humiliation of others and even one's self. Constable argues that such an experience explains "the need to rethink and reconstruct the relationship between self and other(s), the interdependence of self and other."¹⁰⁶ Constable makes clear that shame is central to Camus's metaphoric discussion of Franco-Algerian relations, and that for Camus "both the Muslim and *pied-noir* populations" are "forgotten" by the French in France.¹⁰⁷ The fact that metropolitan France, for Camus, was forgetting the two main populations of Algeria, shows that the author viewed France and the intellectual discourse of that country as engaging in the kind of shaming that he already indicated was responsible for a breaking down of communication between groups and a dehumanizing function that renders a new start for communication nearly impossible. After rapidly surveying the critical accusations placed on a Camus who is deemed to have been silent, and therefore complicitous, on the injustices in Algeria, Constable is able to conclude that his examination of the function of shame invites a rethinking and nuancing of these positions, "through taking into account also the ways in which affective responses of shame mark the self-conscious sites of

¹⁰⁵ Constable 649.

¹⁰⁶ Constable 648.

¹⁰⁷ Constable 660.

ethical responsibilities in Camus's work."¹⁰⁸ Camus's seeming nostalgia does not, for Constable, equate to an "abdication of ethical responsibility"¹⁰⁹ in the shame-based worldview of Camus that he has articulated. To further refine Camus's positions regarding the need for communication and the difficulty for that to occur between the various groups invested in Algeria, we will continue to examine Camus's fiction for insights such as those afforded by Constable's study of the mechanics of shame in Camus.

Ever since Conor Cruise O'Brien awakened the critical community to the necessity of looking at Camus and his work in the context of the French presence in Algeria, that community has been struggling to come to terms with the problematic politics of a writer whose novels, particularly *L'étranger*, were part of their introduction to French literature. We have seen that there are multitudes of approaches to the quest of better understanding what exactly Camus was up to, why his rare public pronouncements on Algeria always seemed to get him into trouble and why it is so hard to extract a coherent and not simultaneously reprehensible political position from Camus's literary legacy. In the following study, we will argue that the clearest expressions of the *pied-noir* worldview that Camus shared with his less rigorously intellectual fellow French-Algerians are available in his fiction, where he seems to be less conscious of being on the public, political stage. Known for his beautifully-crafted prose, Camus's creative process was one of long struggle to find the expressions that best communicated whatever he was trying to say; any doubts on this should be silenced by even a cursory examination of *Le premier homme*, as its status as a working manuscript allows the reader to glimpse the effort Camus put into his prose. It is, as Annie Cohen-Solal has pointed out, nearly universally recognized that "Camus was

¹⁰⁸ Constable 665.

¹⁰⁹ Constable 665.

familiar with every aspect of the political, cultural and social environment upon which the tensions facing the Algerian people had built up.”¹¹⁰ It is discerning Camus’s positions regarding Algeria and France that is difficult due to “the effective withdrawal from the Algerian debate in 1958 of Albert Camus, hitherto the voice of the French liberal conscience, and, of course, himself a French Algerian”¹¹¹ as Philip Dine has succinctly summed up. We will argue that Camus was able to more clearly express himself when he was not on the spot, either reacting to a question from a reporter or to an attack from his erstwhile literary and political comrades. Therefore, it is through the major works of fiction, all of them apparently tied to some extent to autobiographical materials, that Camus produced that we will examine the relationship depicted between the *pied-noir* characters and the landscape they inhabit, and which seems to mirror in its physicality the social isolation of a people always between two cultures, two spaces, never quite fitting in with anyone or anywhere.

¹¹⁰ Annie Cohen-Solal, “Camus, Sartre and the Algerian War,” Journal of European Studies 28 (1998): 44.

¹¹¹ Philip Dine, “French Culture and the Algerian War,” Journal of European Studies 28 (1998): 55.

1.3. The Robinsonnade

The following study will analyze the novels of Albert Camus in light of their similarities to the island adventure tales, or robinsonnades, upon which the author was raised. Albert Camus will frequently describe Algeria as an island space, bordered by the Mediterranean Sea to the North and by the sea of Saharan sand to the south. The image of the Algerian space being insular does not originate with Camus; Benjamin Stora points out in the introduction to his history of colonial Algeria that as long ago as the fourteenth century the historian Ibn Khaldoun referred to the “île du Maghreb.”¹¹² Herbert Lottman, in his acclaimed biography of Albert Camus, tells his readers that the young Albert would skip school “to go down to the harbor to swim or to watch the large masted sailing ships, while dreaming of islands.”¹¹³ Merely one page after mentioning this youthful fixation on islands and the idea of exotic travel, Lottman specifically gives the name of a book the young Camus was reading at the period and an anecdote of the seriousness with which he took its lessons: “At about this time he read Jules Verne’s *L’Ile mystérieuse*, in which the theorem of congruent triangles is used by the engineer hero to measure the height of a cliff. Struck by the notion, Albert sat his friends on the ground in a neighborhood park to explain Verne’s application of geometry.”¹¹⁴ Here we see that not only was Camus steeped in the greatest French robinsonnade of all time during his youth, but that he took to this book with a missionary fervor, apparently wishing to share its genius with his childhood chums. We are convinced that throughout Camus’s novelistic output the influence the robinsonnade had on the author can be profitably observed, and will show many examples of this

¹¹² Benjamin Stora, *Histoire de l’Algérie coloniale : 1830-1954*, (Paris: La Découverte, 1991) 8.

¹¹³ Herbert R. Lottman, *Albert Camus: A Biography*, (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 1997) 31.

¹¹⁴ Lottman 32.

in this study. Our approach necessitates an introduction to the robinsonnade sub-genre, hugely popular in British literature of the nineteenth century and, through translations, also extensively marketed and read in the French-speaking world, not only in the nineteenth century, but indeed up until the present time.

During the nineteenth century, English literature witnessed the production of hundreds of novels and stories set wholly, or for a significant part, on islands. These islands have been variously considered by scholars as gardens of Eden, schoolhouses for Rousseauistic education, and conveniently exotic locales into which to transplant run-of-the-mill situations and characters in order to make them more palatable to the book-purchasing public. While the image of the island was certainly used in all those ways, the most compelling reading of these islands, and the one which will be carefully examined in this study, shows the islands to be microcosms of the imperial reality of the time period. The island nation of Great Britain extended its authority during the nineteenth century over a great proportion of the globe, and the attitudes of the British writers of the time towards this project may be seen in the stories they placed in the discursive space of the island. In Culture and Imperialism the late Edward Said states that throughout nineteenth century British literature, empire is always in the background.¹¹⁵ He also identifies the island narrative Robinson Crusoe as the "prototypical modern realistic novel."¹¹⁶ This book, he says, "is virtually unthinkable without the colonizing mission that permits [Crusoe] to create a new world of his own."¹¹⁷

Throughout the nineteenth century, the British reading public was barraged with tales set in and around islands. Generally, Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe is cited as the ancestor of these tales, although in fact William Shakespeare's The Tempest could be said to have initiated

¹¹⁵ Edward W. Said, Culture and Imperialism, (1993; New York: Vintage Books, 1994) 63.

¹¹⁶ Said vii.

¹¹⁷ Said 64.

Western literature's interest in these little worlds, far removed from familiar landscapes. Certainly Robinson Crusoe is more readily apparent as the progenitor of the type of tale which became formulaic in the nineteenth century, and which claims this heritage by its very name: the robinsonnade. Many writers of the nineteenth century took a few basic plot features of Robinson Crusoe, borrowed its perceived pedagogic purpose, and created tales which were snapped up, largely in serialized form, by adults, and, increasingly, by children. Kevin Carpenter has identified 372 island stories published in the century in Britain, and he states that the overwhelming majority follow a set pattern: "danger (shipwreck), confrontation (savages), discoveries (treasure), and finally rescue or escape."¹¹⁸ These four features of robinsonnades will be observed in various forms throughout Camus's novels, strongly supporting our contention that he made specific use of this sub-genre in his works. Many of the books were outright retellings of Robinson Crusoe or other of the more popular texts, while some were less obvious in their plagiarism. One of the most popular books in this category, and one which is still read and studied today, is The Coral Island by R. M. Ballantyne, published in 1858. This book will serve as a model of the robinsonnade tale, of which it is the first example in which boys are left to survive on an island entirely without help from grown-ups.

In The Coral Island, by far Ballantyne's most popular book, we have a typical beginning of the tale in the shipwreck which deposits Jack, Ralph, and Peterkin on the shore of an uninhabited Pacific island. Once the storm which caused their wreck has abated, the three boys begin to explore their new domain. They demonstrate ingenuity and resourcefulness by wisely using the few implements they managed to save from the wreck, for example fishing with a hook made from a ring one of them was wearing. Their island is shown to be fruitful beyond limits, and they rarely must do more than reach out their hand to be sated. After they have explored their island their peaceful, lazy days are interrupted by a battle between two groups of "savages,"

¹¹⁸ Kevin Carpenter, Desert Isles & Pirate Islands: The Island Theme in Nineteenth-Century English Juvenile Fiction: A Survey and Bibliography, Studien Zur Germanistik Und Anglistik 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Peter Lang, 1984) 57.

in which the boys intervene in favor of a group containing a light-skinned woman. After the boys have defeated the evil savages, they are left to enjoy their island for a while longer until one of them is shanghaied by pirates. Eventually, after the pirates destroy themselves in poorly-executed treachery, the three boys are left with a pirate ship and its valuable cargo, in which they return to England after having participated in the evangelization of an intractable native chief and his tribe.

This tale carefully fits into all of Carpenter's categories for the typical island tale of the Nineteenth Century. Diana Loxley suggests that in the discourse of the Nineteenth Century, desert islands represent the unused land which is waiting to be developed by British colonists.¹¹⁹ Elaine Showalter adds that islands were often depicted as spaces in which reigned an "experimental environment" and simultaneously a feeling of safety and stability.¹²⁰ Ballantyne's narrative seems to fit both of these understandings of the island theme: one can see in The Coral Island almost a pamphlet advertising the imperial project to "boys of all ages," as its foreword suggests. Ralph, Peterkin, and Jack are shown to mature, to become heroes, to eat extremely well, to enjoy themselves immensely, and finally to return home to England enriched both experientially and monetarily. Their domination of the island upon which they at first found themselves castaways is easily read as a domination of virgin territory by the intrepid British colonial explorers. They are shown to take all that they want of the island's bounty, and on their return to England they leave with their ship laden with the products of the island.

The four features of the typical island tale typified by The Coral Island (danger, confrontation, discovery, return) are also a skeleton of the imperial project: cross the dangerous

¹¹⁹ Diana Loxley, Problematic Shores: the Literature of Islands (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990) 3.

¹²⁰ Elaine Showalter, "The Apocalyptic Fables of H. G. Wells," Fin de Siècle/Fin du Globe: Fears and Fantasies of the Late Nineteenth Century, ed. John Stokes (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992) 79.

seas to land on hostile shores; confront whatever wild creatures (savages would appear to fall into this category) might happen to inhabit the (is)land discovered; search for and discover the riches of the territory, helping oneself to any desired resources; and, finally, the necessary return home to the mother country with the bounty, or booty, of the imperial enterprise. So we see that the image of the island works as a metaphor for the exotic land to be colonized by the ever-increasing British, and other European, empires. These characteristics are not entirely limited to works of British fiction, however.

In 1875, Jules Verne wrote The Mysterious Island, a tale which scrupulously follows the tradition of the typical island story in British literature. This book is interesting for our study because it is the best-known French Robinnsonnade and because we know that Albert Camus read and appreciated it. It would appear that Verne was interested in this novel being considered in the context of the British literature of islands, for his story contains every element of the island narrative. His protagonists arrive on their island after a harrowingly dangerous flight from Richmond in a balloon. Several times during their journey the balloon almost falls into the sea, but ultimately four of the five passengers arrive on land safely, and later they find the fifth member of their party who has also survived the dangerous portion of the narration. It is fascinating that Verne, always interested in depicting the scientific forefront of his day, has his castaways arrive on their island by air instead of by the more traditional shipwreck; by this device Verne manages to remain within the traditional frame of the island narrative while simultaneously updating the tale with cutting-edge technology, a theme which will continue throughout the book. Although there are no human natives for the castaways to confront on the island in this book, they do have several violent confrontations with native animals who seem to resist the occupation of the island by these five white men. There are several encounters with jaguars, and these beasts soon become the sworn enemies of certain members of the party. There is also a frightening moment when it appears to the characters that their supposedly inviolate house, carved by nature out of solid granite, has been occupied by hostile forces. As the heroes attempt to regain their rope-ladder, which has been pulled up into their eyrie, by shooting at it an

arrow tied to a rope, they see the following scene: "...at that moment when he gave it a pull to bring down the ladder, an arm, thrust suddenly out between the wall and the door, grasped it and dragged it inside Granite House."¹²¹ Here we certainly have the impression that some sort of human interlopers have invaded the home of the castaways, but soon it becomes apparent that the invaders are in fact orang-outans. The five men also have to confront an invading army of foxes at one point in the story. In short, Verne certainly does not neglect to portray this facet of the pattern of island narratives identified by Carpenter.

The five white men are in a nearly ceaseless state of exploration and discovery throughout the story, and they are also constantly planning an exhaustive search of the island, which they are nevertheless unable to carry out until the very end of the book, and even then they fail to discover on their own everything which the island hides. For the most part, the riches of the island consist of game and various useful plants, including the long-sought-for tobacco weed. However, as Verne is interested in updating the robinsonnade, he also has the explorers discover coal, iron ore, and various other minerals, which they are able to transform into value-added products by dint of their Yankee ingenuity and know-how. The final discovery on the island consists of a gift the characters receive from the island's secret inhabitant, Captain Nemo: a chest filled with diamonds and pearls. This treasure chest serves not only to enrich the adventurers, but also to tie The Mysterious Island firmly into the stream of island narratives extant in the English tradition, for often the treasure discovered on desert isles is of piratical origin, and frequently comes wrapped in the clichéic "dead man's chest." Here we see that our adventurers will leave their island, as of course they do, with a literal treasure chest, and even one which comes to them from a man whose death they experience with their own eyes. So we see that Verne's tale clearly belongs to the robinsonnade genre, as the author has clearly taken some pains to avoid missing any key part of this *forme fixe*.

¹²¹ Jules Verne, The Mysterious Island, trans. W. H. G. Kingston (1875; New York: The Heritage Press, 1959) 242.

However, Verne's tale is somewhat more complex than the average robinsonnade, and it is certainly more openly associated with imperialism than the typical robinsonnade. For one thing, the characters in Verne's book quickly reinforce our metaphorical understanding of the island as a colony by declaring in a straightforward manner their recognition of this idea: "..we do not consider ourselves castaways, but colonists, who have come here to settle."¹²² By overtly linking the island narrative with the colonial project, Verne inherently suggests that in other stories in which this connection is not so clearly made that it is to be understood. However, this overt connection is far from the only way in which Verne casts some doubt upon the imperial project which, overall, this book would seem to support. For example, the colonists quickly declare their desire to cause the extinction of the island's population of jaguars. This seems to bring into the open the types of willful destruction and permanent change which are often wrought, either intentionally or unintentionally, by colonial occupation. The competitive nature of colonial enterprise is suggested by this desire to wipe out by force any extant competition for the resources of the island. Another facet of colonialism is suggested by the statement of one of the settlers that "we will fortify ourselves against savages with two legs as well as against savages with four."¹²³ This statement not only underlines the aforementioned connection between extermination of jaguars and the potential for the destruction of indigenous people groups, but it also depicts the glowingly-lauded colonists as being incapable or unwilling to distinguish between humans and beasts if said humans are not from the "civilized" world. Another moment when the colonial enterprise seems to be called into question is when the colonists discover a teeming warren of rabbit-like creatures. "It was a valuable resource of the colony, and it appeared to be inexhaustible."¹²⁴ In the word "appeared" seems to be inscribed the

¹²² Verne 90.

¹²³ Verne 131.

¹²⁴ Verne 163.

possibility that appearances here are deceiving the colonists, and that, in short, they might very well exhaust the "resource" which these beasts represent. Although there is but the shadow of a doubt, nevertheless the scientific possibility that the resource might not last forever is raised, and the wanton absorption of every natural resource which is typical of the robinsonnade is called into question by this one word seemingly innocuously planted in the phrase. Another moment when colonial economy seems brought into the full light of day is when the colonists make some felt out of musmon-fur: they "produce a solid material, rough, no doubt, and such as would have no value in a manufacturing center of Europe or America, but which would be highly esteemed in the Lincoln Island markets."¹²⁵ Here Verne seems to be underlining the practice of dumping shoddy goods into the colonies when they would be unacceptable for sale in the home country, and in any event refers to the economic ties between colony and home country.

Perhaps the most arresting moment in the book in regards to colonization is the capture and enslavement of one of the orang-outans which attack Granite House. Unlike his literary ancestor, Friday, this ape has no debt of gratitude to discharge to the colonists: he is cornered inside a cave and "overpowered and bound"¹²⁶ by them. The typical process in robinsonnades leading to the dedicated native servant, which involves said servant being rescued from bloodthirsty natives, is here twisted by Verne through the casting of the colonists in the role of the danger to be avoided. The captured ape is questioned by the colonists, who interpret his grunts as acquiescence to the fate of transformation from a "savage" ape to a domestic servant. The terms of the contract for his service are interesting: "We will give you no wages at first, but we will double them afterwards if we are pleased with you."¹²⁷ In this playful tone, the heroes of this book negotiate the enslavement of a savage. This enslavement is made heavily ironic by Verne: first of all, the settlers are on the island because of their opposition to the slave-owning

¹²⁵ Verne 284.

¹²⁶ Verne 246.

¹²⁷ Verne 247.

South, as they are escaped prisoners-of-war from the Civil War; secondly, because they name the ape "Jupiter," thus causing his servitude to be the more starkly apparent when he is compared to his namesake, the king of the gods. It seems that throughout the book "Jup," as he is affectionately known, apes the normal condition of the subjugated, colonized race in relation to the imperial masters. He serves their physical needs, protecting them from dangerous animals and almost dying in the process, as well as bringing them their dinner at the table, dressed in servant garb. His incapacity to express himself in English is lauded as one of the best possible qualities for a servant to possess, and when from time to time he takes up western ways, for example when he learns to smoke a pipe, Jup is treated with a very paternalistic approval. In fact, the settlers honor their contract with Jup, for after he had learned how to be the ideal waiter, they indeed double his wages. Of course, the settlers, with their sophisticated knowledge of mathematics, know that Jup's salary has remained unchanged, and nonexistent. A few pages from the end of the book, Jup dies suddenly in the cataclysmic destruction of the island from which nevertheless all the settlers escape unharmed. The message which Verne here gives us about the fate of the colonised is certainly not unequivocally positive.

The most outright opposition to colonialism in the book comes from the unexpected quarter of Captain Nemo, who has been secretly living under Lincoln Island since before the arrival of the settlers. Whereas in 20000 Leagues Under the Sea one learns almost nothing about the background of Captain Nemo, in The Mysterious Island we learn that Captain Nemo is an Indian, formerly a prince, who took part in the Sepoy Mutiny against the British occupying forces. Although embittered by his failure in this revolt against colonial rule, Captain Nemo nevertheless used the treasures of the deep to which he had access through his submarine, specifically gold recovered from sunken Spanish galleons, to support independence movements throughout the globe. Several passages late in the book are dedicated to assuring the reader that Captain Nemo is considered to be a hero in every sense of the word, and thus this conflation of hero and anti-imperialist rebel must be deliberate. Therefore, although the imperial project appears to be thoroughly approved of throughout the book, the revelation of Captain Nemo at the

end of the book undermines this support to a significant extent, confirming the "bourgeois façade" Jean Chesneaux attributes to Verne.¹²⁸

Verne has embedded a powerful search for truth into the narrative of this tale. The settlers, while colonization is constantly improving the island, are forever seeking to determine the mystery which gives the book its name. They suspect that they have not gained access to the whole truth, but it is not until the discovery of Nemo that they finally understand the island and what it truly represents. As thoroughly as Nemo has rejected imperialism, Lincoln Island, no longer mysterious, writes its own emancipation proclamation by rejecting the settlers and their improvements. The volcano, assumed at the beginning to be dead by the settlers, but which had of course really been slumbering fitfully, rumbles to life and, after a few spasms of violence, finally explodes from its very heart, forcing the evacuation of the settlers and the end of the imperial dream which had existed on Lincoln Island. Thus Verne manages to subvert the island narrative of the nineteenth century after having respected all of its forms throughout the bulk of the tale, and even at the end, after having destroyed the island and the colonialism which he had made it represent, he still sends his castaways packing back to their mother country with the treasure chest and store of knowledge which the main characters of robinsonnades are required by tradition to possess.

In light of a demonstration of Camus's use of all the common features of the Robinsonnade, including imagery, metaphor, and even in many cases narrative development, we will argue that it is through careful and conscious manipulation of the enormous body of robinsonnade literature that Camus will provide a point of view on the relationship between French Algerian and the Algerian space. The fact that Verne's somewhat cynical, if not subversive, robinsonnade is a known influence on Camus's work will inform this reading as well. This will ultimately provide a more compelling argument for Carroll's conclusion that

¹²⁸ Jean Chesneaux, The Political and Social Ideas of Jules Verne, trans. Thomas Wikeley (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972) 21.

Camus's "depiction of the irresolvable contradictions inherent in the situation of French Algerians could even be said to place Camus not as conclusively and definitively on the "wrong side" of the Algerian conflict and of anti-colonialist struggles for independence in general as his critics have claimed."¹²⁹ Rather than the Algerian landscape deriving its evocative power from an infinity of possibility, it is the inherent limitedness of an island's circumscribed nature which fuels the anguish of Camus and his characters. The author and his literary progeny are aware, at some level, that the colonial project of which Algeria was the crown jewel is doomed to foreclosure. They can sense this not only in the political events of mid-century, but also through the literary constraints in place in the robinsonnade. As Carpenter has shown, almost all such tales conclude, after the danger, confrontation, and exploration, with a return to the "mother" country for the erstwhile island occupier. It is this crucial final component of the robinsonnade that will allow Camus to express through his fiction his prescient knowledge of the impending end of the *pied-noir* adventure tale.

¹²⁹ Carroll 548.

2. *L'étranger*: Violence in the Space Between

2.1. Introduction

Throughout Camus's novels, we can detect an increasing prevalence of imagery that is specifically insular and/or tied to the literary tradition of the island adventure tale, or "robinsonnade." In his first attempt at novel-writing, La mort heureuse, Camus included a fairly lengthy passage that in many ways amounts to a robinsonnade. In this novel, the main character, Mersault, lives up to his name by jumping into a life dominated by the sea in a sleepy beach town on the North African coast. When he is not swimming in the sun-drenched sea or hiking in the exotic African hills, this voluntary Robinson constructs a shelter with his own hands and interacts with, and occasionally confronts, the locals in a manner consistent with people from different cultures or even species. Although the setting is peninsular rather than truly an island, Mersault nevertheless plays out a typical robinsonnade trajectory involving some danger, confrontation, and exploring, although his ultimate return is rendered problematic by his eponymous death. Camus never allowed this novel, and thus its relatively uncritical robinsonnade, to be published during his lifetime.

In the first novel that Albert Camus did have published, L'étranger, the author has evolved from depictions of a literal robinsonnade to the use of the tropes, vocabulary, images, and freight of this sub-genre in a more subtle, metaphorical fashion. This chapter introduces the concept of the "space between," a carefully delineated area that serves as a metaphorical island in its effects on the intrigue that plays out within its confines. The most important such space between in this novel is almost literally insular as well, as the beach upon which Meursault shoots "l'Arabe" is cut off from the rest of the world, leaving the central action of this novel to play out in a landscape that is defined by boundaries and circumscription, including the strand and sea that are so ineffably tied to the definition of an island. We will carefully examine these

spaces between, understanding them to be insular in at least a larval sense, and subsequent study of later novels by Camus will serve to further clarify the incrementally increasing importance of the insular and the robinsonnade in the novels of Albert Camus and what they can tell us about the worldview, culture, and prospects of the *pieds-noirs*.

In L'etranger, Camus' first major novel, the protagonist, Meursault, inhabits a space between other spaces, often described using the rubric "entre *x* et *y*." This young man, between sea and shore and sand, between living and dead, between alone and *casé*, between France and Algeria, is forever grappling with his space and identity--metaphor for all *pieds-noirs* and, by extension, post-colonial existence. We use this term hesitantly, noting that Camus was not yet tied to the Existentialist movement at the time he produced this novel, and that the frequently formulated equation between Meursault and the ideals of this movement is therefore at best a coincidence and arguably a misappropriation. This already complicated picture is further occluded by Meursault's arguable positioning between the *pieds-noirs* that he represents and the "Arabes," or Muslim-Algerians, with whom a fairly antagonistic relationship seems to obtain for the most part in the novel; nevertheless, Meursault is consistently shown to belong to the cultural group largely defined by their visceral attachment to and enracination in Algerian soil and to emphatically not belong to the culture of Arabs and Berbers, mostly of Muslim faith, that make up the other main socio-cultural group inhabiting the contested Algerian space. Important moments in the narrative are marked by various spaces between defining frontier items (arguably insular spaces) that often shine light on the text. We will argue that, rather than this interstitial existence necessitating an understanding of Meursault as metaphysically estranged from the community of man, the repetition of betweenness should be understood as referring to the specific cultural and historical circumstances of pre-independence Algeria. This insistence on

the specificity of Meursault's habitation of spaces between, in direct contrast to many readings of Meursault's universality and embodiment of existential angst, will inform a political reading of this novel and ultimately allow us to challenge the dominant opinion (cf O'Brien, Said, etc.) that Camus deemphasized the colonial underpinnings of the space in which he set the majority of his fictional works, Algeria, and that his only relationship with the French imperial project in that area was to reify its territorial claims and suggest that France must remain forever in control of Algeria. While we can but agree with Said's observation that the imperial system is visible in Camus's work to anyone who desires to look for it, we object to his inclusion of Camus in a pantheon of Orientalist writers whose (hidden or overt, subconscious or willing) objective was to paint this colonial reality as a commonality that was destined to continue far into the future. We will show, on the contrary, that a detailed analysis of the spaces between and how they operate specifically from the point of view of the *pied-noir* protagonist inform a picture of the Algerian space and community as one which was doomed to radical change at the expense of the *pieds-noirs*. In effect, this novel shows that Albert Camus foresaw the inevitability of the end of the French domination of Algeria and the simultaneous end of the *pied-noir* community in Algeria. We will separately analyze each of the two parts of Camus's first published novel, for the function of the spaces between seems to shift after the scene of murder on the beach.

Over the course of the first half of the book, the use of many spaces between, particularly that between the two "ethnic" or cultural communities of pre-independence Algeria, communicates to the reader a tense atmosphere, threatening and ultimately delivering violence. The preponderance of landscapes defined by harsh borders such as stark rock walls, fortified villas, and blazing sunlight paints the Algeria of this novel as a sort of armed camp. Furthermore, the inability of the gulf, or large space, between the Muslim-Algerians and the

European-Algerians to be crossed without violence indicates a painful realization of the untenable nature of the political landscape in the Algeria described in this novel. The central scene, of the shooting on the beach, takes place as a result of several successive attempts to close the gap between the two antagonistic groups, combined with the claustrophobic effects of a landscape with no exit except a (politically impossible?) retreat. The second part of the novel, quite different from the first half in its emphasis on reflection, nevertheless continues to show the protagonist inhabiting an untenable space between various existences, fascinated with the bits and pieces of the outside world he glimpses through the narrow spaces between the bars of his prison windows.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ We would like to revisit in a later study the way in which imprisonment and its incumbent prostration to the authority of the government seems to create a space in which the *Pied-noir* and the Muslim-Algerian can relate on a very nearly equal basis.

2.2. Meursault's Black Feet

In the first extended scene in L'étranger, that of the funeral of Meursault's mother, Camus takes pains to ensure that his readers will identify Meursault and the other mourners with the specific society of the inhabitants of Algeria of European origins. The bus ride from Algiers to the countryside makes the setting explicit, as the narrator states on the first page that "[l]'asile de vieillards est à Marengo, à quatre-vingts kilomètres d'Alger."¹³¹ Near the end of this short trip, Meursault tells a fellow passenger that he has come from far away, lending a strange grandeur to this voyage. At the retirement home, called an "asile," and thus conjuring images of politically turbulent times and a haven of peace from the storm, Meursault is faced with a representative of the Muslim-Algerians in the guise of a nurse with a facial deformity caused by cancer, one of the nameless and questionably human Muslim-Algerians to which O'Brien alludes.¹³² In this (almost explicitly) island retreat (note the embedded island in the word "asile") he also spends some time in the company of a concierge, who says that he is from Paris, evoking the response from Meursault that "Ah! Vous n'êtes pas d'ici?"¹³³ This response by Meursault indicates a clear disconnect between Paris, or mainland, metropolitan France, and that part of France located south of the Mediterranean Sea. Simultaneously, we learn from this interchange that the French citizens involved here, at least those born in Algeria, are keenly aware of a cultural gap between their various tribes of Frenchmen. This comment also serves to underline that the setting of this novel is quite specifically that of French Algeria, rather than a

¹³¹ Albert Camus, L'étranger (Paris: Gallimard, 1942) 9. Henceforth, all references to this work will include "L'étranger" and a page number.

¹³² O'Brien, 25.

¹³³ L'étranger 14.

more universal, blank space open to limitless interpretations. The gulf, at least geographical and likely cultural, between the society described in this novel and the society of France will turn out, upon closer inspection, to be one of the many spaces between that characterize the landscapes, cultural and geophysical, in this novel.

It is in the long march from the retirement home to the burial site that Camus provides several stark features of the community of which Meursault will be an, albeit atypical, representative. Firstly, we see that the various mourners are suffering from the clearly oppressive heat of the day, which could serve as a reminder of the tropical conditions of the landscape described, as well as the fact that the group of people being described were perhaps not evolutionarily prepared for the tropical environment. The heat of the sun is mentioned over and over, accompanied with comments like “ça tape,”¹³⁴ “[l]’éclat du soleil était insoutenable”¹³⁵ and “on risque une insolation.”¹³⁶ The concierge specifies that “il faisait chaud, surtout dans ce pays,”¹³⁷ another reminder that the space here is a different sort of country than that depicted throughout the bulk of mainstream, and thus mainland, French literature. The red soil evoked in “cette terre rousse,”¹³⁸ calling to mind the laterite clay found throughout coastal Africa, is another reminder that the space treated here is not a run-of-the-mill French landscape. But it is a combination of the harsh climate and that symbol of Western-style progress, the paved road, which provides the most startlingly clear indication that a very specific group of people was to be

¹³⁴ L’étranger 28.

¹³⁵ L’étranger 29.

¹³⁶ L’étranger 30.

¹³⁷ L’étranger 16.

¹³⁸ L’étranger 27.

seen in the members of the funereal cortège: “Le soleil avait fait éclater le goudron. Les pieds y enfonçaient et laissaient ouverte sa pulpe brillante.”¹³⁹ This passage not only enforces the already very clear idea that the weather was extremely warm on the day of the funeral, but it also serves as key to identifying the people whose feet were sinking into the soft tar of the road. The shiny black color of the melted tar, as seen on the road after the passage of the cortège, is mirrored on the soles of the feet of the walkers here, making them literally people with black feet, or “*pieds-noirs*.” As we have commented earlier, the etymology of this expression has always been the subject of a great amount of creativity, but from the late 19th century, “*pied-noir*” has meant those of European family background living in or around Algiers, by metonymy with their habitually bare, and thus dirty, and black, feet. So we see that from the outset of this novel, Camus has been at pains to make certain that his readers not overly universalize this scene, by linking it firmly to the *pieds-noirs*, or residents of Algeria of European stock. Once this realization sinks in, other features of this scene can be re-examined for additional meanings. For example, the reason these characters find themselves walking through this inhospitable climate is to bury one of their own, that is to say to sink her into the earth. The reader is reminded, at the end of the funeral scene, of “la terre couleur de sang” and “la chair blanche des racines qui s’y mêlaient.”¹⁴⁰ We must not limit the understanding of “roots” here to plant matter, but instead conflate this image with the white flesh of Meursault’s mother who had just been implanted in the blood-red soil of Algeria. This moment seems to be a key example of the rootedness of the European-Algerians in the North African soil, so important for the *pieds-noirs*’ claims for legitimacy as residents of Algeria. This soil, or land, is at once linked with death and

¹³⁹ L’*étranger* 29.

¹⁴⁰ L’*étranger* 31.

life through the metaphor of blood, which is necessarily associated with both these states of being. This funeral is a concrete means of indicating the roots of the *pieds-noirs* in the soil of Algeria, even if these roots are inextricably tied with death and even putrefaction. Camus, having ensured that this scene be read in the context of the European-Algerians, or *pieds-noirs*, through the inclusion of the seemingly innocuous detail of the feet of the cortège-members in the melting tarmac, complicates his narrative by the reference to a particular, and contested, identity.

This novel will continue to explore the situation of the *pieds-noirs*, of whom Meursault stands as an example. We will see that Camus uses the rubric “entre *x* et *y*” to describe the territory occupied by Meursault, and by extension the *pieds-noirs*. This “space between” various limiting landmarks will characterize a privileged space in terms of the action in the novel’s plot, as the crucial scene on the beach will prove to be the most thoroughly described using this rubric, as well as the most closely tied to the insular. The funeral scene, in fact, contains the first use of this rubric in Camus’s major fiction, when we read: “J’étais un peu perdu entre le ciel bleu et blanc et la monotonie de ces couleurs, noir gluant du goudron ouvert, noir terne des habits, noir laqué de la voiture.”¹⁴¹ This passage not only situates the central character in a space defined by the features around it rather than by the space itself, but we read that this space was somehow disorienting, causing Meursault to lose himself to an extent. Note that the confusion in this passage is at least partially related to a contrast between the natural state of the Algerian space and the changes to it wrought by the colonizers, as the Algerian sky seems not to fit with the various shades of black observed in the artifacts of technology grafted onto the countryside. This passage also serves to underline the importance of the open tar, in case a reader would have been tempted to think of that as merely a landscape feature with no particular inherent significance. A

¹⁴¹ L’*étranger* 29.

quick analysis of the monotonous black objects described by the narrator shows us that they are all artifacts of Western civilization: road surface, mourners' clothing, and horse-drawn carriage. These artifacts are confusing, or disorienting, when in juxtaposition with the virginal blue and white sky that crowns them. Meursault himself is shown to inhabit the space between these two colors, these two worlds of opposing levels of human intervention, that is the purely natural sky and the artifice of the black objects under that sky. In continued study of this novel, and indeed of the fiction of Camus in general, I will show that this locus, "entre x et y ," is not only associated with moments of importance for the plots of Camus' novels, but also seems to be tied to the specifics of the society in which almost all of Camus' fiction is set, the *pied-noir* community of Algeria, which, in many ways, reflects the changes wrought upon the heroes of robinsonnades by their island sojourns.

After spending a sun-drenched day of swimming and a night of sex with Marie, Meursault awakens to the drab prospect of his least favorite day of the week, Sunday. He proceeds to spend the entire day in his apartment, and we learn some interesting details regarding his environment. For example, we find that his apartment is quite large, but Meursault has closed off large parts of it since he moved his mother to the "asile." Meursault says that he lives "entre les chaises de paille un peu creusées, l'armoire dont la glace est jaunie, la table de toilette et le lit de cuivre"¹⁴² that he has piled into the one room of the apartment that he uses. Given the dilapidated nature of the chairs and the lack of brilliance of the mirror described here, we see here that Meursault has constructed a space between various relics of another time in which to live. In this interstitial space, we infer the presence of Meursault's mother in her old furniture, while her physical absence is simultaneously reinforced by the closing off of her rooms. (This

¹⁴² L'étranger 36.

sort of domicile characterized by old flotsam and jetsam could be seen as another hint at the ties between Meursault and the Robinsons.)

After living another moment in the past by reading an old newspaper, Meursault puts his back to his apartment and occupies his balcony, where he will observe his neighborhood for the rest of the day. Note that his balcony provides another space between, as he is neither in his apartment nor fully in his neighborhood, and from this excellent point of view Meursault is able to carefully analyze all the comings and goings around him while only interacting in the life he sees in a few subtle ways. He even adds an extra barrier between himself and the *quartier* he observes by turning his chair backwards so its back interposes itself between him and all he sees, finding that “c’était plus commode.”¹⁴³ This could probably be read as a prefiguring of the other bars that will separate Meursault from day-to-day life in Algiers during the second part of the novel. The almost ethnographic detail that Meursault notes concerning the inhabitants of his neighborhood and their Sunday habits underscores the extent to which this character simultaneously identifies with those he observes and remains aloof from them. Gazing from above, he remarks on their dress, their moods, their likely leisure-time activities, even their mating habits, but the observer is only very occasionally drawn into the animation when a few people catch his eye or greet him, and the closest that Meursault will come to speaking to any of these neighbors is when he says ““Oui”, en secouant la tête.”¹⁴⁴ This communication is far from unambiguous: is Meursault’s shaking of his head contradicting the affirmative response of his lips? Does Meursault in fact speak at all, or is his communication purely physical? Either way, the reader and the footballer are unsure as to Meursault’s response to the claim that “on les a

¹⁴³ L’*étranger* 38.

¹⁴⁴ L’*étranger* 39.

eus.”¹⁴⁵ This is not wholly surprising, since a straightforward acquiescence to the soccer player’s statement would have forced Meursault too firmly into the shared society represented by the pronoun “on,” in this case standing in for the first person plural; Meursault has spent the entire day between the solitude in his apartment and the companionship of the neighborhood, and not even an enthusiastic sportsman is able to force him completely out of his space between. This scene serves to cement Meursault into a position that is both with and separate from the *pied-noir* community of his neighborhood; while his neighbors recognize him and even communicate with him to a certain extent, he remains nevertheless somewhat detached from the flow of life below him, as though his balcony were a rocky pinnacle overlooking the liquid activity of *pied-noir* life at his feet.

In a curious episode of childlike abandon and joy, we see Meursault and his colleague utilize a strange form of transportation: they chase a truck along the docks and then leap onto it to hitch a ride. This scene is filled with references to water, and in fact it occurs next to the sea. We see that Meursault was “noyé dans le bruit et la poussière,”¹⁴⁶ showing that the noise and dirt of the setting are parallel to choppy water, as the character can drown in them. This metaphor is particularly interesting for our study because once again it shows that water and land are juxtaposed in Camus’s description of the environment of his *pied-noir* characters. The spectator of this chaotic race is reminded of “des mâts qui dansaient sur l’horizon et des coques que nous longions.”¹⁴⁷ The port here seems transformed into a more untamed nautical environment, one where the boats all around seem frenetic rather than at rest as one might expect in a port. The

¹⁴⁵ L’*étranger* 39.

¹⁴⁶ L’*étranger* 44.

¹⁴⁷ L’*étranger* 44.

description of the arrival of Meursault and Emmanuel¹⁴⁸ reinforces the conflation of truck ride and hazardous aquatic voyage: “Nous sommes arrivés en nage chez Céleste.”¹⁴⁹ This statement informs us that the two are covered with moisture, and the metaphorical nature of the expression once again throws the context back into the water. When the two characters finally manage to haul themselves up onto their conveyance, we read that they were “au milieu de la poussière et du soleil.”¹⁵⁰ So we have here a form of the rubric “entre *x* et *y*” and for the first time we see that this is associated with marine imagery, something we will see again and again in the novels of Camus. Here, the noisy truck churning through dust and hot sun of the port represents yet another space between, this one a happy, though precarious, space of light-hearted amusement in an otherwise drab, workaday existence.

The instances of “spaces between” often seem charged with positive connotations when they first occur, but they also seem to be linked to unfortunate situations, or else to announce that such are forthcoming. For example, Meursault and Marie pass an idyllic day at the beach, rolling together in the waves and sunbathing, all in an environment that is described from the outset as a space between: “une plage resserrée entre des rochers et bordée de roseaux du côté de la terre.”¹⁵¹ The first subtle hint of danger is in the new game to which Marie introduces Meursault, one in which Meursault was to collect seafoam in his mouth in order to spray it into the air. This simulated breathing in of water, or drowning, for the purpose of pleasure seems

¹⁴⁸ The etymology of Emmanuel’s name, “God is with us,” seems to beg for some sort of erudite explication here, but unfortunately we have yet to come up with a satisfactory suggestion.

¹⁴⁹ L’étranger 44.

¹⁵⁰ L’étranger 44.

¹⁵¹ L’étranger 57.

innocent and fun: “[c]ela faisait alors une dentelle mousseuse qui disparaissait dans l’air.”¹⁵² However, the sea seems to reassert its danger by burning the mouths engaged in this activity with its salt: “au bout de quelques temps, j’avais la bouche brûlée par l’amertume du sel.”¹⁵³ However pleasant the interlude on this beach in the space between rocks and reeds, the return to Algiers announces the beginning of the plot complication that will lead to the crucial moment, also on a beach, at the end of the first part of this novel. Indeed, Marie and Meursault have hardly entered a refractory period before the noise of Raymond beating his “Mauresque” girlfriend interrupts the idyll. This intrusion of violence between *pied-noir* and Muslim-Algerian on the romantic progression of Meursault and Marie’s relationship clearly foreshadows the showdown on the beach, which will in fact stem from the same source of violence as the reader discovers here, the closure of the gap between a *pied-noir* (Raymond) and his Muslim-Algerian mistress. Christine Margerrison has analyzed in detail Raymond’s mistress as compared to Marie, and she suggests that “the portrayal of female characters in *L’Étranger* subverts the apparent opposition between women to reveal that, via female sexuality, all are ‘sisters beneath the skin’.”¹⁵⁴ This might further suggest that the violence suffered by Raymond’s mistress will also affect Marie, as seems to be the case when one considers that Meursault’s eventual crime, and her humiliation in court, can be traced back to Raymond’s relationship.

A short passage in *L’Étranger* serves nicely to illustrate the attitudes of Meursault regarding metropolitan France. Meursault is called into his boss’s office, where he is offered the

¹⁵² *L’Étranger* 58.

¹⁵³ *L’Étranger* 58.

¹⁵⁴ Christine Margerrison, “The Dark Continent of Camus’s *L’Étranger*,” *French Studies* 55.1 (2001): 73.

possibility of opening a branch office in Paris. His boss points out that this would permit the young, unattached Meursault to live in Paris and to travel quite a lot throughout the year. Meursault astonishes his *patron* by declaring himself quite apathetic regarding this plan, and by calmly explaining that such a promotion would not actually be life-changing, since according to Meursault one cannot change one's life. Furthermore, Meursault points out that his current life "ici ne [l]e déplaisait pas du tout."¹⁵⁵ The word "ici" in this sentence emphasizes that Meursault feels no desire to leave his current environment of Algiers. As Meursault further reflects upon this situation after his boss has expressed his disappointment with Meursault's lack of ambition, he notes that "[il] n'étais pas malheureux."¹⁵⁶ This point of view is echoed in a second scene that follows on the heels of the first, this time between Meursault and Marie. After discussing their significantly divergent positions on love and marriage, Meursault tells Marie of the offer his boss had made to him earlier that day. Marie indicates that she would love to get to know Paris, whereupon Meursault tells her that he lived there while a student. At Marie's urging, Meursault describes Paris in these words: "C'est sale. Il y a des pigeons et des cours noires. Les gens ont la peau blanche."¹⁵⁷ This description, far from positive, serves to underline differences between Algiers and Paris, much to Paris' detriment. The sun-browned skin which both Marie and Meursault value, as we know from their various beach outings, is shown to be absent in this far-away Paris, where flesh seems to be the color of the "chair blanche"¹⁵⁸ that Meursault had noted in Maman's burial scene. This white skin is also in stark contrast to the darkness of flesh

¹⁵⁵ L'étranger 68.

¹⁵⁶ L'étranger 69.

¹⁵⁷ L'étranger 70.

¹⁵⁸ L'étranger 31.

associated with the inhabitants of Algiers, with their black feet. Not only are Parisians the color of dead flesh, but Meursault points out the urban carrion-eater, the pigeon, as another ubiquitous feature of this unsavory landscape. Dirt and dark, enclosed living spaces complete the portrait of the so-called “City of Lights” according to Meursault, forcing a very unflattering comparison with the sun-drenched landscape and people described in Algiers and its surrounding areas as we see them in this novel. Here we see quite clearly that Meursault has a marked preference for his current surroundings over those of his student days in Paris. Nevertheless, the fact that he knows both landscapes and that his boss gives him an opportunity to return to Paris and to travel reminds us that Algiers and Paris are tightly linked despite their dissimilarities. Meursault, in fact, is shown to inhabit a space between these two major cities of Greater France, even if he shows a marked preference for one of them over the other. The interactions between the European-Algerians and the Muslim-Algerians, showcased in the beach scene which closely follows this passage in the text, will underscore the difficulty of Meursault’s, and indeed all *pieds-noirs*’, habitation of the North African landscape, while Meursault’s description of Paris serves to remind the reader that to the *pieds-noirs*, Paris and metropolitan France were also strange, unwelcoming environments for them. According to Peter Dunwoodie, who has examined the writings of the *pieds-noirs*, this sort of depiction of metropolitan France is typical, and tied to the idea that the Mediterranean breeds virility and a down-to-earth quality in its men, whereas Europe cultivates preciousness and effeminacy.¹⁵⁹

Throughout L’*étranger*, Meursault develops a strange relationship with his former co-worker, Marie. When Meursault encounters her for the first time in the novel, the day after his mother’s funeral, he immediately notes that when they had worked together, he had wanted her,

¹⁵⁹ Peter Dunwoodie, Writing French Algeria (New York: Clarendon Press, 1998).

and she him. After some fun in the sun (evoking the hedonism described in the preface to Les îles de Jean Grenier) the two young people decide to go to a comedic film together, at which point Marie realizes that Meursault is in mourning: “Elle a eu un petit recul, mais n’a fait aucune remarque.”¹⁶⁰ Despite this awkward moment, they end up nevertheless sleeping together that night. So begins a relationship that seems to be differently understood by the two participants. Meursault frequently discusses the elements of physical pleasure in the relationship, whereas Marie periodically tries to establish a loving element with which Meursault seems totally unconcerned. Nevertheless, even after telling Marie in a straightforward manner that he was pretty certain that he did not love her, Meursault still seems to be quite willing to marry Marie if that would make her happier. While Marie herself could be said to exhibit less of an insistence on traditional roles than one might expect, since she is remarkably undemanding of her strange beau, we see that Meursault once again manages to find a space between traditional roles (this time, lover and fiancé) and inhabits it with no apparent discomfort, whereas Marie seems to be slightly less apathetic regarding the progression of their affair. Meursault seems untroubled both by the fact that he is in a relationship to which he brings no love and by Marie’s interest in marriage, which he does not discourage but rather accepts with nonchalance. Once Meursault is in prison, he will miss Marie, but only in a physical sense, and he describes this as really just a feature of his adjustment to his new surroundings. When she comes to visit him, she seems concerned about the future and he seems mildly annoyed that he can no longer brush against her breasts as he once could, or go swimming with her, or be with her under the warm sun; in fact, he seems to miss Marie more as a feature of the landscape of freedom than for any other, more sentimental, reason.

¹⁶⁰ L’être 35.

2.3. On the Beach

On a day that begins with Meursault exhibiting what Marie called a “tête d’enterrement”¹⁶¹ the crucial scene begins with a contrast between perfect, sun-drenched weather and the physical suffering of the main character. The choice of expression by Marie forces the reader to compare this day with that of the first extended scene of the novel, the “enterrement” of Meursault’s mother, which also juxtaposed beautiful weather with a lugubrious event. We will find that the contrast of natural beauty and death will characterize this scene as it did the earlier one. After noting with alarm that the brother of Raymond’s former mistress was observing their departure for the beach, Meursault, Marie and Raymond quickly allow themselves to be captivated by the joy of the outing. The approach to the beach-house of Raymond’s friend indicates that once again we are dealing with a space between: “Nous avons marché entre des files de petites villas à barrières vertes ou blanches, quelques-unes enfouies avec leurs vérandas sous les tamaris, quelques autres nues au milieu des pierres.”¹⁶² The scene of the killing approached through a sort of artificial canyon between pleasure-cottages that are nevertheless described as containing defensive architectural elements, the “barrières,” which lend a claustrophobic air to the scene while simultaneously insisting on the beauty of the location. Furthermore, we see that these houses are also described by what surrounds them, trees and rocks, making them also spaces between. The beach house of Raymond’s friend is neither under trees nor between rocks, but has a different setting: “La maison était adossée à des rochers et les

¹⁶¹ L’étranger 77.

¹⁶² L’étranger 80.

pilotis qui la soutenaient sur le devant baignaient déjà dans l'eau.”¹⁶³ This cabin, also located at the end of the beach, is thus even more specifically between unforgiving landscape features, namely a rock wall or small cliff and the sea. We would argue that this setting is nearly insular, since the rock wall behind the cottage is as effective a barrier as would be more water, and because the placement at the extremity of the beach makes it seem likely that water surrounds the house on more than one side. The fact that the house is perched upon stilts that descend into the water, and the detail that it backs up onto stone, indicate that this residence is unstable, in that it is wedged into a precipitous space in a manner that suggests a lack of solidity. The use of the anthropomorphic expression “adossée” to describe the beach-house suggests a comparison between the structure and its inhabitants, who are similarly shoe-horned into a beautiful, but treacherous, landscape that certainly doesn’t lead one to expect permanency. From this space between, several excursions onto a beach that will also be described as being between other landscape features will be made, ultimately leading to the gunshots which bring to an end the first part of this novel.

Raymond, Masson, and Meursault are chased from the beach house by the women, so they stroll down the beach. This banal occupation quickly becomes charged with tension when the men see “deux Arabes en bleu de chauffe qui venaient dans [leur] direction.”¹⁶⁴ The nature of this beach, with a cliff on one side and the sea on the other, limits the possible vectors of these two clearly antagonistic groups, and in fact we see that a convergence seems inevitable. Taking a moment to form a quite literal plan of attack, the three European-Algerians continue to walk towards the two Muslim-Algerians, and the steadily diminishing stretch of sand separating the

¹⁶³ L'étranger 81.

¹⁶⁴ L'étranger 86.

two groups is highlighted by the narrator: “La distance entre nous a diminué régulièrement.”¹⁶⁵ Here we see that the space between the two groups, a sort of buffer zone, is encroached upon by the men on either side. The tension and sense of danger in this encounter seem to intensify as the space between is compressed, until finally the Muslim-Algerians cease their advance. Unfortunately, Raymond continues towards the brother of his former mistress until he is close enough to provoke him with a comment that is inaudible to Meursault, after which a violent encounter ensues. The elimination of the space between these two groups has resulted in numerous contusions and a near-drowning on the side of the Muslim-Algerians and two lacerations for the European-Algerians. The space between is reestablished quickly after this spasm of violence, as the Muslim-Algerians use their knife to hold the three European-Algerians at bay while they back away. In many ways, this knife literally embodies the space between these representatives of two communities, as Raymond’s former mistress’s brother keeps it between himself and Raymond even when these two are in their closest tête-à-tête, refusing the complete elimination of the space between proposed by Raymond’s punches. It is only fair to point out that Raymond’s willingness to completely eliminate the space between, signified by his advance and his fists, is backed up by a tactically superior situation, as his group outnumbered the Muslim-Algerian’s three to two.

This encounter is only the first of several attempts to reduce or eliminate the space between these two communities here on the beach, each leading ineluctably to a decisively violent encounter. One cannot read this scene in the context of pre-independence Algeria without remarking the parallels between the confrontation on the beach and the general rhythm of life in the colonized space of Algeria. Despite the administrative appurtenance of Algeria to

¹⁶⁵ L’*étranger* 86.

France, in its being divided into three “départements” theoretically no different from those to the north of the Mediterranean, the democratic triptych of the French Republic, “Liberté, Égalité, et Fraternité,” were hardly the rule in this colonized space. Rather, the white settlers and their families were fully enfranchised citizens of France, able to vote, possess land, and count on the support of their government, while the Muslim inhabitants of Algeria were repressed in many ways due to the requirement of the French government that they abandon Islam if they wished to become full-fledged French citizens. There was a *de facto* segregation of the European and Muslim communities in Algeria, even if there were no laws legitimizing this status quo.¹⁶⁶ Although this scene on the beach places the whites in the numerical majority, which was not the case in Algeria as a whole, it serves to underscore the relative advantage of their position, particularly in a neighborhood that was inhabited by whites. The violence inherent in the proposed closing of the space between the two communities, represented on this beach in a microcosmic fashion, will be a repetitive theme in the fiction of Camus, but here we find this idea conveyed in the most direct manner possible, as the latent violence is shown to explode into very real, physical, dangerous, confrontation.

Once Raymond was patched up from this encounter, he decides to take another stroll along the beach, and Meursault elects to accompany him even though Raymond violently states that he doesn't want company. The two men wander along the beach, and at the extremity of this space they discover another space between, in which the Muslim-Algerians are calmly reclining, one of them playing a flute. This space was “une petite source qui coulait dans le sable, derrière

¹⁶⁶ The difficult relations between the various groups living in pre-independence Algeria have been well described, variously, in Herbert Lottman's biography of Camus, in Benjamin Stora's history of colonial Algeria, or even in Gillo Pontecorvo's film La bataille d'Alger.

un gros rocher”¹⁶⁷ characterized by “le petit bruit d’eau et de flûte au cœur du silence et de la chaleur.”¹⁶⁸ The calmness of this idyllic space and the two Muslim-Algerians is in sharp contrast to the violence of the sunlight, which is described in terms of violence and destruction: “Le soleil était maintenant écrasant. Il se brisait en morceaux sur le sable et sur la mer.”¹⁶⁹ Violence is also apparent in the casual mention of an aspect of Raymond’s clothing, his “poche revolver,”¹⁷⁰ which we quickly understand is not empty when he and Meursault begin a short conversation regarding whether or not, and finally how, the brother of Raymond’s former mistress can be shot. Raymond ultimately entrusts the pistol to Meursault, who is to shoot if Raymond’s foe makes a move. The tableau of these four men on the edge of a beach, surrounded by the sea, a raging sun, a small freshwater creek, a large boulder, and an oppressive silence composed, nevertheless, of specific sounds, seems to leave no avenue of escape for the violence hemmed in by these various walls as the space between Muslim-Algerians and European-Algerians is reduced to a minimum by the advance of Meursault and Raymond. (This Algerian space, circumscribed and forcing dangerous encounter, points to an understanding of pre-independence Algeria as a zero-sum game, with at least one of the involved groups destined to lose out in favor of another.) Nevertheless, an elemental transformation allows the two Muslim-Algerians to escape this scene by flowing, in effect, through the cracks in the walls: “les Arabes, à reculons, se sont coulés derrière le rocher.”¹⁷¹ The landscape features that seemed to

¹⁶⁷ L’étranger 89.

¹⁶⁸ L’étranger 90.

¹⁶⁹ L’étranger 89.

¹⁷⁰ L’étranger 89.

¹⁷¹ L’étranger 91.

keep the compression of these two societies bottled up is shown to have a safety valve of sorts that allows an escape from this encounter, but only through a liquid movement, or flow, that is in itself a contrast with the solid matter of the scene, notably the rocks and the pistol. Nevertheless, the compression of these two groups is relieved, and Raymond seems comforted by this, as he immediately begins talking about returning to Algiers. Unfortunately, he does not retake possession of his firearm, and there is to be one more encounter between members of two Algerian societies in the circumscribed landscape of the beach.

The last scene in the clearly delineated first part of L'étranger begins with Meursault's impression that climbing the stairs to rejoin the women in the beach-house was simply too much work, and simultaneously that staying where he was was also unacceptable, as he was "sous la pluie aveuglante qui tombait du ciel."¹⁷² This rain, actually blazing sunlight, gains a physical force by being described metaphorically as matter rather than energy, reinforcing the impression that Meursault is assaulted on all sides by oppressive physical boundaries forcing him to desperately seek an exit from this tense situation, which will of course not be a peaceful one. As he sets off down the beach again, Meursault notes various details of the landscape: he is assaulted by an "éclatement rouge,"¹⁷³ the sea is panting for breath, and Meursault's forehead is swelling from the sun's attack, characterized by repeated encounters with an "épée de lumière"¹⁷⁴ which provoke jaw-clenches in the character. Meursault remarks that "[t]oute cette

¹⁷² L'étranger 91.

¹⁷³ The multiplicity of terms regarding splitting, including the tar examined earlier, the sun on Meursault's head, and this blood-red splitting attack, may strengthen the argument that this novel predicts a coming apart of "French Algeria."

¹⁷⁴ L'étranger 92.

chaleur s'appuyait sur moi et s'opposait à mon avance."¹⁷⁵ Seeking to avoid the effort of climbing the stairs to the beach-house, Meursault has inadvertently placed himself in a path requiring even more effort, but he furnishes the required work, gritting his teeth and clenching his fists in his pockets. After a long, difficult walk down the beach in the only available direction, Meursault spies the goal of his march: "Je voyais de loin la petite masse sombre du rocher entourée d'un halo aveuglant par la lumière et la poussière de mer."¹⁷⁶ This isolated rock massif, where Meursault and Raymond already had one encounter with the two Muslim-Algerians, becomes the object of a fierce desire on the part of Meursault, who imagines the shade and cool water of its freshwater spring. We note with great interest the fact that this rock is surrounded by a blinding halo, thus seeming cut off from all other land, particularly as the halo's source is said to be light and sea-dust. The landscape of the crucial encounter in L'étranger is, in fact, clearly insular, and in a fashion all that will follow is a struggle over domination of this tiny island paradise, arguably a microcosm for Algeria, with its cool shade and cool fresh water, starkly contrasted with the aggressive heat and sun of the watery (beach) desert that surrounds it.

The Muslim-Algerian is occupying an idyllic space in an otherwise inhospitable, even inimical, desert landscape. As Meursault contemplates contesting the shade and cool water, driven by an "envie" repeated three times in one sentence, to possess this beautiful spot, both he and the Muslim-Algerian finger the weapons in their pockets. There is one last opportunity to avoid the encounter, as Meursault recognizes that "je n'avais qu'un demi-tour à faire et ce serait fini."¹⁷⁷ Unfortunately, the seeming insularity of the spot made the prospect of a return voyage

¹⁷⁵ L'étranger 92.

¹⁷⁶ L'étranger 92.

¹⁷⁷ L'étranger 93.

across the burning littoral desert impractical: “Mais toute une plage vibrante de soleil se pressait derrière moi.”¹⁷⁸ Everything in the environment conspires to bring about a fatal encounter between these two men, both feeling a need for the tiny paradise space in an otherwise uncomfortable landscape. Pushed by the sun, now strangely “le même soleil que le jour où j’avais enterré maman”¹⁷⁹ to take another step towards the shady spot occupied by the Muslim-Algerian, Meursault finally obliges this man to take out his knife, which then acts as a mirror to send stabbing blades of sunlight into Meursault’s eyes. If the moment in which the trigger is squeezed seems described in a somewhat pathetic manner as a justification of the shooting, Meursault acknowledges his responsibility in indicating his knowledge that his one step too far was both aggressive and stupid, as he admits that “c’était stupide, que je ne me débarrasserais pas du soleil en me déplaçant d’un pas.”¹⁸⁰ Once Meursault, pushed by the unfriendly and inflexible environmental conditions, was committed to the course of trying to displace the Muslim-Algerian from his relatively paradisaical island space, the stage was set for a violent confrontation between two unequally armed adversaries, and the outcome could never really be in doubt. Strangely, once the violence has to some extent cleared the air, Meursault realizes that the seemingly desert space that had seemed so aggressive was in fact beautiful in its own right; his reaction to this realization, shooting the inert corpse of the Muslim-Algerian four more times, underscores the senselessness of the violence in this context while underscoring how pervasive it

¹⁷⁸ L'étranger 93.

¹⁷⁹ L'étranger 94.

¹⁸⁰ L'étranger 94.

must be.¹⁸¹ This scene, examined in light of the complex interplay of landscape and cultural conflict, seems to contrast with Said's implication that Camus's fiction belies realities of the colonial situation when it isn't busy reifying the necessity of the French presence in Algeria; indeed, we see here that Camus reveals through his fiction the violence inherent in the competition for a harshly circumscribed space, and the predictably murderous outcome when members of two unequally-equipped communities come to physical blows. This reading seems to indicate a greater complexity in the fiction of Camus than Said has allowed for, since while the European, colonial man is shown to "win" this combat, he does so in a manner consistent with murder, and furthermore he does so with the addition of his extra shots, after a pause, into the body of his erstwhile adversary, placing this conflict in the context of deeper moral uncertainty. The events of this most famous section of *L'Étranger* show more nuance than we would expect if, as Said states, "Camus's work [is] affiliated historically both with the French colonial venture itself (*since he assumes it to be immutable*) and with outright opposition to Algerian independence."¹⁸² In the space between the first and second bullets, the reader is faced with the realization that Meursault is certainly not acting completely in self-defense, and that this character's moral position has just become far more complex. The physical barriers that manipulate the two characters into a violent confrontation by eliminating most of the possible vectors that would have allowed them to go about their lives without interfacing are a reminder of the insularity of the Algerian landscape as Camus will present it throughout his works, and

¹⁸¹ Paul Theroux, with a long history of careful observation of Africa, notes in his recent *Dark Star Safari* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003, p. 24) that this literary moment still reverberates in North African intellectual circles. He reports that an Egyptian author stated to him that "The attack on Iraq is like the random attack in Camus's *The Stranger*."

¹⁸² Said 175 (my emphasis).

this insularity informs an understanding of Algeria as a limited space in which conflict is inevitable as various groups vie for the resources of a land whose horizon/border is always visible. In such a landscape, Camus shows neither an assumption of the immutability of this situation nor outright opposition to Algerian independence, but rather a lingering presentiment of the likelihood of the evolution of such a tense, unstable situation, and one of the possible, perhaps even likely, outcomes of such an evolution would be the splitting apart of France and Algeria.

As we have seen, Meursault inhabits various spaces between in this novel. Reading Meursault as a representative of the *pied-noir*, we must grapple with the concept, as presented by Camus, of the *pied-noir* inherently occupying such a space. It is not difficult to see how members of the European-Algerian community could find themselves caught between a “mother country” many of them had never visited and indeed to which many of them had no blood ties, being of Iberian stock like Meursault, Marie, and so many other of the *pieds-noirs* we see in this novel, and the Algerian land that they knew and loved. Given the extremely difficult relations between Muslim-Algerians and European-Algerians as we see them in this novel, where they are characterized by a lack of understanding and a latent, and eventually overt, violence, the reader of L'étranger comes away from this novel with a sense that the continued cohabitation of these two antagonistic groups is extremely unlikely to remain a viable situation. Given the seeming impossibility of these two groups living together in harmony, (Raymond and his lover are the most direct example of the consequences of intensive frequentation of members of these two communities, and their relationship devolves into shame and violence; Raymond's lover's brother and Meursault's interactions provide a blisteringly dysfunctional microcosm of this society) this novel begs the question of what solution will be found. Violence was clearly the

means of resolution attempted by Raymond and Meursault, and arguably by Raymond's lover and her brother as well. The ultimate outcome of the cohabitation, Meursault's decapitation *by the agents of the mother country*, shows that in fact this representative of the *pieds-noirs* was caught between two societies and was ultimately unable to adjust to one or the other successfully. The long-term prognosis for the relationships constituting the communities of pre-independence Algeria is overwhelmingly negative in this novel, a fact that we will argue indicates a recognition on the part of the author that any hopes for the continued existence of French Algeria were already fading when this novel was published during the Second World War.

2.4. Between Four Walls

The second half of L'étranger reads in many ways like a different narrative. As a result of the denouement of the first half, Meursault will no longer be spending his time interfacing with the Algerian natural landscape, but instead will be inserted into the various institutions making up the French legal system. In the second half of this novel, we will see that the lack of Algerian vistas to explore will be felt keenly by Meursault, and indeed his punishment seems to be significantly composed of this enforced lack. Nevertheless, we will find that Meursault continues to inhabit various spaces between, and further study of the troubled relationship between the European and Algerian communities of Algeria will be quite possible in the second half of the novel. Since Albert Camus formally divided his novel into two parts, the rupture in the narrative to which we are referring is strongly underscored by the physical layout of the text itself, in many ways encouraging the reader to understand that he or she is really dealing with a new text after the shooting on the beach.

The first environment in which Meursault finds himself in the second half of L'Étranger is the office of the “juge d’instruction” who begins interrogating the prisoner “dans une pièce tendue de rideaux.”¹⁸³ In this enclosed environment, in which a lamp pointed at Meursault and leaving his questioner in the shadows takes the place of the sun and man-made walls take the place of the rocks and waterlines that earlier hemmed in Meursault, the accused will begin to attempt an explanation of the circumstances surrounding the killing on the beach. Rather than insisting on the dire reality of his straits, the narrating Meursault indicates that he took the entire setting as a game, because “[il] avai[t] déjà lu une description semblable dans des livres.”¹⁸⁴ This comment, coming from the narrator of a novel, forces the reader to reevaluate the narrative process in which he or she is involved; by emphasizing the on-going story-telling in this manner, Meursault obliges us to resituate his character in the novelistic setting of which he is also a character, and thus we realize that Meursault is, at least for a moment, somewhere in-between various levels of narrative. He is not merely character and narrator, but now also reader, since he refers to things he has read, and in fact also an actor, for the judge’s room resembles a stage when reexamined from a literary point of view. The curtains that frame the space are freighted with theatrical meaning when juxtaposed with Meursault’s comment that the setting looked to him like “un jeu.”¹⁸⁵ Normally meaning “a game,” this term is of course related to the verb “to play,” but also “to act.” The lamp that shines upon Meursault like a spotlight, leaving the judge in the dark, also emphasizes the idea that Meursault is on stage in this new space. Here we see that Meursault conceives of his new set as a stage, and he appears bemused to find himself in

¹⁸³ L'Étranger 100.

¹⁸⁴ L'Étranger 100.

¹⁸⁵ L'Étranger 100.

such an environment. A stage implies an audience, while the judge appears to be backstage directing the action: “il m’a fait asseoir” so we see once again that Meursault has wound up in a space between, this time located between the judge and the implied audience, perhaps represented by the literary audience whose existence was pointed to by Meursault mentioning having read about such scenes. This short scene introduces one of the new spaces Meursault has discovered through his actions at the end of the first half of the novel, and a new role to be played by this character, that of actor in the spotlight who is observed by all those around. By the end of this short scene, we see that Meursault has become comfortable in his new space, finding the judge “raisonnable” and “sympathique.” However, Meursault is brought back to the larger scene of the novel on his way out the door (and back, of course, to his prison cell): “[e]n sortant, j’allais même lui tendre la main, mais je me suis souvenu à temps que j’avais tué un homme.”¹⁸⁶ This cold realization strikes the reader at least as hard as it does Meursault, since there had been no mention of the reason that Meursault was being staged by the judge in this little scene, and thus the reminder that this scene, like all those to follow, is part of the process of judging Meursault for his actions on the beach (and before) is chillingly surprising. Meursault’s first space between in the second half of L’étranger is not so much physical as it is literary, for now we see that this character’s positioning in regards to the readers of the narrative of which he is the narrator places him between us and other characters in the novel, forcing us to see them through his own perceptions of them, and thereby obliging us to share his point of view.

During his following visit to the judge’s chambers, Meursault is once again staged by the magistrate, this time with a different lighting technique: the office “était plein d’une lumière à

¹⁸⁶ L’étranger 100.

peine tamisée par un rideau de voile.”¹⁸⁷ Repeating his directorial gesture of having Meursault sit down, the judge summons a stenographer who, Meursault tells us, “est venu s’installer presque dans mon dos.”¹⁸⁸ Here we see that Meursault is literally placed in the narrow space between two representatives of the French legal system, the judge who intends to question him in the absence of his attorney, and the stenographer who will record the interaction for posterity. The bright light on the stage seems to imply that light will be shed on Meursault’s case, but the scrim suggests that there is something shady about the proceedings here, as will become clear once the judge gets going. Obliging Meursault to repeat his description of the events on the beach, after inquiring as to Meursault’s feelings about his mother, the judge zooms in on the second through fifth shots with the revolver. Meursault thinks about it and then says that he “avai[t] tiré une seule fois d’abord et, après quelques secondes, les quatre autres coups.”¹⁸⁹ This truthful account of the shooting, at least inasmuch as it squares with what the narrator told the readers of the shooting early in the narrative, leads the judge to ask Meursault a crucial question: “Pourquoi avez-vous attendu entre le premier et le second coup?”¹⁹⁰ This question, focusing on the space of time between the first two pistol-shots, elicits no response from Meursault, who had up until this point communicated so freely with the judge that he mentions that he had never spoken so much. Indeed, this temporal space between is of key import for this case, for it shows quite clearly that Meursault was not merely responding to external influences when he shot the Arab on the beach, at least not for the four shots after the Arab was already down. This space

¹⁸⁷ L’étranger 103.

¹⁸⁸ L’étranger 104.

¹⁸⁹ L’étranger 106.

¹⁹⁰ L’étranger 106.

between implies some sort of reflective moment, a rupture in the flow of events on the beach that led to the shooting. Meursault's first shot could be explained away as self-defense, as a reaction to the sun in his eyes, as a reflexive twitch brought on by the stress and contributing environmental factors; the four shots that were produced after this space between, this pause, can have no such explanation. In even an unbiased legal arena, which this judge will show seconds later Meursault is not dealing with, this space between the first shot and the second would suggest premeditation and therefore guilt. Even Meursault seems to sense this, as the memory of this space in time is what ultimately arrests his headlong account of the circumstances of the shooting, even if he states that he felt like telling the judge that this factoid was unimportant: "ce dernier point n'avait pas tellement d'importance."¹⁹¹

Whether Meursault really intended to make this objection or not, he was not given the chance, for it is at this moment that the judge suddenly shifts from his role of representing the state seeking the truth and enters more precisely into an Inquisition mode, for he begins to brandish a crucifix at Meursault and to cry "d'une façon déraisonnable"¹⁹² that Meursault should accept his intervention with Christ for the forgiveness of Meursault's guilt. This "coup de théâtre," in which the judge's personality seems to undergo a radical, surprising shift accompanied by threatening physical gestures, results in a compression of the space between the judge and Meursault, while the latter is unable to back up because he is seated and because of the stenographer who is already practically touching his back. As we observed in the attempts to close the gap of the space between the Muslim-Algerians and the European-Algerians in the first half of the novel, here we see that the effort to force a connection between the judge and

¹⁹¹ L'étranger 107.

¹⁹² L'étranger 108.

Meursault is doomed to failure. Not only has Meursault already described the judge's manner of speaking as "déraisonnable," but we discover that these two men now effectively speak different languages, for they no longer communicate effectively. Meursault, in an effort to rid himself of someone whose commentary doesn't interest him, tries to give the impression that he agrees with the judge; however, when the judge triumphantly asks overtly if Meursault is not now ready to trust in Christ, Meursault's negative response snaps the judge back into his chair, ending the attempt to cross the space between the two men, which is now revealed as being a much wider gap than was apparent before this scene. Immediately after this scene, in which Meursault is revealed to be separated from the judge by an uncrossable space, the reader is further distanced from the scene and thus the two characters by a reminder of the literary nature of the dramatic scene he or she had just experienced, for "la machine, qui n'avait pas cessé de suivre le dialogue, en prolongeait encore les dernières phrases."¹⁹³ Not only does the "machine" (à écrire, of course) in and of itself point to the artifice inherent in the scene it describes, the fact of its transcription forces the reader to remember that he or she is dealing with literature. Furthermore, the lag between the dramatic scene of Meursault and the judge and the final tapping of the typewriter is another temporal space between, further highlighting the disconnect between the various worlds involved in the scene, including that of the spectators/readers. Meursault has been understood by critics since the novel was first released as being isolated, estranged from the world around him; here we see that his isolation is not limited to one world, but extends into a multiplicity thereof.

Meursault's personality seems to evolve, or perhaps to become more thoroughly that which it already was, through the environmental changes accompanying his arrest. In fact, not

¹⁹³ L'étranger 109.

only his environment changes, but his society seems to undergo a shift as well. We have seen that in the first half of the novel each attempt by a member of either the European-Algerian community or the Muslim-Algerian community to cross the space between these two societies results in a violent backlash, in which we read an acquiescence on the part of the author that this multicultural society was not really one in which intercourse was frequent or facile between the representatives of its various constituent groups. Once in prison, however, Meursault immediately finds that even though tensions still exist between the various communities, it is now possible for some peaceful interaction to take place. The narrator recounts being placed in a holding cell, mostly populated by Arabs. “Ils ont ri en me voyant. Puis ils m’ont demandé ce que j’avais fait.”¹⁹⁴ In this description we see what is perhaps not an overtly friendly welcome for the new white prisoner, since the Arab prisoners laugh either at him or at the fact that a white man has actually been arrested. Nevertheless, we see that almost immediately a conversation is initiated by the Arab prisoners with the European-Algerian inmate, and this fact in and of itself shows that the novel has entered a new phase, for even such innocuous questions would have been fraught with danger in the first half of the narrative. Of course, when Meursault informs his new cell-mates that he is there because of having killed an Arab, this admission has a chilling effect on the conversation. This silence is only momentary, however, as sunset triggers a new topic of conversation between the Arabs and Meursault.

Where the reader might imagine, with gathering darkness and a cell full of Arabs and one white man who admits to having killed an Arab, that some violent retribution might be in the offing, the narrator shows a situation 180 degrees from the reader’s quite reasonable anticipation by showing, for the first time in this novel, cooperation between members of these two

¹⁹⁴ L’*étranger* 114.

antagonistic parts of the Algerian community. “Ils m’ont expliqué comment il fallait arranger la natte où je devais coucher. En roulant une des extrémités, on pouvait en faire un traversin.”¹⁹⁵

In this remarkable scene, which inaugurates Meursault’s experience with the prison system, we find that not only is what would be a quite understandable antagonism missing, but that in fact there is a sense of community between Arabs and *pied-noir* that has heretofore been absent from this novel. We note that this sense of commonality is reinforced linguistically through the use of the impersonal pronoun, “on,” used apparently in this scene in its frequently-observed role of replacement for the first-person plural pronoun, “nous,” or “we.” If Meursault and his Arab cellmates constitute a linguistic first-person plural community, then the space between these two communities observed in the first part of this novel would seem here to have been successfully crossed without resulting in the explosion of violence that accompanied such traverses, or even the attempts at such, in the first half of the novel. We remark further that not only is the expected violence missing from this scene, but that in addition the cooperation between Arab and *pied-noir* has here resulted in a subversion of the French penal system, since the uncomfortable mat provided as a foretaste of the discomfort of imprisonment as later commented upon by Meursault is in this case transformed into a pillow, conjuring images of creature comforts rather than punishment. Furthermore, we underscore here that the fact that Meursault would need to learn such a trick from the Arab inmates indicates that his new environment is actually the terrain of the Muslim-Algerians, since they know the sort of survival tips that can only be imparted from the experienced to the neophyte. The concept of the French prison system being the accustomed environment of the Muslim-Algerians seems to represent a reality of the French occupation of Algeria which is rarely to be found openly in the statements to the press of Albert Camus, but

¹⁹⁵ L’*étranger* 114.

which is nevertheless clearly indicated here in his earliest published fiction. While Meursault's stay in this holding cell will prove impermanent, we argue that this short scene is vital to understanding a shift undergone by the protagonist in being arrested: he will henceforth experience at least a part of the Algerian existence of those under the oppression of the state, and so his observations on the geometry and geography of the various apparatuses of that oppression will permit the reader to see, albeit obliquely, a more clear view of the situation in Algeria before independence than was ever presented by Camus in his non-fiction statements.

Soon after his incarceration, Meursault receives a visit from his lover, Marie. The visitation chamber constitutes one of the most carefully constructed geometric microcosms of Algerian society in all the works of Camus. This space, of which a central part between is a dominant element, provides an extremely interesting schematic of the Algerian space as it exists within the French penal system. "La salle était séparée en trois parties par deux grandes grilles qui la coupaient dans sa longueur. Entre les grilles se trouvait un espace de huit à dix mètres qui séparait les visiteurs des prisonniers."¹⁹⁶ The space between the visitors and the prisoners is here very explicitly set forth by the author, and we see furthermore that this space is not wholly empty, as it in fact contains a prison guard; this would seem to reinforce the inviolability of the space, since the guard's presence assures that no one else would dare attempt to transgress upon the boundaries of this interstitial space. With this corridor bounded by bars separating the free from the imprisoned, we see that the penitentiary system has protected itself from the violence of two communities intermingling that we observe in the first half of the novel; interestingly, however, the nature of the two separated groups has now undergone a major shift, for no longer are the *pieds-noirs* and the Arabs separated, but now it is simply the incarcerated and the

¹⁹⁶ L'étranger 114-115.

unimprisoned that are forcefully separated. Meursault's shift in societal position, alluded to in the earlier scene in which he is taught how to make a pillow from his mat, seems to be somewhat confirmed in this scene, since we read that "[d]e mon côté, il y avait une dizaine de détenus, des Arabes pour la plupart."¹⁹⁷ Here, the narrating Meursault claims all the inmates are "on his side," which has the dual freight in French that it does in English. The space between, protected by bars and a prison guard, serves to strengthen the separation between Meursault's new side and his old, represented by the visiting Marie. This space also has a significant impact upon the actions taken by the visitors and the prisoners, as the sizable gulf between the two groups not only obviates the possibility of any physical communion, but it also renders more complicated the very oral communication for which this room was presumably conceived: "À cause de la distance entre les grilles, les visiteurs et les prisonniers étaient obligés de parler très haut."¹⁹⁸ The dehumanizing aspect of this system is readily apparent, since by forcing the inmates to shout their private conversations with their loved ones from outside the prison, the warden and his staff remind their charges that they no longer possess any privacy or intimacy. Indeed, we see that Meursault is peculiarly affected by this system, in that he finds the conversation of his neighboring prisoner more interesting than his own with Marie. Meursault also finds the visitation room to be a disorienting space, and he compares it unfavorably with his prison cell: "[m]a cellule était plus calme et plus sombre."¹⁹⁹ In this confusing, dehumanizing space, Meursault's rupture with the world of freedom as represented by Marie is rendered extremely clear; not only does Meursault have difficulty adapting to the noise and light of this strange

¹⁹⁷ L'étranger 115.

¹⁹⁸ L'étranger 115.

¹⁹⁹ L'étranger 115.

space, but he finds it difficult to converse with his lover. Examining the other prisoners and their visitors, Meursault seems to find Marie's interventions distracting, or annoying: "je n'ai pas eu le temps de les observer plus longtemps parce que Marie m'a crié qu'il fallait espérer."²⁰⁰ This exhortation produces nothing more than a noncommittal "oui" from Meursault, who seems more interested in the fabric of Marie's dress than in anything she might have to say to him. This entire scene, played out on a sharply geometrical stage in which a space between is the central element both formally and narratively, shows the growing disjuncture between Meursault and his life in the first half of the novel.

However, the communicative difficulties experienced by Meursault and Marie in this scene are not consistent to all the other couples sharing this inhospitable space. Upon closer inspection, we see that the majority of the occupants of this visitation chamber are able to communicate freely: "Malgré le tumulte, ils parvenaient à s'entendre en parlant très bas."²⁰¹ The persons evoked here are the "Arabes," and we see once again that this segment of the Algerian populace is more at home in this punitive space, as they have developed a system for defeating the communicative barrier imposed by the space between and the crowded conditions in the hall. Unlike in the holding cell, where Meursault's companions of misfortune actively showed him how to make the best of his new, unwelcoming landscape, this time Meursault observes that there is a way to defeat the barriers of the visiting room, but he does not actually attempt to put this knowledge into practice. Furthermore, we see that the horizontal separation between parties imposed by the geometry of the space, which would seem to affirm Meursault's appurtenance to the trans-culture group of the imprisoned, is not the only defining boundary in

²⁰⁰ L'étranger 115.

²⁰¹ L'étranger 116.

the room. The Muslim-Algerians, who are managing to communicate with each other across the space between, are doing so in part by having created another space between, this time vertically, between themselves and the shouting *pieds-noirs*: “La plupart des prisonniers arabes ainsi que leurs familles s’étaient accroupis en vis-à-vis.”²⁰² In contrast to the European-Algerians, who stand at the bars and shout to one another, the “Arabes” are utilizing a different plane for their more successful, and subtle, communicative strategies. In this way, in addition to allowing for differing levels of isolation from the free world of the prisoners from different cultural backgrounds, the narrator shows us that a space between the Muslim-Algerian inmates and the European-Algerian prisoners is still being maintained, and thus discourages the reader from carrying too far the apparent homogenization of the penal system. Even if all the prisoners are placed within the same punitive framework, in this case represented by the rigidly-conceived visiting hall, there are still separations between the constituent groups that make up the prison population. What is somewhat strange in this new schematic is that while, geometrically, the European-Algerians are still on top, literally closer to the high ceilings of the visiting room, their exalted status within the prison’s architecture seems, rather, to have a deleterious effect on their ability to communicate with their loved ones from outside the punitive space. There are probably many conclusions to which one could come based on this paradoxical situation, but it seems clear that Camus here is making certain in this scene that his reader simultaneously understands that Meursault, in being imprisoned, has acceded to certain aspects of a new identity, while always retaining at least a portion of the cultural apartheid that is his birthright as a *piéd-noir*. Despite some indications that Meursault had in some fashion definitively crossed the space between the two main cultural communities of pre-independence Algeria, in this

²⁰² L’*étranger* 115-116.

scene's geometrical staging of the two groups occupying different altitudes in a space that constrains them to share the same horizontal strictures, we see that the erosion of the space between is far from complete. Even when Meursault is sharing, as much as possible, this punitive space with Marie, across the space between and definitively separated, and with the other prisoners, the majority of whom are "arabes," we see in Meursault's description of the space that he is aware of the vertical stratification of the room: "Le murmure des Arabes continuait au-dessous de nous."²⁰³ Note that this statement serves as a linguistic echo of the social separation, for Meursault and Marie still constitute "nous," while the Muslim-Algerians, half of which are now spatially much less separated from Meursault, are exteriorized in the third person.

The termination of this scene, the only time Meursault would receive a visitor in this rigidly separated space due to the lack of a legal tie between Marie and Meursault, signals the beginning of the true incarceration experience of Meursault, "les choses dont je n'ai jamais aimé parler."²⁰⁴ We have already examined how the geometry of the visitation chamber functions to foreground the separation between the prisoners and their visitors from the free world. We have also seen how the space between the *pieds-noirs* and the Muslims, greatly narrowed now that both are under the thumb of the French government in the penal system, nevertheless still exists, although in a vertical rather than horizontal plane. The final moments of the visitation scene add important detail to the new society in which Meursault finds himself. First, we see that he has already begun to become institutionalized in a fashion, for he finds it difficult to handle the relative chaos of this big chamber: "Je me sentais un peu malade et j'aurais voulu partir. Le

²⁰³ L'étranger 118.

²⁰⁴ L'étranger 119.

bruit me faisait mal.”²⁰⁵ “Partir” in this context can only mean returning to his cell, so here we have the first hints that Meursault is becoming attached to his life in isolation. While he admits to feeling torn, because he also wants to enjoy Marie’s presence, we see that the voices of all the people in this room, Marie included, are affecting him with violence, and actually causing Meursault pain. This pain, experienced through communication, is contrasted with the situation of another prisoner in the room and his visitor, who just look at each other rather than talking; Meursault describes the two of them as an “îlot de silence.”²⁰⁶ This little isolated space, characterized by a lack of at least verbal communication, seems to represent to Meursault a situation preferable to the noisy visiting room, and suggests yet again that he has begun to feel wistful about the cell to which he states he would like to return, since an individual prison cell would seem to be another such little island of silence. Just after Meursault expresses his desire to leave, we see another contrast with the “Arabes” who share the prison space with Meursault: “on a emmené les Arabes.”²⁰⁷ The juxtaposition of this phrase with Meursault’s expression of choice suggests that *pied-noir* prisoners may have a more flexible prison experience than their Muslim counterparts, since these are shown being forced into passivity while Meursault at least retains an illusion of some personal control over his movements within the prison. The taking away of the Arabs is made to seem somewhat ominous by the silence that falls as soon as they begin to be removed, hinting at some sort of complicity in whatever was happening to these disappeared men. The contrast between the disappearance of the Muslims and the treatment of the *pieds-noirs* is further underlined by the non-verbal communication between a guard and the

²⁰⁵ L’étranger 118.

²⁰⁶ L’étranger 118.

²⁰⁷ L’étranger 118.

silent man next to Meursault, since the “Arabes” had merited no such communication that the narrator thought to mention. Finally, the text gives the reader every indication that Meursault had decided of his own volition to leave, since there is not only a lack of any mention of any external pressure upon him to remove himself, but we see that he retained the freedom of choice to turn and look back again at Marie, who was “immobile, le visage écrasé contre la grille, avec le même sourire écartelé et crispé.”²⁰⁸ Strangely, it is Marie who seems to be experiencing imprisonment and punishment here instead of Meursault, since she is crushed against prison bars and even associated with drawing and quartering, a mode of punishment that was certainly out of date, but nevertheless delightfully evocative of the imaginative cruelty of penal codes. Meursault, having discovered through this visit from Marie not only that he could prefer his prison cell to other situations, but also that his imprisonment paradoxically constituted a relative freedom compared to others in the space, will now be free to deeply experience the incarceration experience without further interruptions of members of the non-penitentiary world.

As we have seen in an analysis of the scene in which Meursault receives his first and last visit from Marie, the new prisoner quickly grew adapted to his prison cell, to the point of thinking wistfully of it while in the visiting room with his lady-friend. In fact, Meursault identifies the moment of Marie’s visit, and the subsequent letter confirming that it was to be her last one, as the real beginning of his incarceration: “de ce jour-là, j’ai senti que j’étais chez moi dans ma cellule et que ma vie s’y arrêta.”²⁰⁹ The sentiment of being at home in a prison cell is somewhat surprising from a character who seemed to love nothing more than going to the beach and enjoying the outdoors in the first half of the novel. In retrospect, the scene in the first half of

²⁰⁸ L’étranger 119.

²⁰⁹ L’étranger 113.

the novel in which Meursault passes an entire day in his apartment, gazing down at his neighborhood, provided a foretaste of how he would come to terms with life in prison, for even if his panorama is significantly reduced in his new home space, he will nevertheless succeed at filling his days with gazing and ruminating. He calls the process of whiling away his days “tuer le temps.”²¹⁰ This idiomatic expression, conveniently available in English as well as French, places the behaviors with which he will “kill time” in a rather macabre context. Between the walls of his prison cells, in the most constrained space between imaginable, Meursault will find that he is able to evoke all that he enjoyed in his prior life through remembering, although in thus killing the time he was forced to recognize “combien les murs de ma prison étaient rapprochés.”²¹¹ Meursault refers to events in his earlier life as having transpired “dans un autre monde,”²¹² reminding the reader that he now occupies a new one, with different spatial constraints and different modes of life. It seems that coming to terms with incarceration, to the point that one can miss one’s cell while visiting with one’s erstwhile girlfriend, involves losing the “pensées d’homme libre”²¹³ and accepting the justice of punishment for crime. Therefore, we see that Meursault is wracked with sexual desire for Marie, or for any woman, until growing used to this lack in his new life. We see that Meursault is driven to the extreme of sucking on splinters in a desperate attempt to satisfy his nicotine cravings. Finally, however, Meursault seems to come to grips with his new lifestyle, largely through the realization that he could have been worse off. The image he chooses to describe this worst-case scenario is curious: “si l’on

²¹⁰ L'étranger 122.

²¹¹ L'étranger 120.

²¹² L'étranger 120.

²¹³ L'étranger 119.

m'avait fait vivre dans un tronc d'arbre sec, sans autre occupation que de regarder la fleur de ciel au-dessus de ma tête[...].”²¹⁴ While affirming that he would have grown used to this strange sort of imprisonment, eventually looking forward to the rare moments when birds might pass overhead, we see in this image a sort of idealized incarceration, in which the prisoner would completely fill the space between the walls of his cell. It is noteworthy that Meursault's prison cell is “toute en haut de la ville, et par une petite fenêtre, je pouvais voir la mer.”²¹⁵ This panoramic view recalls the inevitable hike up the central mountain peak in the robinsonnade, which allows the Robinson to survey his prison island, while at the same time having it at his feet and thus dominating the space. Here, Meursault is able to survey the lands surrounding his prison, and note the water that forms its ultimate wall, but the sense of domination is singularly missing in Camus's version of this moment.

In a space between²¹⁶ located within his prison cell, the incarcerated Meursault finds a scrap of paper describing part of a story which fascinates him during the interminable hours of imprisonment. “Entre [s]a paillasse et la planche du lit”²¹⁷ is a torn piece of newspaper containing what he refers to as “l'histoire du Tchécoslovaque.” This story, the basic plot of which is also the framework of Camus's play *Le malentendu*, provides a parallel to Meursault's situation which interests our study as much as it seems to interest the prisoner, Meursault, himself. In this snippet from an old newspaper, Meursault reads and rereads “des milliers de

²¹⁴ *L'étranger* 120.

²¹⁵ *L'étranger* 114.

²¹⁶ Note that the cell itself is referred to as an insular space, suggesting that its entire confines is insular, since Meursault refers to himself as being “isolé” within.

²¹⁷ *L'étranger* 124.

fois” a “fait divers” about a Czech man who returns after a long absence to his native town, having made his fortune, and who is murdered by his mother and sister who wish to steal his money and who do not realize that this is their long-lost relative. This story within a story seems to exhibit spaces between, and the very brevity of the fragmentary text serves to highlight the parallels between the situations of Meursault and the unnamed Czech gentleman. First, the story seems to be an investigation of the concept of home, and ultimately a rather pessimistic commentary on the possibility of reintegrating a home from which one had earlier been separated. The unnamed Czech, returning to the land of his birth, seems nevertheless to embody an identity between that of native son and foreigner, as he initiates a masquerade based on his knowledge of the people of his hometown, while his mother and sister act as though he were an anonymous and conveniently rich outsider. The happy homecoming of the local boy who made it big is contrasted with the grotesque outcome of his masquerade, and the macabre results continue in the violent suicides of the man’s mother and sister once they realize the identity of their victim. The Czech returned to a space that was somewhere between home, sweet home and hell, and the mother and sister experience an analogous shift in perspective from viewing the arrival of a rich fool as a financial opportunity to be seized with both hands to understanding how their violence has actually stabbed them (or rather, hammered them) in their own flesh and blood. The troubled relationship of the Czech to his home village and the twisted interdependence that his tale exhibits between various members of the family in this village combine to portray a terrain in which nothing is stable, and assumptions about otherness and sameness are shown to be unreliably accurate. A gulf exists between the Czech and his home village and family that he left behind in the past. Whether this gulf, or space, between his new and his old life was caused by his wealth, by the passage of time, by contact with cultures

exterior to the village, or by a combination of factors, we (and Meursault) do not know. What is made very clear by this little anecdote discovered in a space between within the space between four walls that is Meursault's new environment is that crossing the space between results in violence. The Czech may have unnecessarily complicated things with his masquerade, but the impulse to hide his true identity must be a result of the cultural distance that he has cultivated during his years of absence from his home village and family. His brutal murder and the subsequent suicides are the direct results of his attempt to traverse the gulf that had grown up between him and his family, between him and his native land, during the years he spent becoming an other. This situation seems to be parallel not only to Meursault's own situation of having caused violence during an attempt to close the gap between himself and a Muslim on the beach, ultimately resulting in his own death as well, but in a larger sense to the situation of the *pieds-noirs*, who occupy a cultural space separated not only from the Arabs and Berbers with whom they share the Algerian landscape but also from the mainland French who occupy their supposed home country. The *pieds-noirs*, like Meursault in his prison cell and the Czech in his mother's hotel room, occupy a space between well-defined categories and will thus be vulnerable in any change of environment, for they will be forced to attempt to close gaps between cultures, and will thus provoke the violent backlashes predicted by Camus's novel. The commentary Meursault makes upon this vignette shows a marked lack of (self-)pity: "le voyageur l'avait un peu mérité."²¹⁸ By "playing" (jouer) the Czech man had brought upon himself the violent outcome of his sad little story, which Meursault is now placing in the context of a morality play. However, the message that playing is at fault seems disingenuous since in the larger context of the book the cultural roles of the characters do not seem to be a choice at all, but rather the direct

²¹⁸ L'Étranger 125.

outcome of their contested heritages. Even without taking on false roles as did the Czech character in the morality play (which Camus will actually stage, let us not forget) the roles assigned to the characters in L'étranger by dint of their cultures are impossible to shirk, as the costumes are as integral as the very skin of the actors/characters. Concluding that the *pieds-noirs*, the mainland French, and the Arab and Berber Algerians deserve the fates of their various violent interactions, Camus here cannot be said to be envisioning an endless future of peaceful cultural plurality in the Algerian space, as Said in particular has suggested; instead, the only logical extrapolation of such a zero-sum game is that only one of these three larger cultural groups is likely to survive in the Algerian space in the future. The fact that at the end of this novel it is a representative of the *pied-noir* culture that is beheaded by the French government might point to the outcome thought most likely by Camus.

2.5. Losing his Head

During the trial, Meursault inhabits the very center of attention, between journalists, judges, jury members, witnesses, and spectators. In this position of intense scrutiny from all angles, Meursault's very point of view becomes split, as he begins to see himself in various members of the trial's spectators and participants, so that while he is the focus of the entire proceeding, he paradoxically feels that the trial process serves to, from his perspective, "m'écarter encore de l'affaire, me réduire à zéro[...]"²¹⁹ Like the theatrical staging of Meursault that we noted in the scene in which his pre-trial interrogation takes place, here once again Meursault is on a stage, but this time the theatre is played in the round, and the direction Meursault is receiving from his attorney ("[il] m'a conseillé de répondre brièvement aux

²¹⁹ L'étranger 159.

questions qu'on me poserait, de ne pas prendre d'initiatives et de me reposer sur lui pour le reste"²²⁰) seems to discourage Meursault's active participation. In the spotlight and simultaneously sidelined by the strange direction of this theatrical presentation, Meursault looks out upon the spectators and begins to imagine himself looking back at himself, particularly when he regards one of the journalists: "j'ai eu l'impression bizarre d'être regardé par moi-même."²²¹ The muddle of identity and perspective here of course gives to the novel its celebrated ambiance of detachment from reality, or at least from the more petty concerns thereof, but this particular juxtaposition of the *piéd-noir* journalist's regard and that of Meursault seems to serve as a reminder of the cultural background of the protagonist; he feels that that journalist could very well have been, in fact, is to a significant extent, identical to him. This strongly reinforces the specificity of the culture of Meursault, particularly since the journalist is shown as being physically different from another journalist who is identified as a "French French" envoy from a Parisian newspaper. It is perhaps germane to note that the physical specificity underlined is corpulence in the Parisian compared to leanness in the *piéd-noir*, a not very surprising echo of the ideal of the Mediterranean man. Ultimately, Meursault effectively switches places with the journalist, for he reports experiencing the trial from point of view not anchored in himself, but rather exterior, looking in at the accused man, then the murderer, in the box. He sums up the experience as an enjoyable show, noting that "il est toujours intéressant d'entendre parler de soi."²²² He slowly returns to himself as he is ushered from the court out into the evening air,

²²⁰ L'étranger 131.

²²¹ L'étranger 132.

²²² L'étranger 151.

where memories of his favorite time of day slowly merge with the realization that he is heading, not back to his apartment, but back to his cell.

Once he is a condemned man, Meursault receives a new prison cell, and this one seems to resemble the hollow tree trunk he had earlier fantasized about as the worse type of prison possible, but one to which Meursault felt certain he could adjust if need be: “On m’a changé de cellule. De celle-ci, lorsque je suis allongé, je vois le ciel et je ne vois que lui.”²²³ However, rather than passing his time waiting for the odd bird to fly through the small arc of sky visible to him, as he had theorized, Meursault instead spends his days wondering if there is some way to avoid the sentence of death under which he has been placed. This new cell acts as a temporal space between the past and a future which is far more discernible than is normal for a human being, what Meursault calls a “certitude insolente.”²²⁴ Meursault insists on the juxtaposition of the cell and the narrow temporal space in which the death sentence has placed him, stating that its effects “devenaient aussi certains, aussi sérieux, que la présence de ce mur tout le long duquel j’écrasais mon corps.”²²⁵ We note here, additionally, that Meursault is no longer, strictly speaking, in the middle of his cell, but rather he is up against the wall both literally and figuratively, as the narrow interstitial space he inhabits is shrinking.

Meursault’s final cell is brought into relief by the visit of the chaplain who comes even after Meursault has refused him invitations thrice. Meursault clearly pays close attention to the chaplain’s physical intrusion into his already narrow, limited space, as we read “il s’est adossé au

²²³ L’étranger 165.

²²⁴ L’étranger 167.

²²⁵ L’étranger 167.

mur, les mains à plat sur les cuisses.”²²⁶ This careful description indicates simultaneously the fact that the chaplain is interacting with the very wall against which Meursault crushes his body and that the two men do not fit comfortably in this little room, forcing the chaplain to sit rigidly and in such a way that he takes up the least amount of space possible. During a discussion in which the chaplain tries to assail Meursault’s atheistic outlook on life and death, Meursault begins to grow weary of the chaplain’s presence when the latter stands up, leading Meursault to note that “dans cette cellule si étroite, s’il voulait remuer, il n’avait pas le choix. Il fallait s’asseoir ou se lever.”²²⁷ After this reflection, not on what the chaplain had to say but once again on the physical parameters of the prison cell, Meursault has almost completely lost interest in the chaplain when this uninvited guest finally says something that makes some sense to Meursault: “Toutes ces pierres suent la douleur, je le sais. Je ne les ai jamais regardées sans angoisse. Mais, du fond du cœur, je sais que les plus misérables d’entre vous ont vu sortir de leur obscurité un visage divin. C’est ce visage qu’on vous demande de voir.”²²⁸ Here, Meursault is finally able to participate in the conversation. He affirms that he knows these stones in the cell wall better than he knows anything or anyone in the world. However, he affirms that no face has ever come out of these walls in all the long hours he has examined them, they have remained simply cold, sweaty stones. Once it is clear that the chaplain and Meursault cannot share the limited space of the cell with their completely different worldviews, Meursault manages to discover a technique whereby he removes the intruder from his cell: he attacks him. This surprising burst of frenetic energy leaves Meursault quite fatigued, so once the prison guards and the chaplain have exited

²²⁶ L’étranger 176.

²²⁷ L’étranger 179.

²²⁸ L’étranger 180.

his cell, Meursault takes a nap against the cold stone of the wall he knows so well. It is during this night that Meursault seems to come to grips with his impending execution, in which he will experience, for a brief moment, his final space between.

In his final days, except when interrupted by the chaplain as discussed above, Meursault ruminates on the mechanics of his upcoming execution. His analysis of the procedure from the perspective of the prospective “patient” permits us to see the clearest portrait of the mind of the *pied-noir* in the fiction of Albert Camus, for couched in this discussion is not only a thinly-veiled commentary against capital punishment, but also a tacit recognition of the troubled relationship between the *pieds-noirs* and the metropolitan French, and above all the government that supposedly represents both groups.

In his description of the physicality, or “*mécanique*” of the execution, Meursault quickly narrows in on several important aspects of death by guillotine. First, he notes sadly that his mental image of climbing a scaffold for the execution was a romantic misconception stemming from “tout ce qu’on m’avait appris”²²⁹ concerning the French Revolution. Note that while he debunks the myth of the elevated guillotine platform, he simultaneously points out that his misconceptions had been taught to him by an unnamed other, “on.” “They” were presumably responsible not only for his false mental image of a glorious machine raised high for all to see, but for inculcating in him other similarly inaccurate ideas about the glories of the French republic, founded in many respects through the guillotine. Meursault points out to his readers not only that “[e]n réalité, la machine était posée à même le sol,” but that it was “beaucoup plus étroite que je ne le pensais.”²³⁰ Here we see that Meursault has recognized that the guillotine

²²⁹ *L'étranger* 170.

²³⁰ *L'étranger* 170.

was exalted in his images provided by the French educational system, but that reality paints a sobering portrait of a narrow machine placed flat on the ground, and which a victim was forced to approach “comme on marche à la rencontre d’une personne.”²³¹ This is a moment rich in realizations for Meursault and also for his readers: as Meursault confronts the falseness of his “idées exagérées”²³² the reader is able to see, in Meursault’s coming to terms with the mechanics of execution, a more clearly defined relationship between this *pied-noir* and the French state symbolized by the guillotine. The French state is here revealed to be, for Meursault and by extension for the *pieds-noirs*, less exalted and romantic than had been previously understood, and simultaneously more clinical, precise, and “étroite.” This new, narrower understanding of the French government seems to offer the direst consequences for this *pied-noir* in its grasp.

The first comment upon the up-coming execution parses it in the following manner: “le président m’a dit dans une forme bizarre que j’aurais la tête tranchée sur une place publique au nom du peuple français.”²³³ We will insist that this formulaic expression, described here by the narrator as “bizarre,” is key to understanding the ramifications of this novel on the question of the status of Algeria and the prospects for the Algerians of European descent. As the presiding judge informs Meursault that he will have his head cut off in a public square, he adds that this will be done in the name of the French people. However, for Meursault and for many other inhabitants of pre-independence Algeria, the question of just who this French people was had no extremely obvious answer. While the French from Paris were unquestionably French, the status

²³¹ L’étranger 170.

²³² L’étranger 170.

²³³ L’étranger, 164.

of the European-Algerians and Muslim-Algerians was much murkier at this time. While these two groups technically lived in France, since Algeria had been administratively divided into French départements, and while the European-Algerians and a tiny fraction of the Arabs and Berbers could revendicate French citizenship, there was certainly some doubt as to whether either of the Algerian sub-cultures was, at least in a cultural sense, really French. Meursault, ruminating about the randomness of his death sentence, points this out by stating that the fact that the sentence “avait été portée au crédit d’une notion aussi imprécise que le peuple français”²³⁴ made the decision seem far less serious. Coming from a character who is technically French, this commentary seems to reinforce the separation observed in this novel between the French of France and the European, or “French,” Algerians, for if Meursault finds the notion of the “French people” imprecise, then he appears to be examining this confusing phenomenon from the outside.

As Meursault continues to reflect upon the mechanics of execution, he becomes somewhat obsessed with the idea that some sort of flexibility should be built into a capital punishment system, for he finds it distressing to understand that once his sentence was handed down he had absolutely no possible way of escaping from the death that had been assigned to him. The blade of the guillotine, in the view of Meursault, is defective in its chilling perfection: “ce qui était défectueux avec le couperet, c’est qu’il y avait aucune chance, aucune.”²³⁵ The guillotine, albeit less glorified than the image from history textbooks, nevertheless is presented as a perfect killing machine. The worst part of the guillotine, for Meursault, is that he realizes that it is in his best interest that the machine function perfectly, for a botched execution would,

²³⁴ L'étranger 167.

²³⁵ L'étranger 169.

rather than free him from the assembly line of death, force him to undergo another slice from the machine. The ultimate victory of the guillotine and the government/people it represents is that “le condamné était obligé de collaborer moralement. C’était son intérêt que tout marchait sans accroc.”²³⁶ The humiliation of being forced into collaboration, which would certainly have resonated with the French during the Second World War, when this novel appeared, unmans the character in the sense that it forces him to choose cooperation with a process that is to his detriment in order to avoid torturous pain. For Meursault, the guillotine represents the ultimate space between, this time only wide enough for his head and neck to enter. The guillotine blade, already associated with the French people, is clearly the boundary on one side of this space. But what is on the other side of Meursault’s head? Remembering the emphasis he placed upon the positioning of the guillotine flat on the ground, we see that once placed in the embrace of the guillotine Meursault will be caught between the French government’s blade and the Algerian soil. When, ultimately, the French government will loose its blade, it will charge down until stopped cold by Algeria. Of course, during this violent crossing of the narrow space between, the group occupying this space will be beheaded, surgically removed from the space in which its culture developed over more than a century. The execution scene, set up for his readers by Camus but not actually played out within the confines of this novel, predicts the ultimate humiliation, then eradication, of the *pied-noir*, who will be enlisted by the French government to morally collaborate in the destruction of his culture during a spasm of violence between the non-European Algerians and the French. Far from reifying the French imperial project in Algeria, as Said has argued, Camus in his first major novel predicts the inevitability of a bloody end of the French occupation of Algeria. If the blood spilt in Camus’s prediction is that of a representative

²³⁶ L’étranger 169-170.

pied-noir, that is only to be expected from a writer who hails from within that culture. The circumstances leading up to Meursault's execution certainly do not exculpate the *pieds-noirs*, as a murder of an Muslim-Algerian by a *pied-noir* leads ultimately to this staging of the future sacrifice of the *pieds-noirs* "au nom du peuple français."

3. Castaways on a Plague Island: *Robinsons Oranais* in *La peste*

3.1. Introduction(s)

Albert Camus provides two key pieces of introduction to his novel La peste before launching into the main body of his narrative. The first, a quote attributed to Daniel Defoe, reads: “*Il est aussi raisonnable de représenter une espèce d’emprisonnement par une autre que de représenter n’importe quelle chose qui existe réellement par quelque chose qui n’existe pas.*”²³⁷ By not making explicit the source of this citation, Camus leaves his reader the freedom to imagine from which of Defoe’s works it might have come. Defoe’s most famous novel is unarguably Robinson Crusoe, but any reader having already noted the title of Camus’s novel would be very likely to think of Defoe’s A Journal of the Plague Years. Both of these potential sources for Defoe’s citation can and should inform the reading of Camus’s novel, in different and complementary ways. First of all, the reminder of Defoe’s novelistic pseudo-journal, recounting how London dealt with the bubonic plague, tells the reader from the very beginning of the experience of La peste that a literary precedent for such a work exists and is acknowledged by Camus. Defoe’s novel provides a “first-hand” account of the plague written many years after the fact. Camus’s novel provides a third-person narrative that ultimately proves to be the account of a fictional main character whose status as narrator is concealed until the end of the book. These two approaches, stylistically different, are in fact very similar literary projects whose consanguinity is emphasized by the citation included by Camus. However, the possibility of the reader attributing the Defoe quote to the much more widely-read Robinson Crusoe reminds the reader that Camus was aware of that novel, and thus of the general outlines of its plot as reflected in the burgeoning of robinsonnades that followed its publication. This gentle hint at the large

²³⁷ Albert Camus, La peste (Paris: Gallimard, 1942) 7. Henceforth, references to this work will include “La peste” and a page number.

body of island adventure novels serves to call to mind a certain atmosphere of adventure and exoticism that the novel will try to play down. Nevertheless, we will show that La peste will frequently make use of insular imagery, particularly in regards to those characters of this novel suffering from illness. Furthermore, the preponderance of isolation in this text, from social separation to physical isolation used as a tool against the spread of disease, will be understood within the larger context of the robinsonnade, evoked here at least in the form of an homage to its inceptor.

When the actual source of Defoe's citation is identified, the reader gains an even greater insight into the background that Camus is here giving to this novel than that provided by his or her ruminations on the probable sources discussed above. This epigraph proves to originate neither in Defoe's Journal of the Plague Years nor in the exceedingly widely-read adventures of Robinson Crusoe that are usually thought of when his name is mentioned, i.e. his shipwreck and subsequent life for many years on a desert island. Instead, Camus chose to begin his novel about plague in Oran and the effects of that scourge on a select group of residents of that city with a citation from the relatively obscure third volume of Robinson Crusoe, subtitled Serious Reflections of Robinson Crusoe: "All these reflections are just history of a state of forced confinement, which in my real history is represented by a confined retreat in an island; and it is as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another, as it is to represent anything that really exists by that which exists not."²³⁸ This choice of source text implies immediately that Camus wished not only to evoke Robinson Crusoe and his picaresque adventures on an island that he transformed from wild and deserted to somewhat homey and much less deserted, but also

²³⁸ Daniel Defoe, Serious Reflections of Robinson Crusoe (London: Dent & Co., 1895) xii.

the greater context of Robinson and his island, including at least the events of the intervening second volume in which Robinson founds a utopia based on bee-like social structures on his island, and then the third volume which provides a sort of post-game analysis of Robinson's island adventures. Our suggestion that Camus, when writing about pre-independence Algeria, was frequently thinking in terms of insularity, is immediately strengthened by the mere choice of a Defoe quote to introduce this novel. However, the determination that the epigraph's context is a work of reflections upon a life based around island life is even more telling, as it legitimates our supposition that Camus was not trying to simply write an island adventure tale with Algeria as the island²³⁹ but rather that he was writing his novels in full realization of his temporal positioning at the end of, or at least in sight of the end of, France's colonial Robinnsonnade in Algeria. We would further note that the epigraph chosen by Camus to introduce his second published novel comes not simply from the third volume of Defoe's tales of Robinson Crusoe, but in fact from a preface to that volume entitled "Robinson Crusoe's Preface."

The main point of this short first-person intervention by the (fictional) narrator and protagonist is to insist that the preceding and following accounts of the life of Robinson Crusoe are factual and based on a real life. This obfuscation of the fictional nature of Defoe's text seems somewhat tongue-in-cheek to a twenty-first-century reader, and yet it is written most earnestly, even dipping into legalese reminiscent of a will and testament: "I, Robinson Crusoe, being at this time in perfect and sound mind and memory, [...] do affirm that the story, although allegorical, is also historical."²⁴⁰ This rather strange comment from the narrator will prove key

²³⁹ We would argue that his abandoned first novel, *La mort heureuse*, contained a section in which the protagonist, Mersault, lived a robinsonnade on the quasi-deserted coast of Algeria.

²⁴⁰ Defoe ix.

to our analysis of Camus's La peste, for it seems clear that Camus also aimed for the same kind of balance with his oft-allegorized novel of plague and resistance. The story of plague in Oran, then, like the tales of Robinson Crusoe evoked by the epigraph, is meant to be understood simultaneously as historical and allegorical. There can be no doubt that Camus expected his readers to seek other possible ramifications for the novel than the strictly historical, but we see here that the reader is indirectly warned from straying too far from an historical interpretation of the allegorical novel. While this permission to allegorize certainly legitimates the general understanding of Camus's novel as a commentary on the resistance to the German occupation of France, we will argue that a less distant allegory is also inherent in the novel's structure and plot: the French Algerian experiment is also explored in this allegory, ultimately indicating that Camus was very much aware of the tenuous nature of the *pied-noir* existence in Algeria.

Using the license to allegorize appropriated from Defoe, Camus is able to express what would have been extremely difficult concepts for a man of the *pied-noir* culture in an indirect way, perhaps the only possible outlet for doubts about the glowing Mediterranean culture in which his childhood and education were steeped. Indeed, through allegory, Camus may be able to express feelings and perceptions regarding this *pied-noir* culture of North Africa that he would not even be able to formulate directly due to his upbringing and worldview. In the opening lines of the very first chapter of the third volume of Defoe's tales of Robinson Crusoe, entitled "Of Solitude," we read: "I have frequently looked back, you may be sure, and that with different thoughts, upon the notions of a long tedious life of solitude, which I have represented to the world, and of which you must have formed some ideas, from the life of a man in an island. Sometimes I have wondered how it could be supported, especially for the first years, when the

change was violent and imposed, and nature unacquainted with anything like it.”²⁴¹ This opening of the work introduced by the epigraph that also opens La peste shows us that ruminations of the inherent solitude of “a man in an island” are central to the text, and furthermore that this solitude is “violent and imposed” upon the protagonist. In La peste, we will carefully examine the nature of solitude brought about by the disease and the measures used to combat it, and we will see that it is overwhelmingly portrayed in an insular manner, tying the experiences of the characters in this novel directly to the robinsonesque adventures of Crusoe himself as well as his legions of imitations. We will examine the specifically Algerian setting of this novel for clues as to the ramifications of this insular isolation for the situation of the *pièdes-noirs* and the other inhabitants of the Algerian island, eventually showing that this novel can be read, in part, as a discussion of the possible futures of Algeria and a window to a better understanding of Albert Camus’s position regarding the realities of the French colonization effort in Algeria.

The second introduction to La peste is some four pages that set the scene, in many ways, for the bulk of the narrative. This scene is not just any space that will be attacked by the plague, but it is instead a very specific coastal city of French Algeria, Oran. We read: “A première vue, Oran est, en effet, une ville ordinaire et rien de plus qu’une prefecture française de la côte algérienne.”²⁴² This sentence calmly introduces several concepts that might seem less than obvious to the reader at his or her “first glance,” such as the concept that a French prefecture could, in fact, even exist on the Algerian coast. Furthermore, that such a city, with its surprising geographical affiliations, would be characterized above all else by the adjective “ordinaire” is

²⁴¹ Defoe 1-2.

²⁴² La peste 11.

also somewhat surprising. The very use of the expression “at first glance” can easily be interpreted as an ironic suggestion that this first glance, like many first impressions, would be misleading or even false. Therefore this first glimpse of what will be the setting for this allegorical novel is depicted for the reader as a banal place with no expectations of unusual events, while simultaneously an undercurrent of irony seems to belie this word-picture and instead insist on the unusual geographical setting of the tale. The uniqueness of the Oranais setting is further underscored by the suggestion, politically naïve or else inflammatory, that Oran is a “lieu neutre.”²⁴³ While one obvious meaning of this term would ascribe to Oran a universal identity, we will see that this understanding is sapped by the preponderance of specific references to peculiarities of the Oran landscape and situation, forcing us to move to a more political understanding of this term, neutrality in the sense of picking neither side during a conflict. The juxtaposition of a French prefecture on the Algerian coast and the description of this city as a neutral place forces the reader to reexamine the politics of Algeria before the Algerian War; the very process of making this part of the Algerian coastline French would escape most people’s understanding of neutrality, as it clearly would have involved overseas conquest at some point since the French mainland is at a sea’s breadth remove. Even the proof offered by the narrator for Oran’s neutrality is nearly laughable, as the evidence is in fact merely a lack of pigeons and gardens. Both of these missing features could be associated with peace and neutrality, but a lack of doves (or at least of their cousins) and tranquil garden havens certainly does not seem to be *prima facie* evidence for the peacefulness, or even neutrality, of what was a conquered, and therefore likely contested, space.

²⁴³ La peste 11.

The supposedly neutral Oranais space is further shown to be unusual, special, specific, and even unique in a further passage: “Mais il est juste d’ajouter qu’elle [the city of Oran] s’est greffée sur un paysage sans égal, au milieu d’un plateau nu, entouré de collines lumineuses, devant une baie au dessin parfait. On peut seulement regretter qu’elle se soit construite en tournant le dos à cette baie et que, partant, il soit impossible d’apercevoir la mer qu’il faut toujours aller chercher.”²⁴⁴ This poetic, romantic description of Oran does not seem to square with the earlier description of this space as a neutral, unremarkable geographical area. Instead, this seems an almost loving, nostalgic evocation of a space that is even couched in terms of a human body, as it is able to turn its back on the bay. In fact, given the feminine pronoun for “cité” used in this passage, Oran is described as a naked, and thus sexualized, “she” who is languidly turning her back on the sea.²⁴⁵ The biological, anthropomorphic description of Oran is further made explicit by the suggestion that “she” grafted herself onto the countryside; this vocabulary of fruit-tree husbandry simultaneously evokes a fruitful female and intensive, modern agriculture, winking at Oran as an object of desire while explaining at least in part some of the practical applications of this “countryside without equal” that is Oran’s context. The lack of equality referenced in this same passage could be read as a reminder of the effective lack of social equality that was extant in Oran at the time the novel is set, and which will be made evident in the events of the novel, during which a class structure of different levels of *pied-noir*

²⁴⁴ La peste 13.

²⁴⁵ The sexualized island space is a trope of the robinsonnade, as the desire to possess land frequently has a rapine undercurrent. Camus depicted a *pied-noir* woman experiencing a sensual moment with the Algerian night in “La femme adultère,” and in Tournier’s Vendredi the Robinson character (as well as the eponymous Vendredi) has an explicitly sexual relationship with his island of Speranza.

society will be visible, and in which the lowest level of society, the Arab-Algerians, will be all but effaced from the picture.

The specific descriptors of the plateau, that it is naked, and thus bare, unadorned, or unforested and dry, and that it is surrounded by a wall of luminous hills as well as the bay, make of Oran a quasi-insular space and even hint at its desert-island affiliation. The nudity, doubtless also referring to the Oran-as-desired-woman, simultaneously evokes the desert, that landscape feature of North Africa so well imagined and fantasized throughout the romantic period; this desert, when coupled by the features surrounding Oran and cutting it/her off from the rest of the world, isolating it/her, make of Oran a sort of desert island. We will show in the narrative that the author returns again and again to isolated areas with well-defined frontiers as metaphorical islands of isolation. When we read that “one must always go looking for” the sea, we are obliged to ask ourselves why this compulsion exists and for whom this is the case, for this will provide a clue as to the specific cultural identity of the narrator and thus to the message of this allegory. The gerund “partant” suggests that this process of seeking the sea, which is obligatory according to the “il faut,” is tied to the action of leaving Oran. We will see that throughout the narrative, leaving Oran becomes an obsession for some characters while others will resist the very good reasons that might push them towards such an exodus.²⁴⁶ The fact that both staying in Oran and leaving it are described as actions that may be forced on the characters in the novel and/or the

²⁴⁶ Rambert’s long process of attempting to escape from quarantine in Oran plays out much as would the action in a robinsonnade: he hatches a plan, goes through long, drawn-out implementations that keep failing and requiring him to start over, and although he never completely gives up his dream of escape from the “island,” he nevertheless makes himself more and more useful in the anti-plague struggle as he tries to occupy himself while awaiting the ultimate coming to fruition of his escape plans. We note with interest that Rambert even develops a sort of “message in a bottle” communication system that he uses in an attempt to stay connected to his girlfriend on the other side of the quarantine walls.

inhabitants of Oran once again ties this allegorical novel to the context of the French prefecture on the Algerian coast in which it is set, and specifically seems to hint at the looming spectre of some sort of crisis involving staying and/or leaving the Algerian coast and the Oran which has been poetically described as a desired and beautiful woman.

These introductory pages, which we feel provide at least a partial key to the allegorical tale that follows, also introduce the Oranais themselves, spending quite a bit of effort on underscoring how making money was far and away the greatest preoccupation of these French Algerian inhabitants of Oran. The social habits of these men and women seem to mirror the aridity of the lands surrounding the town, as they are depicted as locked into routines that afford only the most basic of social interactions. Christine Margerrison argues that the blandness of the Oranais is chosen by Camus in order to give the voice of the narrator more individuality in contrast.²⁴⁷ Everything seems to pale in comparison to the search for monetary reward. This mercantile focus of the Oranais seems tied to the rather strange statement that “Ce qui est plus original dans notre ville est la difficulté qu’on peut y trouver à mourir.”²⁴⁸ The narrator quickly substitutes the word “inconfort” for “difficulté,” indicating that in fact death is not loath to come to this area as the statement first seems to imply but rather that when it comes, it is particularly unpleasant. This on-the-fly editing that the narrator leaves in for our reading pleasure once again points to the less than straightforward manner in which the setting for this novel is being introduced, for the meaning of this passage with one word or the other is radically different, leaving the reader with the sense that he or she is being toyed with by the narrator. The phrase

²⁴⁷ Christine Margerrison, “Albert Camus and ‘Ces femmes qu’on raie de l’humanité’: sexual politics in the colonial arena,” French Cultural Studies 10 (1999): 220.

²⁴⁸ La peste 12.

that concludes this discussion, “[u]n malade s’y trouve bien seul,”²⁴⁹ further underscores the social poverty of Oran and the Oranais, for this indicates that rather than succor their stricken countryman or woman, the Oranais can be expected to abandon him or her. This thesis will be demonstrated to be both true and false through the actions of the characters of the novel as they go about their struggle against the plague; nevertheless, this statement obliges the reader to ask him or herself why, specifically, disease should be more isolating for the *souffrant* in Oran than elsewhere. We will argue that this insistence on the uniqueness of the so-called “ordinary” city of Oran is part of a strategy of forcing the reader to remind him or herself repeatedly of the specific context of the allegory, ultimately allowing Camus to communicate on the Algerian situation as well, perhaps, as on that of the European mainland around the time of the Second World War. Oran is a city that is only “apparemment” “une ville sans soupçons,”²⁵⁰ and proves to be rather full of people suspecting and, indeed, discovering, that their fellows may indeed be working at cross purposes to them.

Throughout La peste we see that isolation is a central theme of this work. Camus’s strategy of islanding people and groups in the novel point to a decision on the part of the author to take advantage of the imperial connotations of the island adventure tale to deepen his allegorical novel’s possible readings. This strategy will be found at work in passages describing quarantine, avoidance of infection and/or infected people, various medical procedures for dealing with the plague, and in the day-to-day actions of the characters upon whom this narrative focuses. The plague in this book is described as a sort of biological colonialism, in which the personal integrity of human beings is threatened by a microbial invasion. On the one hand in this

²⁴⁹ La peste 13.

²⁵⁰ La peste 12.

narrative, boundaries are sometimes crossed or sometimes cannot be crossed, but regardless the process of crossing boundaries will be depicted as destabilizing, dangerous, and even sometimes criminal. On the other hand, we will see that quarantine and isolation reinforce the boundaries in the name of public safety, and we will examine the ramifications of these policies on the social fabric of Oran. Finally, we will analyze the metaphorical understanding of plague as colonialism and the messages that might be contained within this analysis. We will examine relations between *pieds-noirs*, as well as relations between members of this group and others with whom they share the Oranais space. We will further elucidate Camus's very complex position on colonialism, specifically the French imperial project as it is reflected in French Algeria, through this analysis of his second major novel.

3.2. A Plague of Rats

In the first chapter of La peste, the narrator describes the “curious events” that mark the beginning of the plague in Oran. These events are signaled right away by the following phrase: “Le matin du 16 avril, le docteur Bernard Rieux sortit de son cabinet et buta sur un rat mort, au milieu du palier.”²⁵¹ This sentence simultaneously introduces the reader to the central character of the novel and juxtaposes him physically with a dead rat. This rat, right in the middle of the landing, seems out of place, as the events it presages were said to be in the introduction. Rieux's instinctive response, to kick the rat out of the way, shows the reader that this is a man of action who does not shy away from unpleasantness. However, the framing of the dead rat, in the center of the landing, places the animal in the spotlight, and Rieux is forced to react to the animal, hinting that this doctor will not be able to control the situation with the rats and the aftermath

²⁵¹ La peste, 15.

thereof. This rat merely announced the hundreds and even thousands of rats whose deaths are described in great detail over the ensuing pages, and the growing discomfort of the Oranais populace. The deaths of these rats are described, catalogued, counted, and theorized upon. Little, and not so little, piles of rat carcasses become common sights throughout Oran. However, the narrator makes sure that the reader understands the individual nature of death as experienced by these rats: “Ils venaient aussi mourir isolément dans les halls administratifs, dans les préaux d’école, à la terrasse des cafés, quelquefois.”²⁵² The isolation of these rats during their dying moments is made more poignant by its juxtaposition with areas normally set aside for social interaction, whether bureaucratic, recreational, or convivial. We emphasize the use of the word “isolément” as tying this wave of rat deaths to the imagery of the insular. In fact, the narrative of the rat die-off is the beginning of a conceit that will continue throughout this novel of Oran as an islanded, isolated space from which people will attempt to escape. We read that “certains qui avaient des maisons au bord de la mer parlaient déjà de s’y retirer.”²⁵³ The situation of the resort homes by the shore reminds the reader of the proximity of Oran to the sea and of the city’s geographical peculiarities already discussed in the introduction to the novel. There is doubtless an ironic intent here in the suggestion that some of the Oranais were thinking of fleeing the sinking ship of Oran as though they were the rats in this scenario.

The first chapter of this novel concludes with the concierge, who had early on attempted to stem the flood of rat corpses, at least in his (and Rieux’s) building, becoming sick with carefully described symptoms such as a fever of 40 degrees, a burning sensation internally, and swollen, painful, and hardened lymph nodes. This unfortunate gentleman’s situation seeming to

²⁵² La peste, 22.

²⁵³ La peste 23.

only worsen over time, Dr. Rieux finds himself with only one course of action open to him: “il faut l’isoler et tenter un traitement d’exception.”²⁵⁴ In the ambulance on his way to isolation, the concierge dies, making him the first character that the reader observes to die from what is increasingly obviously the plague. The medico-social procedure of isolation as a course of action when dealing with the plague has now been overtly introduced, and it will remain an important theme and plot device throughout the remainder of this novel. The fact that the concierge dies despite the (unsuccessful) attempt to make him more insular is perhaps an indication that this technique will be difficult to implement. Camus has introduced his novel a second time through this miniature chapter, and the result is a narrative that is firmly affixed to the theme of isolation, and thus to the insular experience of the Oranais in a peculiarly dangerous and tenuous situation.

Seemingly reluctant to plunge completely into his narrative, the narrator provides yet another pseudo-introduction to his tale, this time in the form of commentary upon the journal of Jean Tarrou, “qu’on a déjà rencontré au début de ce récit.”²⁵⁵ Noting that the Oranais were struggling to accept the fact that their little city “pût être un lieu particulièrement désigné pour que les rats y meurent au soleil et que les concierges y périssent de maladies bizarres,”²⁵⁶ the narrator chooses to view this peculiar place through the point of view of someone new to Oran and whose perspective might therefore be free from the confusion reigning in the city at that time. Of course, even though the Oranais were having difficulty accepting that their city was to be the scene of such bizarre happenings, the logic of the narrative insists that, indeed, Oran was

²⁵⁴ La peste 27.

²⁵⁵ La peste 28.

²⁵⁶ La peste 28.

to be singled out in this unfortunate manner. The choice of Oran, then, while here signaled to be surprising, is nevertheless completely intentional. Camus wanted his readers to remember that this narrative was set in Algeria, as the repeated references to “notre petite ville”²⁵⁷ and Oran specifically make clear. Tarrou, recent arrival in Oran, takes advantage of its advantages, notably the warm beaches, and carefully catalogs the same drawbacks already mentioned in the main introduction, for example the city’s ugliness and lack of trees as well as the ugliness of its trams. This city is not described as a blank, nameless, or generically French town; rather, the narrator cites Tarrou’s use of the word “singularité”²⁵⁸ to show the specificity that must be attached to the choice of settings for this narrative. Throughout this study we will attempt to better understand the insistence upon this particular, “singular” setting for La Peste.

3.3. A Hazardous Voyage

Oran’s transition from a notably ugly, mercantile city to one afflicted by the plague is cast in terms of a voyage by the narrator. The death of the concierge M. Michel is said to have signaled the beginning of this change: “Mais d’autres parmi nos concitoyens [...] durent suivre la route sur laquelle M. Michel s’était engagé le premier.”²⁵⁹ This “route,” contracting and ultimately dying in a grisly fashion from plague, will be the journey undertaken by many of the “fellow citizens” of the narrator. These fellow citizens, other Oranais in the vast majority, are here linked to the plague through their national identity, or citizenship. Here we may have at

²⁵⁷ La peste 28.

²⁵⁸ La peste 30.

²⁵⁹ La peste 28.

least a partial explanation for the absence of Arabs underlined by O'Brien²⁶⁰ in his analysis of this novel and subsequently repeated by many other critics: Camus has made a specific choice to show the journey of these “concitoyens,” which would leave out the vast majority of Arabs, as these were not enfranchised with that citizenship. Once again this choice would seem to underscore the importance for the narrative of the specific situation in Oran, this time in an overtly political vein. This “journey” of the Oranais citizens, metaphorically the plague, is nevertheless a journey. We will further examine the ramifications of this juxtaposition later in this study, but it seems important here to note the equation “plague=voyage” as this speaks to our political reading of this novel.

The theme of travel is reinforced when Tarrou, himself, is classified as a “voyageur”²⁶¹ by the narrator. This man, whose origins are uncertain, but who has arrived in Oran and has thrown himself into life there, observes the Oranais and their environment while still retaining the identity of a traveler. The travel motif adds a distinctly nautical underpinning when Tarrou cites the night watchman of his hotel as saying “Quand les rats quittent le navire...”²⁶² This aphorism, already referenced above, here makes clear that Oran was conceived, at least by one of its citizens, as a sinking ship. Tarrou resists the simile “boat=city” by saying “c’était vrai dans le cas des bateaux, mais qu’on ne l’avait jamais vérifié pour les villes.”²⁶³ This resistance is somewhat eroded by the reader’s knowledge that, indeed, the veracity of this aphorism is about to be proven quite abundantly, and also by the word that immediately follows Tarrou’s

²⁶⁰ O'Brien 53.

²⁶¹ La peste 30.

²⁶² La peste 31.

²⁶³ La peste 31-32.

statement: “Cependant.”²⁶⁴ The addition of this word just after Tarrou’s denial of the applicability of the night watchman’s saying saps the confidence with which it is uttered and reaffirms the reader’s impression that, indeed, Oran may be considered as a sinking ship. This sinking is echoed in a social context by Tarrou’s report on his hotel-manager’s response to finding rat corpses in his establishment. Tarrou tried to console this man by telling him that everyone is in the same boat. “Justement, m’a-t-il répondu, nous sommes maintenant comme tout le monde.”²⁶⁵ This social upheaval, still in the context of a sinking ship, implies that the events striking Oran have connections to the social fabric of the city as well as to its physicality and political reality.

Isolation is the first order of business when there is a risk of widespread infection, at least in the Oran of this novel. “Le corps du concierge isolé”²⁶⁶ is a dependant clause that introduces Rieux’s first efforts at stemming what he appears to believe is the beginnings of an epidemic. However, the political structure of Oran will not facilitate the rational approach to solving this dilemma. When Rieux asks his colleague and chief of the Oranais medical community to see to “l’isolement des nouveaux malades” he is told “Il faudrait des mesures préfectorales.”²⁶⁷ This insistence on the bureaucracy’s failure to act with all due haste, and indeed the French bureaucracy given the French-specific term “préfectoral,” implies a certain responsibility on the part of this governmental organization for the events that are about to unfold in Oran. The failure of the state to adequately address this situation is thrown into relief by a scene in which

²⁶⁴ La peste 32.

²⁶⁵ La peste 33.

²⁶⁶ La peste 35.

²⁶⁷ La peste 35.

the reader sees representatives of the government investigating a suicide attempt as the plague gains an ever-stronger foothold in Oran. The suicide investigation, which seems almost completely *pro forma* as the victim/criminal merely repeats the phrase “chagrins intimes”²⁶⁸ in order to explain his actions; his neighbor had supplied him with this rather vague and yet compelling explanation. The representatives of the Oranais bureaucracy even recognize the extent to which their investigation is conceivably a case of poor prioritizing, for we read: “— Vous pensez, soupira le commissaire en sortant, nous avons d’autres chats à fouetter, depuis qu’on parle de cette fièvre...”²⁶⁹ This fever, then, seems to be recognized as a major concern by both members of the medical community and representatives of the government, but it is nevertheless not immediately seen as the top priority of the préfectorat.

The strange lack of coordination of anti-plague measures is perhaps indicative of a systemic problem in the government, but this problem seems to be echoed in the Oranais society as well. The narrator, having already detailed the extent to which the press followed the rat collection process, comments on the strange silence this same press exhibits towards the early rash of people dying rapidly, “dans une odeur épouvantable.”²⁷⁰ The narrator’s explanation returns us to the phenomenon of isolation: “C’est que les rats meurent dans la rue et les hommes dans leurs chambres.”²⁷¹ Much has been made of Camus’s association with the Existentialist movement; here we have a depiction of man, isolated in death, whose condition is compared unfavorably to that of dying rats, and which might provide some fodder for this discussion.

²⁶⁸ La peste 38.

²⁶⁹ La peste 38.

²⁷⁰ La peste 39.

²⁷¹ La peste 39.

However, these Oranais men and women, dying in their bedrooms away from the press and any other human contact except the carefully described lancing scalpels of their doctors, are far from alone, but rather are the locus of an invasion of millions of microbes. This influx of colonizing germs will prove fatal in the majority of cases.

The word “peste,” or plague, is finally expressed for the first time after these men and women have been dying for some time, and the person who first uses the word is Rieux, after he is pushed by an older colleague to say what they both have known for some time: “c’est à peine croyable. Mais il semble bien que ce soit la peste.”²⁷² This word seems to be viewed by the doctors, or perhaps rather by the Oranais society as a whole, as a dirty word, as evinced by their reluctance to say it out loud. Furthermore, Rieux’s colleague predicts the response to their supposition: “Elle a disparu des pays tempérés depuis des années.”²⁷³ Reminiscing about having seen the plague in China, Rieux’s colleague fuels the general feeling that the plague is a disease that affects only the poor, tropical regions of the world, but then he reminds Rieux that he had also witnessed plague in Paris only twenty years earlier, although in that case no one was willing to come out and admit to the existence of plague in the French capital. The comments of these two doctors, and more importantly their assumptions about the opinions of the majority of the “concitoyens,” seem to imply an understanding of the plague as some sort of failing of modernity or progress, and that the admission that Oran was a plague-riddled area would mean simultaneously admitting that Oran was not the temperate, modern, model city of commerce that its inhabitants liked to see in it, but rather a stage for the playing out of a sordid story of

²⁷² La peste 40.

²⁷³ La peste 40.

primitive microbes dominating cultured Frenchmen living on the southern coast of the Mediterranean.

La peste is a narrative that is overtly concerned with narration, and this narration in turn is explicitly linked to the plague and Oran. We will argue, furthermore, that this narrative is acutely aware of geography, specifically that of Oran in its placement by the sea. This self-aware narrative seems to be related to the robinsonnade, at least in the employment of some oceanic and insular imagery. Words have the power to alter the landscape: “Le mot “peste” venait d’être prononcé pour la première fois. A ce point du récit qui laisse Bernard Rieux derrière sa fenêtre, on permettra au narrateur de justifier l’incertitude et la surprise du docteur, puisque, avec des nuances, sa réaction fut celle de la plupart de nos concitoyens.”²⁷⁴ Here we see that the Oranais citizens were stopped in mid-narrative by the surprise of the plague coming to their city. The surprise has been set off by the pronunciation of the word “plague,” implying that words, more than the phenomena they describe, are the operative factor in the transition of Oran and its citizens from their daily, humdrum, workaday existence to the scene of a bizarre, surprising tale. If this wink from the narrator to the reader were not sufficient, the narrator points himself out clearly and even reminds the reader of the relationship between the narrator and the “on” which here substitutes for his reader(s). Until Bernard Rieux said, and the narrator wrote/transmitted, the word “peste,” this novel and the people and setting it describes were on one path, but the enunciation of this word ensures that this narrative will now head down a certain path, and this path is characterized, at least at first, by uncertainty and surprise. Indeed, Rieux is said to be “partagé entre l’inquiétude et la confiance.”²⁷⁵

²⁷⁴ La peste 41.

²⁷⁵ La peste 41.

This divisive internal state of Rieux shows the lack of penetration of the concept of plague in Oran for this character at this early stage in the novel, but it is also phrased in a manner that we have already linked to islanded characters in Camus's novels: Rieux is between two states or things, is surrounded by the contrasting concepts of worry and confidence, in the same way that Meursault was between sun and sea and sand in L'étranger. This would be a feeble reference to Camusian insular imagery were it not for confirmation a few lines further on. This confirmation comes in the context of Rieux looking out a window that divides the world into two halves: "D'un côté de la vitre, le ciel frais du printemps, et de l'autre côté le mot qui résonnait encore dans la pièce: La peste."²⁷⁶ This clear separation between two contrasting worlds, with Rieux and his perceptions right on the cusp, mirror the manner in which Rieux is surrounded by different states of being, but this passage is followed by a description of Rieux's mindset when confronted with these realities: "Et une tranquillité si pacifique et si indifférente niait presque sans effort les vieilles images du fléau..."²⁷⁷ This tranquility, modified by an adjective that is also that of the world's largest ocean, seems to confirm that Rieux is experiencing this life- and narrative-changing moment within the context of a world bordered by the sea, and thus islanding. Indeed, we read that as Rieux examines the world from which he is separated by a thin layer of glass, he notes that "Seule la mer, au bout du damier terne des maisons, témoignait de ce qu'il y a d'inquiétant et de jamais reposé dans le monde."²⁷⁸ Thus, the sea is confirmed as the final factor proving the unpredictability and frightening aspects of the world, and thus fills the role of

²⁷⁶ La peste 43.

²⁷⁷ La peste 43.

²⁷⁸ La peste 44.

that which most accurately foreshadows the events that are coming to Oran, for Rieux will not experience peace or tranquility but rather scenes quite reminiscent of the historical plagues he had daydreamed about. Once again, the narrator reminds the reader that these ruminations came about because “le mot de “peste” avait été prononcé.”²⁷⁹

This reminder that the mere enunciation of a single word was sufficient to forever change the Oranais landscape is mirrored in an almost parenthetical description of Joseph Grand, who “ne trouvait pas ses mots.”²⁸⁰ This modest employee of the mayor’s office is lifted up as an example of living life according to one’s convictions, but the very modesty of Grand’s life is associated with his inability to find the correct words, as this inhibits him from advancing in his career. Nevertheless, Grand confronts his handicap head-on by spending every evening working on “un livre ou quelque chose d’approchant.”²⁸¹ Once again the narrator links narration and the plague by having Rieux arrive at a (faulty) conclusion: “il n’arrivait pas à croire que la peste pût s’installer vraiment dans une ville où l’on pouvait trouver des fonctionnaires modestes qui cultivaient d’honorables manies. Exactement, il n’imaginait pas la place de ces manies au milieu de la peste et il jugeait donc que, pratiquement, la peste était sans avenir parmi nos concitoyens.”²⁸² This passage is of course ironic since, according to the logic of the narrative, the reader is in fact learning of the events in Oran through a narrative left by Bernard Rieux himself, even though the doctor had ample evidence of the power of the plague during the time he was writing. The “honorable manies” of observing and writing about the plague in Oran

²⁷⁹ La peste 44.

²⁸⁰ La peste 48.

²⁸¹ La peste 49.

²⁸² La peste 49.

were, in fact, compatible with the existence of plague in that city, and indeed require that coexistence for the narrative to have its first-hand quality. The narrator concludes his side comment on narrative and the plague by once again affirming that this narrative will concern the “fellow citizens” of Oran and their relationship with the plague, leaving open the question of just who these fellow citizens were, how broadly they were conceived, and exactly what their relationship with the plague and each other might turn out to be. From here on out in the narrative, the reader will experience the playing out of these relationships in what will be officially, governmentally recognized as a plague situation striking a French city on the Algerian coast, and this coastal city, already explicitly compared to a sinking ship, will be islanded and will also contain many examples of people and places that are described using insular imagery, accentuating the suffocation and lack of freedom extant in Oran through association with the large body of robinsonnade literature and its emphasis on entrapment between various nearly impenetrable barriers. For example, Rieux’s perceptions of Oran’s coastal situation changes with the arrival of the plague: “La nuit, les grands cris des bateaux invisibles, la rumeur qui montait de la mer et de la foule qui s’écoulait, cette heure que Rieux connaissait bien et aimait autrefois lui paraissait aujourd’hui oppressante à cause de tout ce qu’il savait.”²⁸³ Here we see that the Oran that Rieux loves, including its surrounding sea, has been transformed into an oppressive environment by his knowledge of the plague that is starting to strike the city. The heavy insistence on the sea and the way it dominates this night-time description of Oran once again underscores the quasi-insular nature of this city which will soon be under seige.

The isolation of Oran from the “civilized world” is quickly reinforced after this section by the meeting of the Oranais medical establishment. These worthies debate whether or not to

²⁸³ La peste 59.

proclaim the recently spreading disease the plague, as this will have very specific ramifications for the governmental response to the situation. Oran's separation from the Metropole is emphasized when Castel, Rieux's colleague, tells him: "le département n'a pas de sérum," to which Rieux replies "Il faut faire venir ça de Paris."²⁸⁴ This reminder that while Oran is a French city, it is still, in a practical sense, quite far from Paris, will resonate more and more clearly throughout the novel as the effective separation between these two cities grows. The roles here set up for Oran and Paris also fall into the pattern of the robinsonnade, as the capital city is shown to be the source of complex goods that are locally unavailable to the islanded protagonists. Medicines, in particular, were often the things that castaways needed the most desperately in robinsonnades, as when quinine was desperately needed by the "colons" of L'Île mystérieuse.²⁸⁵ The plague, or a disease that should at least be treated as such according to the Oranais medical establishment, will serve to make very obvious the extent to which Oran and Paris are effectively separated, and simultaneously will isolate the stricken city and its "citizens" from all other regions as well, transforming it into an effectively insular space. The serum, saving technological marvel of the Metropole, will continue to emphasize through its absence the disconnect between Oran and Paris, as we see in parts of conversations between Rieux and Castel: "Les sérums n'arrivaient pas,"²⁸⁶ and "—Et les sérums? --Ils arriveront dans la semaine."²⁸⁷ When the serum finally arrives, flown in from Paris to once again indicate the

²⁸⁴ La peste 50.

²⁸⁵ Jules Verne, The Mysterious Island, trans. W. H. G. Kingston (1875; New York: The Heritage Press, 1959) 296.

²⁸⁶ La peste 58.

²⁸⁷ La peste 63.

separation between Oran and Paris, it turns out to be insufficient for any major epidemic, and thus the capital disappoints the isolated outpost with its lack of resources and inability to seriously deal with the situation.

This incompetence continues far into the epidemic, with Rieux commenting weeks later that “le nouveau sérum envoyé par Paris avait l’air d’être moins efficace que le premier et les statistiques montaient. On n’avait toujours pas la possibilité d’inoculer les sérums préventifs ailleurs que dans les familles déjà atteintes. Il eût fallu des quantités industrielles pour en généraliser l’emploi.”²⁸⁸ Thus we see that Paris, center of an industrial civilization, is nevertheless incapable of mobilizing itself sufficiently to save its stricken city, and that rather than improving its response Paris shows itself to be increasingly incompetent in this regard. As Oran accepts that it will never be saved by Paris, Rieux’s colleague Castel begins behaving in a manner quite familiar from the robinsonnade: “C’est pourquoi il était naturel que le vieux Castel mît toute sa confiance et son énergie à fabriquer des sérums sur place, avec du matériel de fortune.”²⁸⁹ This passage shows one of the pseudo-castaways in this pseudo-robinsonnade beginning the process of attempting to jury-rig a solution to a problem using the very limited resources available in the enclosed, limiting, environment. Castel has here assumed the characteristics of innovation and making do with what’s available that have typified the robinsonnade hero since the inception of this sub-genre.

Finally, the first large section of La peste concludes with the following order being given to the authorities of Oran: “Déclarez l’état de peste. Fermez la ville.”²⁹⁰ From here on out in

²⁸⁸ La peste 117.

²⁸⁹ La peste 126.

²⁹⁰ La peste 64.

this narrative, Oran will not only be figuratively isolated, but will be politically and physically closed off from the outside world as well. As was already the case for patients of the plague (“l’isolement de leurs malades dans les salles spéciales de l’hôpital;”²⁹¹ “La déclaration obligatoire et l’isolement furent maintenus. Les maisons des malades devaient être fermées et désinfectées, les proches soumis à une quarantaine[...]”²⁹²) the entire city of Oran will now be isolated, quarantined, turned into a veritable island by the administration’s efforts to control the spread of the disease. The rest of this novel will play out in this islanded space, allowing the reader to compare the pressures on the protagonists to those experienced by Crusoe and all the Robinsons that followed him, forced to live in their islands and to confront life within sharply circumscribed horizons. We will analyze the bulk of La peste from the perspective of the robinsonnade in order to determine if details of this narrative can shed light on the relationship between the Oranais and their environment, between Paris and Oran, and to determine how to understand the plague itself as a metaphor for colonization.

3.4. Quarantine

The second section of La peste details the rise of the plague in Oran and the coming to terms with this disease and its attendant social disruption on the part of the Oranais. The governmental response to Oran’s plague, the closing of the city, results in a clearer demarcation of the now even more insular space that is this city. This closing off of Oran creates a particularly isolated terrain which is reflected in the behavior of the Oranais. The first of two

²⁹¹ La peste 55.

²⁹² La peste 63.

key words describing Oran and its citizens in this new state of affairs is “séparation.” We find this word repeated at least a half dozen times in the first twenty pages of this section of the novel, and each repetition further emphasizes the extent to which separation is given key importance in the mindset of the plague-stricken Oranais. The narrator tells us at the very beginning of this section that “la séparation d’avec un être aimé” became “la souffrance principale”²⁹³ of this time for the Oranais. As in the robinsonnade, being cut off from loved ones is a key component of the plague experience, at least as far as psychological pain is concerned. It is interesting to note that by identifying separation as the principal pain of this situation, the plague itself and the physical suffering it entails, which are very clearly described in this novel, are relegated to a secondary position. Oran’s separation is more than the physical isolation of the castaway in the robinsonnade, perforce, as this story is set in a time and place where many means of communication beyond face-to-face contact exist. Nevertheless, the narrator points out that “la ville n’était plus reliée au reste du pays par les moyens de communication habituels.”²⁹⁴ As it is pointed out that mail was disallowed due to it being a potential vector of infection, and that telephone service was quickly restricted to emergencies only to keep from being overwhelmed, the Oranais find themselves limited to telegraph communication, which by its nature does not permit natural discourse, and indeed even requires the fragmentation of the sentence, and by extension language, itself. If the Oranais have slightly more communication with the outside world than the castaway with his message in a bottle, both are nevertheless unable to adequately communicate their experiences and emotions to the wider world as long as the isolation continues. Like the castaway, who suddenly finds himself alone on his island after a violent

²⁹³ La peste 67.

²⁹⁴ La peste 68.

shipwreck or marooning, the narrator describes the sudden change in lifestyle as “Cette séparation brutale,”²⁹⁵ thus insisting on the violence of this transition as well. Another modern means of communication, the train, is shown to be a factor that, in its absence, began to communicate to the Oranais the seriousness of their isolation: “[...] nous nous apercevions clairement que les trains n’arrivaient pas. Nous savions alors que notre séparation était destinée à durer.”²⁹⁶ As the bars close around Oran, the sense of being separated from the rest of the world is clearer and clearer to the citizens of this stricken city. Eventually, the Oranais realize that the duration of this separation could be without term; we read that the plague “donnait à leur séparation des risques d’être éternelle.”²⁹⁷ So separation, from loved ones, from other regions, and conceivably from life itself is shown to be one of the main characteristics of life in plague-stricken Oran, echoing the robinsonnade cliché of a man separated from all he knows by an impenetrable barrier of waves and sand. Oran’s walls include sea and sand, but also literal walls and armed guards, so the inevitable attempts to escape from this isolated space will not be limited to boat-related activities, but will still involve complicated plans that are doomed to failure more often than not.

The second *mot clé* of the second section of La peste is “exil.” This word is present in many forms at least ten times in as many pages, and it ties the separation that the Oranais were experiencing specifically to a political distancing as well as a physical and emotional one. Exile, after all, implies being forced to endure separation, usually by a politically more powerful entity than the exile himself or herself. The repeated use of this word will lead us to an examination of

²⁹⁵ La peste 70.

²⁹⁶ La peste 71.

²⁹⁷ La peste 75.

the exiled people as a people-group. The first example of the use of this word is also specifically placed in a political context: “Ainsi, la première chose que la peste apporta à nos concitoyens fut l’exil.”²⁹⁸ We note that the exile, brought by the plague, is shown to concern the fellow citizens that we have been mentioning over the last several pages. This exile, then, can be said to be specifically targeted at the Oranais citizens rather than, more broadly, at the entire population of Oran. Through this detail, the narrator reminds the reader that this allegorical tale is principally concerned with the European-Algerians cast away on the plague island. A few lines further on, we read: “Oui, c’était bien le sentiment de l’exil que ce creux que nous portions constamment en nous, cette émotion précise, le désir déraisonnable de revenir en arrière ou au contraire de presser la marche du temps, ces flèches brûlantes de la mémoire.”²⁹⁹ Here we see quite clearly that the feeling, or emotion, of exile is pushing the citizens of Oran towards a reactionary behavioral pattern, as the reference to speeding up the flow of time is undermined by the succeeding reference to the needling power of memory, thus the past. Note that the narrator is aware of the irrationality of such an endeavor, but nevertheless reports the potential political ramifications of the exile here discussed. The exile is compared to an imprisonment: “Ils éprouvaient ainsi la souffrance profonde de tous les prisonniers et de tous les exilés, qui est de vivre avec une mémoire qui ne sert à rien.”³⁰⁰ Here again, the narrator makes clear the extent to which memory is implicated in the imprisoning process of exile, for while suggesting that memory is useless in the context of exile, he in no way undermines its power to torment the exile/prisoner, and/or to push him towards reactionary behavior as suggested above. The specific bitterness of this exile

²⁹⁸ La peste 71.

²⁹⁹ La peste 71.

³⁰⁰ La peste 72.

is explained almost immediately thereafter: “Mais si c’était l’exil, dans la majorité des cas c’était l’exil chez soi.”³⁰¹ This is where the plague exiles touches on the political situation that interests us in the novels of Albert Camus: we will read this book allegorically, as we were invited to do so by the Defoe quote at the very beginning of the novel, in relation to the situation of the *pieds-noirs* at the end of the French domination of Algeria in the 1940s and 1950s. The concept of being exiled in your own home seems to tie directly to the history of the *pieds-noirs*, who felt that they were Africans and yet who were being pushed by world events, especially decolonization, into a position of isolation, or exile, in the North African lands they viewed as their ancestral homes. Furthermore, the wave of decolonization that was beginning when Camus wrote La peste was suggesting to the *pieds-noirs* the possibility of their having to leave these lands, which left them in a quandary as they had no real relationship with the “motherland” to which they would be repatriated. The “soudain exil”³⁰² faced by the citizens of Oran (thus, the European-Algerians specifically, and only a tiny fraction of the Arab-Algerians) will depict the struggles of the *pieds-noirs* to come to terms with the political realities of the decolonization pressure that had been building since the First World War and that was coming to a head in the post-World-War-Two era that saw Camus publish this novel. This novel’s geographical specificities are not, in our opinion, decorative details, but rather they allow this allegorical tale to address another distinct story, that of a people exiled, isolated, marooned to fend for itself in a hostile world full of antipathic governmental and natural forces.

The two key words examined above come together in a deliberate and specific allusion to the social and historical context of the *pieds-noirs* in this section of La peste. This becomes clear

³⁰¹ La peste 72.

³⁰² La peste 76.

upon the reexamination of one of the passages partially cited above: “[...] la séparation d’avec un être aimé devint soudain, dès les premières semaines, celui de tout un peuple, et, avec la peur, la souffrance principale de ce long temps d’exil.”³⁰³ Here we read that the separation and exile that characterize the human experience of the plague are attributed to “an entire people,” requiring us to carefully identify this people in order to adequately assess this statement. The large number of times the narrator has referred to his “concitoyens” would seem to imply that this group of citizens is the people here described, and we know that the “citizens” of Oran would have been primarily the European-Algerians who benefited from French nationality while living on their North African shore. The large group of Arab-Algerians, referenced in this novel mostly by a mention of the “quartier nègre” and Rambert’s original intention of investigating the situation of the Arabs of Oran, would be excluded from this “people” through the political reality of Algeria in the 1940s and through the text’s insistence on the “concitoyens.” Indeed, the citation above is set off from the statement that before the closing of Oran’s gates, “chacun de nos concitoyens avait poursuivi ses occupations, comme il l’avait pu, à sa place ordinaire.”³⁰⁴ This shows that the citizens are, indeed, being specifically described by the separation of an entire people, and furthermore that there is an insistence on place, in that the prior normalcy of the Oranais citizens is tied to these people’s normal place. This implies in turn that the change in state of affairs of the Oranais involves moving from that place to some other.

The situation of the Oranais is also described in somewhat insular terms: “[...] échoués à mi-distance de ces abîmes et de ces sommets, ils flottaient plutôt qu’ils ne vivaient[...].”³⁰⁵ The

³⁰³ La peste 67.

³⁰⁴ La peste 67.

³⁰⁵ La peste 72.

Oranais, between deep chasms and mountainous summits, float through this portion of their lives in a sort of inverse island of water surrounded by different forms of land. The land is shown to be key to this experience, as the citation continues by stating that the floating Oranais could only have taken strength in “acceptant de s’enraciner dans la terre de leur douleur.”³⁰⁶ We have already examined the powerful image of roots in the Algerian soil that was offered up at the burial of “Maman” in L'étranger; this passage seems to evoke similar pangs, but this time the earth of Algeria has earned the sobriquet of “the soil of their pain.” Indeed, this passage insists on an implicit choice between this process of self-rooting in the soil of pain or some sort of external fixation that would be characterized here by chasms and mountain peaks. The narrator clarifies this image further: “Ce monde extérieur qui peut toujours sauver de tout, ils fermaient les yeux sur lui, entêtés qu'ils étaient à caresser leurs chimères trop réelles et à poursuivre de toutes leurs forces les images d'une terre où une certaine lumière, deux ou trois collines, l'arbre favori et des visages de femmes composaient un climat pour eux irremplaçable.”³⁰⁷ Here the insistence on the specificity of this soil is rendered transparent, as the Oranais are shown to stubbornly refuse to look beyond their lands to the powerful outside world (whose ability to solve problems is undermined in the novel by the inefficacy of its sera) and to instead remained fixated on details of the Algerian landscape. The climate, formed of land, hills, trees and light, is so much a part of the Oranais citizens that they can not replace it. Oran, under the plague, forces its citizens to reevaluate their relationship to it and to the outside world, with the result being this fixation on the Oranais landscape, and specifically to tiny details of this landscape that

³⁰⁶ La peste 72.

³⁰⁷ La peste 73.

are shown to be part and parcel of the identity of each Oranais citizen. The isolation of the Oranais is complete, as the gates are locked, the phones are cut off, the mails are suspended, and the telegraphs are void of meaning. Even “la mer proche était interdite,”³⁰⁸ reminding the reader of the islanding of this space, as even the warm waves of the Mediterranean are shown to fulfill the Robinsonnade role of impenetrable barrier to those isolated on an island, forced by the invasion of the plague to live “au jour le jour, et seul en face du ciel” and in the “extrémités de la solitude.”³⁰⁹

3.5. Islands Within Islands

The islanding effect of the plague on the Oranais that we are postulating through parallels with the intertext of Robinson Crusoe and the hundreds of imitations thereof is also spelled out by the narrator in no uncertain terms when he is describing the “chambre de réception” Rieux had set up at the auxiliary hospital he found himself running: “Le sol creusé formait un lac d’eau crésylée au centre duquel se trouvait un îlot de briques. Le malade était transporté sur son île, déshabillé rapidement et ses vêtements tombaient dans l’eau.”³¹⁰ Here the plague sufferer is explicitly transported to a personal island due to his having contracted this disease. This little island, surrounded by a body of water, is characterized as “son île,” indicating that it is inextricably linked to its inhabitant. If the mere existence and utilization of this island were not sufficient to ensure that this narrative be considered in light of the robinsonnade, other details of this scene evoke that group of texts. For example, we see that the sufferer “was transported” to

³⁰⁸ La peste 108.

³⁰⁹ La peste 74.

³¹⁰ La peste 85.

his island in a passive manner, showing that he, like the Robinsons before him, did not choose this islanding. We see that his clothing fell in the water, obliging him to be clothed in “la chemise rugueuse”³¹¹ of the hospital, which also hints at the makeshift garments concocted by castaways in island stories. It is interesting to note that the plague experience, heretofore generalized to the entire Oranais citizenry, is here brought full circle to the individual experience of an unnamed, typical plague victim. The exile and separation already discussed as striking the population as a whole are shown in this passage to rely on this individual image of islanding for their full impact. Even when the plague victim has passed through this quasi-shipwreck and has been admitted to the hospital, he is still in quarantine and thus isolated and islanded even in “les préaux d’une école qui contenait maintenant, et en tout, cinq cent lits dont la presque totalité était occupée.”³¹² This isolation of an entire people, which leaves the individual constituents of that people personally isolated as well, is central to our analysis of La peste.

The third section of La peste opens with another evocation of the islanding of Oran: “De la mer soulevée et toujours invisible montait une odeur d’algues et de sel. Cette ville déserte, blanchie de poussière, saturée d’odeurs marines, toute sonore des cris du vent, gémissait alors comme une île malheureuse.”³¹³ This passage begins with a reminder of the constant presence of the sea through the coastal aromas of salt and seaweed, emphasizing the littoral location of Oran and thus this narrative. However, the invisibility of the sea points to its inaccessibility; the Oranais, we have already been told, are being denied access to the sea as part of the quarantine upon their city. Furthermore, the peculiar geography of Oran as described in the opening

³¹¹ La peste 85.

³¹² La peste 86.

³¹³ La peste 156.

passages of this novel are also echoed here, for the sea is in part invisible due to Oran's having turned its back on the sea. So, in this passage, which we have determined specifically describes Oran, this city is explicitly described as whimpering "comme une île malheureuse." From this passage we see that the entire novel has been and is playing out in this unhappy island, whimpering through its sea breezes. After the series of hints, nods, and winks at the insularity of the plague and Oran, this attribution of "unhappy island" to the city seems to concretize this metaphorical understanding of the city. With Oran established as the unhappy island, the Oranais become, by extension, "unhappy islanders," which is an excellent description of the castaway in the typical robinsonnade. Throughout the remainder of this analysis, we will examine a few more incidents in La peste that seem particularly closely tied to insularity and Algeria, and we will attempt to wrest some political insight from Camus's choice of metaphors in this text.

The final stages of the plague as described in this novel reveal an ever-increasing number of victims finally cresting and then a sudden declining in the number of people contracting the disease and an increase in the percentage of those surviving once they had contracted it. The flow of the narrative leads inexorably to the day when the gates of Oran are finally opened to the world, when the isolation, or islanding, of Oran is made far less severe. This day is, nevertheless, described in such a way as to reinforce the metaphor of Oran as island: "[...] venus de mers lointaines, des navires mettaient déjà le cap sur notre port, marquant à leur manière que ce jour était, pour tous ceux qui gémissaient d'être séparés, celui de la grande réunion."³¹⁴ Here we see that it is the arrival of ships from distant seas that marks the opening of Oran to the world, ensuring that the city is still thought of in terms of communicating with the rest of the world

³¹⁴ La peste 265.

primarily through ocean-going vessels. The use of the verb “gémir,” already associated with the “île malheureuse,” reinforces the insularity of the city that is here shown to be tamed by the return of ships to Oran. The reopening of Oran could seem to be a victory over the plague, but the narrator takes pains to avoid such a conclusion from the careful reader of his text. On the page before this description of the end of the quarantine, Rieux receives a telegram that tells him of his wife’s death. The separation between Rieux and his wife, caused at first by the latter’s tuberculosis and then by the plague quarantine, is shown to outlast the temporary separation suffered by so many Oranais during the months of the plague’s domination of the city. If Rieux’s bad news and its even worse timing, just before the end of the plague quarantine, is not sufficient to undermine the joy of the victory over the plague, the description of Rieux’s emotional state is even more telling: “Depuis des mois et depuis deux jours, c’était la même douleur qui continuait.”³¹⁵ This unending pain is contrasted with the physical beauty of Oran freed from plague: “[...] il contemplait obstinément, par la fenêtre, un matin magnifique qui se levait sur le port.”³¹⁶ The beauty of Oran, always tied as it is here to the littoral positioning of the city/island, seems in this case almost to mock the doctor’s longstanding suffering caused by death and separation. The news of the death of Rieux’s wife comes on the heels of the death of Tarrou, who throughout the plague months had assisted Rieux in his endeavors to combat the plague and its effects, and who contracted and died painfully from the plague after just about everyone else started manifesting an ability to fight off an apparently weakened strain of the disease. Finally, just after the narrator admits to being Rieux, which confirms this text as following the pattern of the castaway eventually relating his tale once he has had the opportunity

³¹⁵ La peste 264.

³¹⁶ La peste 264.

to escape from his island, there is another strange anecdote that seems to resist the conclusion that life after the plague is going to be idyllic. As Rieux walks down the street, he is stopped by a police roadblock. He takes out his papers that have allowed him a greater degree of freedom than that enjoyed by his fellow Oranais during the quarantine, and he is told: “Impossible, docteur. [...] Il y a un fou qui tire sur la foule.”³¹⁷ Here we see that Rieux’s freedom has actually been lessened now that the plague no longer gives him special access to forbidden spaces, and it is a representative of the government who makes this clear to Rieux. As this scene develops, it becomes clear that the crazy individual shooting at the crowd is none other than Cottard, about whom it had been revealed earlier that once the quarantine was over he faced probable arrest. After Cottard grotesquely shoots a spaniel that has somehow survived the plague and the governmental decrees against keeping pets, he is eventually arrested by machine-gun-toting policemen who eventually beat him up once they have him down on the street: “Un agent s’approcha de lui et le frappa deux fois, de toute la force de ses poings, posément, avec une sorte d’application.”³¹⁸ The jack-booted thugs here supposedly protecting the peace, but shown to fire machine guns into windows of apartment buildings and to cold-bloodedly beat prisoners they have already acknowledged to be mentally unsound and thus most likely not responsible for their actions are the representatives of the government that is returning to its normal levels of control in the post-plague city of Oran. This scene may serve to remind the reader that Rieux, like Meursault before him, has expressed having no love of the police, and it certainly implies a certain tension between at least some of the inhabitants of Oran and the governmental forces of law and order.

³¹⁷ La peste 274.

³¹⁸ La peste, 276.

At the end of this text, we read that the narrator, identified now as Rieux, “savait cependant que cette chronique ne pouvait pas être celle de la victoire définitive.”³¹⁹ This comment is somewhat surprising, since one might well have assumed that lifting the quarantine on Oran before the plague was completely controlled might be considered a bad idea. Rieux’s/the narrator’s reason for this statement is the following: “Car il savait ce que cette foule en joie ignorait, et qu’on peut lire dans les livres, que le bacille de la peste ne meurt ni ne disparaît jamais, qu’il peut rester pendant des dizaines d’années endormi dans les meubles et le linge, qu’il attend patiemment dans les chambres, les caves, les malles, les mouchoirs et les paperasses, et que, peut-être, le jour viendrait où, pour le malheur et l’enseignement des hommes, la peste réveillerait ses rats et les enverrait mourir dans une cité heureuse.”³²⁰ This passage immediately indicates that the deeper, secret knowledge possessed by Rieux, and which the crowd knew nothing of, comes from books, yet another self-conscious reference to the narrative process in this tale. The knowledge itself, that the plague bacillus never dies and never disappears, feeds into the echoes of failed victory that came through Rieux’s personal travails at the end of the plague quarantine. The insistence on the bacillus, the microbe responsible for the plague, reminds the reader of the precise mechanism of this disease, that it is spread by the invasion of the body by this plague bacillus. Of course, here we have an anthropomorphized plague germ, since it is capable of awakening its rats and sending them amongst the city-dwelling humans, but nevertheless the scientific basis of the plague, underscored time and time again in the text due to the narrator’s clinical observations, is here evoked at the very end of this novel, indeed in its very last sentence. We will argue that the insistence on the microbial basis

³¹⁹ La peste 279.

³²⁰ La peste, 279.

for this disease is relevant for an allegorical reading of the text as a commentary on the Algerian situation in the years between the Second World War and the Algerian War. Microbial infestation of a human body is analogous to the colonization of a land by a group of people. Specifically, in the case of the plague germ in La peste, the narrator makes clear that the particular germ responsible for the Oranais version of the plague is slightly different from the classic bacillus as described in medical texts. This reinforces once again the specificity of the Oranais setting of this tale, and requires the reader to understand the bacillus in question to be specifically associated with Oran. Oran itself was observed to bear resemblance to a body in the opening passages of the novel, especially when we read that this city had its back turned to the sea. This (desirable, female) body is subsequently infected with, or colonized by, a tenacious and deadly organism that forces it to undergo pain, isolation, death, and putrefaction before finally going into remission. Raymond Stephanson suggests that “plague and the threat of infection force the drama of self and other to be played out at its most intimate and terrifying level.”³²¹ In La peste we have an example of how Camus has carefully juxtaposed the complex identity issue of self and other, through the intimate level of the plague metaphor, with the specific situation regarding a group of people living in North Africa even though their grandparents lived in Europe. Therefore, we feel that it is not too great a stretch to read the plague metaphorically (as we are encouraged to do by the Defoe quote that introduces this text) as a means of speaking about the colonization of Oran, and by extension the entirety of Algeria.

The Oranais, repeatedly identified as citizens, have already been shown to be, in the logic of this text, for the most part inhabitants of Oran of European stock, since the Arab-Oranais

³²¹ Raymond Stephanson, “The Plague Narratives of Defoe and Camus: Illness as Metaphor,” Modern Language Quarterly 48.3 (1987): 239.

(except the few who had renounced Islam) were denied the privileges of citizenship. As the plague is introduced to Oran, causes great changes in the territory and in the inhabitants and then eventually peters out, so the habitation of Oran by these European-Oranais can be viewed as a long inoculation that wrought great changes on the area, but that was eventually destined to fail, at least temporarily. This metaphorical reading is complex, as the text's Oranais represent the colons and their descendants, but at a deeper level represent the body of the colonized. This doubling of the European-Oranais suggests ironically that in colonizing and developing the Algerian space, these same people were themselves rendered subservient, were themselves colonized. The references to the Algerian soil as being irreplaceable would seem to imply a certain dependence on this soil on the part of the Algerians of European stock. Also, the relationship between the Oranais and the representatives of the central French government are always strained in this text, as the latter are shown to respond too slowly and/or incompetently to the situation in Oran, and also in that the latter typically acts in a heavy-handed, domineering fashion, either in enforcing quarantine through violence or in the commando-style raid on Cottard's apartment. In the logic of La peste, which is presented to the reader as an edited series of first-hand accounts of a difficult time in the Algerian coastal city of Oran, the Oranais are primarily victims, but they are not free from association with the infection of the plague.

La peste describes calamitous events transpiring in a setting of “un paysage sans égal”³²² that is very explicitly identified as that of the Algerian coast. This novel, written by an author who was born and raised in the *pied-noir* community of Algiers, contains social commentary that is not simply universal and applicable to all of humanity for the edification of that enormous group, as Camus has often been read and taught, nor only an allegory of Nazi occupation of

³²² La peste 13.

France, but also specific commentary upon the socio-political situation in Algeria in the time leading up to the Algerian War. Indeed, we could even argue that these two allegorical readings are not completely different, since fascism and colonialism were considered related movements,³²³ and the political specificities of the supporters of the continued French presence in Algeria made this conflation a real-world phenomenon. David Carroll reminds us: “That the plague also had a colonialist form is in fact a logical, necessary implication of the allegory constructed in the novel.”³²⁴ Albert Camus’s public statements regarding the Algerian situation have been widely quoted and discussed, and indeed these can be taken to indicate that Camus, leftist intellectual of the Parisian, existentialist school harbored some fairly right-wing political beliefs regarding the future of Algeria. Nevertheless, we feel that closely examining Camus’s fiction provides a counterpoint to his non-fictional pronouncements, for flowing through his novels we find a constant current of references to Algeria and the *pied-noir* society that was invented, developed, and largely eradicated in that “landscape without equal.” This stream of commentary is specifically linked to the descriptions of the Algerian landscape, particularly Camus’s habit of describing insular spaces within Algeria. In La peste, which as we have shown is specifically interested in the citizens, thus the *pieds-noirs* predominantly, of Oran, we see this group isolated and islanded in numerous ways, from social isolation due to quarantine procedures to the biological isolation of one body as compared to another when discussing the plague bacillus’s trajectory from person to person. It is the aftermath of the plague that contains

³²³ Aimé Césaire states that the crime to which Europeans object the most in Hitler’s actions is “d’ avoir appliqué l’Europe des procédés colonialistes don’t ne relevaient jusqu’ici que les Arabes d’Algérie.” (Discours sur le colonialisme [Paris: Présence Africaine, 1955] 12.)

³²⁴ David Carroll, “The Colonial City and the Question of Borders: Albert Camus’s Allegory of Oran,” L’Esprit Créateur 151.3 (2001): 98.

the most interesting commentary upon the possible future of Oran and the Oranais, however. We see the Oranais/*pieds-noirs* reunited with the wider world, specifically mainland France, through the reunited lovers strolling through Oran together after the end of the quarantine. Nevertheless, this coming together of Oran and the outside world is shown to be a flawed victory through the narrator's ruminations on the temporary nature of the victory over the disease. Thinking of the joy in the newly-opened city, the narrator states that "cette allégresse était toujours menacée."³²⁵ This seems to indicate that the narrator expects the joy of the Oranais to be short-lived, or at the very least that the narrator does not whole-heartedly join in the celebrations at hand. Of course, the narrator is identified as Rieux, whose wife died while they were separated, leaving him with no happy reunion, and whose friend and colleague had died in the plague's last gasp as the walls were coming down after the quarantine, but even these personal defeats do not seem to be all that is referenced in the narrator's pessimism, as this is shown to be realism based in scientific fact, specifically the life cycle of the plague bacillus. This bacillus, whose active role in this novel is mentioned time and again, dominates Oran for several months before suddenly losing steam and ground. The celebrations at the reopening of Oran represent a perceived victory of the Oranais over the bacillus, but the narrator/doctor/plague expert's comments at the end of the novel sap this victory. Rather than responding to treatments of human ingenuity, the plague bacillus seems to suddenly lose vigor of its own accord, allowing itself to be driven back underground. However, the narrator, in setting up the bacillus as some sort of underground monarch with armies of suicide rats at its disposal, leaves the plague's power largely intact, and points instead to a reprieve of uncertain length before the seemingly inevitable return of the plague among the Oranais.

³²⁵ La peste 279.

3.6. Conclusion

At the beginning of La peste, Oran is said to be grafted onto the Algerian landscape. This term from plant husbandry is also associated with vivisection, and seems a word charged with many strange, conflicting images. On the one hand, the fruit tree with good roots but poor fruit is able to produce better produce when a branch from a superior fruit-producing tree is grafted onto it; in this scenario, grafting produces a sort of hybrid offspring that is better, more vigorous, more lucrative than either of its original parents. On the other hand, grafting involves surgery, involves cutting into one surface in order to facilitate an impaling of a foreign object into that surface. If Oran is grafted onto the Algerian plateau as described in the opening pages of this novel, then violence and some amount of unnaturalness are inherent to the existence of the European-Algerian city of Oran. When the plague bacillus is introduced into this equation, we can see a doubling of the invasive cohabiting of two organisms in a single space. Although surgery is not required for the combining of these two life-forms to occur, we see in Rieux's rounds that cutting is part and parcel of the cohabitation of plague bacillus and human host, as Rieux's scalpel is busy slicing open various nodules caused by the disease's effects on its host's body. Whereas grafting a limb onto a barren tree can be shown to have the potentially beneficial result of producing vigorous offspring, the plague bacillus provides no visible benefits to its host body, and indeed seems in almost every case to destroy this host. Oran's grafting onto the Algerian coastal plateau must fall somewhere in-between these two cases, and the ultimate future of Oran is left very much in doubt at the end of this novel. Will Oran produce high-quality fruit and ultimately improve the land onto which it was implanted through violence, or will it prove to be a bacillus that uses up its host and ultimately kills it? Rieux's final comments do not tell us

the future of Oran, but they allow us to see the uncertainty that he, less ignorant of the plague than the festive public at large, finds in that future. Rieux indicates that the plague bacillus is still hiding all over Oran, in the furnishings of private life: furniture, bedding, bedrooms, handkerchiefs, and, perhaps most importantly, in papers of all descriptions. Rieux, editing his journals and those of his friends and colleagues into this cautionary tale, who has transformed himself from physician to author, has the literal/literary seeds of the plague about which he writes in the very papers upon which he is putting down his observations and interpretations. It is far from inconceivable given the mention of “paperasses” here that Rieux, and all those who keep plague journals such as the merchant in Defoe’s A Journal of the Plague Years and Rieux and his circle of friends and colleagues, are going to be more or less directly responsible for the coming of the next plague.

Camus, more aware perhaps of the events coming to the Oranais and the other *pieds-noirs* of Algeria than were the bulk of his *concitoyens*, provides in La peste a warning that a great crisis is coming to the *pied-noir* community, grafted precariously onto a landscape without equal, and that this crisis is centered around a colonial process that is always destructive and the outcome of which is very difficult to predict with accuracy, save that many will die and that exile seems the most probable course of action to be followed by the Parisian French government in attempting to deal with this coming crisis. Expressing the notion of the impermanence of the Oranais, and *pied-noir*, civilization would have been impossible for Camus to do openly without his being forced to abandon the very strong cultural, and especially familial, ties to that culture that he frequently mentioned. Even Camus’s often-cited reference to choosing his mother over justice indicates the extent to which his familial and cultural ties interfered with his enunciation of a rational political position regarding Algeria. However, taking Defoe’s proffered license to

allegorize, and capitalizing on the large body of work associating island narratives with discussion of imperial process and ramifications, Camus is able to indirectly communicate some dark musings regarding the fragility of the Algerian situation in the period following the Allied liberation of North Africa and the subsequent end of the Second World War. Where the scion of the *pied-noir* culture was unable to come out and say that the unjust, unfair, and inequitable situation between the *pieds-noirs* and the Arab- and Berber-Algerians was doomed to be changed in favor of the more oppressed group, the writer was able to slip the seeds of the coming plague, which would wipe out the Oranais “citizens,” the *pieds-noirs* , into a novel that would be largely read allegorically as referring to the political events in mainland Europe, rather than as referring to Algeria. Nevertheless, the preponderance of references to specificities of the Algerian landscape and to the Oranais “citizens” obliges us to examine this text for the message it bears regarding the future of those citizens, and exile and separation from a landscape without equal seems to be the most likely scenario.

4. Falling for Colonial Nostalgia: Islands in *La chute*

In his short novel, *La chute*, published in 1956, Albert Camus abandoned Algeria, the setting of all his other novels, and chose to situate the intrigue in Amsterdam. Nevertheless, he continues to address concerns about colonialism as he had in earlier works set in the specifically colonial space of Algeria before the war and he even defines Amsterdam as an insular space which has the added interest of being associated with other more famous, and more obviously colonial, islands. In this novel a French ex-patriot narrator will ultimately explain his feelings regarding imperialism, and he will do so through his relationship with insular space. This narrator defines Amsterdam at the beginning of the text using a version of the rubric "entre x et y :"³²⁶ "coincé dans un petit espace de maisons et d'eaux, cerné par des brumes, des terres froides, et la mer fumante comme une lessive."³²⁷ Near the end of this novel, Amsterdam is also described as "une capitale d'eaux et de brumes, corsetée de canaux."³²⁸ Thus the setting of *La chute* is identified as insular, as it is shown to be a land surrounded by different states of water. Of course, even a passing familiarity with the unusual geography of the Netherlands indicates the strong relationship between these low countries and the water that surrounds them, not only in the form of the canals and rivers but more importantly in the seawater that borders this city and the lands around it on several sides and also from above, since the engineering of the Dutch has allowed them to live below sea level. Even though the narrator claims to be fond of this

³²⁶ I find that Camus uses various versions of this rubric to define spaces as insular throughout his novels. For a more detailed development of this argument, see the first chapter of my dissertation, which focuses on *L'étranger*.

³²⁷ Albert Camus, *La chute* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956) 16-17. Henceforth, all references to this work will be indicated by "*La chute*" and a page number.

³²⁸ *La chute* 144.

inhospitable space, he certainly does not confuse it with paradise. At one point, the narrator clearly indicates that his island is of the desert island variety, saying that he is “réfugié dans un désert de pierres, de brumes et d’eaux pourries.”³²⁹ The image of the narrator as a castaway on a forbidding island is strengthened after he finally explains the reason for his self-imposed exile: having fled his feelings of guilt in Paris, he has set up a makeshift shop in the criminal underworld of Amsterdam. Right after he confesses his crime to his listener, he says “Mais nous sommes arrivés, voici ma maison, mon abri!”³³⁰ The fact that his home is redefined quickly as his shelter evokes the lean-to’s cobbled together by marooning victims in robinsonnades. These hints at this text’s ties to the robinsonnade genre are greatly strengthened by the narrator’s plans for his interlocutor: “Je vous mènerai volontiers à l’île de Marken, vous verrez le Zuyderzee.”³³¹ Not only does this “juge-pénitent” inhabit a desert island, he is eager to bring his listener, and by extension us the readers, into an island space as well.

While the choice of Amsterdam as the setting for a novel interested in island colonial space may seem relatively obvious where water is concerned, this northern, long-civilized space does not evoke the savage wilderness that typifies the insular *tabula rasa* that the island represents in robinsonnades. However, from the very first lines of this short novel, the narrator provides the reader with clues pointing to an association between this Amsterdam and the wild islands of the robinsonnade. The bartender in the opening scene, whose bar has the somewhat exotic name “*Mexico-City*,” is described in the second sentence of the novel as an “estimable

³²⁹ La chute 123.

³³⁰ La chute 75.

³³¹ La chute 75.

gorille.”³³² He is furthermore described as being quite entitled to refusing to serve clients at his whim: “Être roi de ses humeurs, c’est le privilège des grands animaux.”³³³ The transformation of this Dutch innkeeper into a powerful, capricious tropical beast serves to indicate from the very outset of this text that the Holland here depicted is tied more tightly to the savage world than one might expect. Indeed, the text goes on to make absolutely clear that this bartender’s limited verbal production is tied to a world far removed from the shores of the Zuiderzee: “son mutisme est assourdissant. C’est le silence des forêts primitives.”³³⁴ This deafening silence of the primitive forests transports the reader even farther away from the comparatively prosaic Netherlands, and the insistence upon this distancing implied by the repetition of references to the elemental forces of primitive nature becomes nearly deafening in and of itself. The speaker in the text continues: “je suis attiré par ces créatures [...] on éprouve de la nostalgie pour les primates.”³³⁵ Yet again, the bartender and perhaps his countrymen are called creatures and are shown to bring to mind the primates. One of the speaker’s clients is referred to as “l’ours brun,”³³⁶ once again suggesting a powerful animality in this denizen of the Dutch criminal society. In fact, we read further that “cet homme des cavernes est spécialisé dans le trafic des tableaux.”³³⁷ This description of this character as variously a bear or a caveman ties the central intrigues of the speaker’s life to this strange Dutch menagerie, since a stolen painting is crucial to

³³² La chute 7.

³³³ La chute 7.

³³⁴ La chute 8.

³³⁵ La chute 8.

³³⁶ La chute 44.

³³⁷ La chute 44.

the development of the plot. This linking of the modern Amsterdam's citizens with the more primitive denizens of the wilds seems determined to place this novel in a context much wilder than Amsterdam in the middle of the twentieth century. This sense is strongly confirmed when the speaker, ruminating upon the organization of Dutch criminal society, refers to piranhas: "Vous avez entendu parler, naturellement, de ces minuscules poissons des rivières brésiliennes qui s'attaquent par milliers au nageur imprudent, le nettoient, en quelques instants, à petites bouchées rapides, et n'en laissent qu'un squelette immaculé?"³³⁸ This rather poetic evocation of these famously aggressive predatory fish, compared to the organizational model of the Dutch society within which this tale is set once again paints a picture of Amsterdam as simultaneously more savage and more exotic than the reader might immediately imagine to be the case. Indeed, the choice of comparison between the members of the Dutch *demi-monde* and piranhas obliges the reader to reinterpret the Dutch landscape as something akin to the rainforests, complete with dangerous native fauna and also, perhaps, by extension placing this space in the context of the colonized tropics. This supposition will be almost immediately confirmed by the speaker's references to specifically colonial lands tied historically to the Dutch imperial project.

The Dutch are described in a curious manner in La chute: they are said to be "là sans y être."³³⁹ The narrator says of the populace of Amsterdam: "Je l'aime, car il est double. Il est ici et il est ailleurs."³⁴⁰ This strange double existence of the Dutch not only lends to them a rather distracted and unfocused air, but its reminder of multiplicity of identities and meanings also seems to be an invitation to a metaphorical reading of this people. Indeed, we will suggest that

³³⁸ La chute 11.

³³⁹ La chute 93.

³⁴⁰ La chute 17.

the Dutch are to be read as at least parallel to, if not completely standing in for, another people-group's experiences. This paradoxically multiplied existence is quickly explained through yet another evocation of islands: the Dutch are both here and elsewhere because they are all mentally "partis à des milliers de kilomètres, vers Java, l'île lointaine."³⁴¹ This faraway isle, to which the Dutchmen are only mentally departed, suggests the grip an island space can have on the hearts and minds of those who once experienced an existence within its shores. These distracted men and women are described as "colons nostalgiques"³⁴² who are forever dreaming of the paradise spice islands which they once inhabited. Here we have a very specific reference to the link between island space and the imperial projects with which it is associated, further solidifying our contention that in the novels of Albert Camus such references carry a freight of imperial discourse. Furthermore, these "nostalgic colonials," having lived through the forced abandonment of their colonial possessions, seem to embody a prediction of similar experiences to come for other colonials not yet entirely forced into nostalgia, for they are discussed by a Frenchman exiled from his home country. Even the professed love of Clamence, the "juge-pénitent," for these homesick Hollanders suggests a kinship between them and citizens of "la plus grande France." Indeed, we will see through analysis of the Dutch people and landscape and a passage specifically referencing the North African littoral that this short novel is metaphorically interested in the predicament of the *pieds-noirs*, who will be understood by extension to be "homesick colonials" in the making. The deep connection between the Dutch and their former colonial island territories, strong enough to continue to filter their very existence

³⁴¹ La chute 18.

³⁴² La chute 18.

in Amsterdam, suggests that such a connection exists between the people like Clamence, Frenchmen with associations to North Africa, and that pseudo-insular colonial space.

This double existence indicates that the image of the tropical island colonial possession is shown to obsess the seemingly down to earth and stolid citizens of Amsterdam, who are never able to completely reintegrate into life in Europe; instead, theirs is a sad existence of dreams of tropical paradise confronted with the drab reality of cold fog and gray sea. This reverse imperialism, wherein the once colonial space has conquered the imaginations of the once masters, is borne out even economically through the prostitutes of Amsterdam: "Le rêve, monsieur, le rêve à peu de frais, le voyage aux Indes! Ces personnes se parfument aux épices. Vous entrez, elles tirent les rideaux et la navigation commence. Les dieux descendent sur les corps nus et les îles dérivent, démentes, coiffées d'une chevelure ébourifée de palmiers sous le vent."³⁴³ The Indonesian prostitutes, or at least a simulacrum thereof, thus now attempt to earn back from their johns some of the profits once gained from the colonial enterprise. This depiction of the colonial relationship as a sexual one certainly resonates with the island literature of the nineteenth century, in which the island space is desired, and then possessed, in a very sexual manner.³⁴⁴ The narrator's choice of prostitution as the expression of this sexual relationship may seem disingenuous since it is somewhat less violent than the effective rape that is the trope of the robinsonnade regarding this union, but we would argue that the choice of prostitution allows the colonized to demonstrate some control over their former masters in the form of demanding payment, changing the nature of the transaction from one in which the European merely takes

³⁴³ La chute 19-20.

³⁴⁴ For a particularly compelling example of this trope of the robinsonnade, see Diana Loxley's analysis of the dynamiting of Granite House in Jules Verne's L'île mystérieuse in her Problematic Shores: The Literature of Islands (London: Macmillan, 1990) 54-55.

what he wants to one in which he must reimburse the person who caters to his addiction. Furthermore, the transient nature of the prostitution transaction reminds the reader that the Dutch are now renting a few moments of simulated Javanese island adventure time rather than actually living out their colonial adventure as they must have done at an earlier time. Unlike the traditional island/colonial adventure, which generally results in the European enriching himself by raping and plundering the island space that he grows to love, here the failed colonials are forced to impoverish themselves each time they wish to revisit those paradise shores that haunt their memories and refuse to allow them to feel fulfilled living in the low countries of northern Europe. This financial impoverishment seems to mirror a lessening in virility and vitality for these Dutch men, for they are no longer the masters of their island domains but are instead clutching at phantasms of their former glory by soliciting prostitutes who may or may not actually be real scions of the island spaces they represent for these humbled former colonial masters. The Dutch, torn between the paradise they loved and lost and their own gray town are thus forced into the humiliating position of consumers of nostalgic evocations of their past happiness.

The narrator of La chute, having clearly established the incessant longing of the Dutch for their lost colonial islands, finally begins to discuss the connection between islands and imperialism from his own unique perspective as inhabitant, and yet not citizen, of the desert island space that is Amsterdam. He admits that what drives him is an overwhelming desire to dominate those around him, and furthermore he claims that this is a truism for intelligent men: “La vérité est que tout homme intelligent, vous le savez bien, rêve d’être un gangster et de régner sur la société par la seule violence.”³⁴⁵ Furthermore, the narrator states: “Je sais bien qu’on ne

³⁴⁵ La chute 60.

peut se passer de dominer ou d'être servi. Chaque homme a besoin d'esclaves comme d'air pur. Commander, c'est respirer."³⁴⁶ These statements suggest blithely that the desire to rule over others is intrinsic to human nature, or at least western human nature, and provide a psychological explanation for the drive to colonize the weaker areas of the world. This rather bleak worldview is closely associated with the metaphor of island as colonial space: "j'aime toutes les îles. Il est plus facile d'y régner."³⁴⁷ In this statement we have a very straightforward confirmation of one of the central premises of Diana Loxley's excellent study of island literature, namely that the island space is the ideal literary locus for any discussion of the imperial process. She suggests, and Clamence here concurs, that the "powerful trope of the island" "represents the space of colonial/imperial power."³⁴⁸ The narrator here confirms that island spaces are the targets of choice of an attempt to dominate because they are not as difficult to conquer. This recognition of the island space as the best possible terrain for colonialism may also suggest that the insular setting is the best way to literarily explore the phenomenon of colonialism. Whether because islands are empty pages just waiting for a strong imperial hand to write their destinies or because from their central mountain peak the entire colony can be observed, literally at the feet of its master, the narrator and thus Albert Camus by extension here confirm that islands will, indeed must, be used in order to discuss imperialism.

In La chute, Camus seems to conflate the colonial drive with that towards fascism, perhaps a natural outgrowth of this novel's setting in Amsterdam after the Second World War.

³⁴⁶ La chute 49.

³⁴⁷ La chute 49.

³⁴⁸ Loxley 3.

This book's narrator here clearly points out that domination seems easiest on islands, as evidenced in the above statement confirming the relative ease of reigning over an island space. In an echo of the robinsonnade's traditional hike up the central mountain peak for a panoramic view of the new territory, we see that Clamence likes to be on a balcony overlooking the sea and the "fourmis humaines."³⁴⁹ Comparing the humans under his dominion to ants refers to their apparent size when seen from above and also to their function as worker drones under his command, tasked with tirelessly laboring for the improvement of his island demesne. He recounts his "doux rêves d'oppression" in which he manages to "dominer tout le monde."³⁵⁰ In these sweet dreams, Clamence's objective is to dominate all those around him, but in the context of a more fascist and totalitarian worldview we would suggest that these dreams are megalomaniacal in nature, and that he uses the French idiomatic expression for "everyone" because it also implies "all the world," framing these dreams of conquest and control in terms of a desire and/or quest for total world domination. In addition to Clamence's self-reported dreams suggesting the hard edge of fascism within his political desires, we see that statues showing the former slave trade of Amsterdam are juxtaposed with the narrator's conclusions that domination is easier on islands, reminding us of the harsh reality of some aspects, at least, of the colonial system: "Délicieuse maison, n'est-ce pas? Les deux têtes que vous voyez là sont celles d'esclaves nègres. Une enseigne. La maison appartenait à un vendeur d'esclaves."³⁵¹ These statues are a reminder of the straightforward manner in which the Dutch invested themselves in one of the most blatantly dehumanizing aspects of the extended imperial project, the

³⁴⁹ La chute 29.

³⁵⁰ La chute 60-61.

³⁵¹ La chute 49.

commercialization of human lives. This is reinforced by the specificity of the setting, when Clamence mentions the fact that he lives in what was the house of a Jew until the Nazis got involved in Amsterdam's politics: "Moi, j'habite le quartier juif, ou ce qui s'appelait ainsi jusqu'au moment où nos frères hitlériens y ont fait de la place. Quel lessivage!"³⁵² Through this comment, Clamence identifies himself with the Nazis in several ways: he calls them his brothers, strongly implying a kinship between himself and these murderous fascists, and he tacitly approves of their actions by living in the neighborhood cleaned out by these same people. Indeed, the exclamation declaring the deportation and killing of seventy-five thousand Jews as "quite a laundering" seems to show a certain admiration for the Nazis and their actions, which Clamence immediately confirms when he states "J'admire cette application, cette méthodique patience!"³⁵³ In an Amsterdam that has been cleaned out of its Jews, this extra reminder of that earlier holocaust of the slave trade and its foundational role in the prosperity of the modern Amsterdam forces the reader to link the somewhat metaphorical island dominion to other examples of abuses of political power in the experiences of the characters in this short novel, leading to a heavy conflation of the island and the fascist excesses of the Nazi era and then, after the narration of Clamence's despotic experiences in North Africa, with that space as well.

Once he has set up the Dutch as "colons nostalgiques" who have been forced out of their paradise colonial space by political events beyond their control, Camus provides an episode that all but ensures that we make the leap from the Dutch to the *pieds-noirs*, that group of "nostalgic colonials" facing the imminent arrival of a similar fate when Camus was writing La chute, as the

³⁵² La chute 15.

³⁵³ La chute 15.

insurrections of 1954-56 were in full swing at this time. As we have shown elsewhere³⁵⁴ in analyses of L'étranger and La peste, Camus seems to have been acutely aware of the fragile state of the French-Algerian colonial project, and it is in this short novel that he begins to deeply intimate the manner in which the experience of the French pull-out from Algeria will affect the former French-Algerians who will be forced, like the Dutch, to physically inhabit one space while their minds, imaginations, and perhaps hearts still live in another. The narrator, receiving his interlocutor at his bedside, explains in this way: “Je suis confus de vous recevoir couché. Ce n'est rien, un peu de fièvre que je soigne au genièvre. J'ai l'habitude de ces accès. Du paludisme, je crois, que j'ai contracté du temps que j'étais pape.”³⁵⁵ The gin which the narrator has been drinking throughout the story now shows itself under a different light: instead of being merely a detail of local Dutch color, this beverage is shown to be charged with its rather well-known association with the extensive British colonial endeavor, through which it was ingested throughout the tropics as a febrifuge and anti-malarial prophylactic.³⁵⁶ Furthermore, the narrator's interlocutor, and by extension the readers of this text, are also implicated in the

³⁵⁴ This refers to the first two chapters of my dissertation.

³⁵⁵ La chute 125.

³⁵⁶ I have suggested in a study of Céline's Voyage au bout de la nuit that the practice of regularly taking quinine, a poison, in the hopes of rendering the body just toxic enough to make life difficult for malaria parasites while avoiding damage to the body itself, can be read metaphorically as a recognition that the colonizing process is harmful to the colonist as well as to the people dominated. Malaria, endemic to the regions colonized by Europeans, seems to act as an immune response of these regions to the infection that is the European colonist, since the people native to these lands are often portrayed as possessing a native resistance to malaria that the Europeans lack. There is some scientific evidence to back up this argument, as being haploid for sickle cell seems to confer some added degree of tolerance to malaria, and such genetic make-up is far more prevalent in groups ancestrally inhabiting malaria-prone regions than in those of European stock.

drinking of gin and its associations with the failed colonial enterprise and its continued effects on those who were a part of it.

The narrator includes attached to one of his last discourses another confession which he then generalizes to explain imperialism. As a prisoner in the desert of North Africa as a result of associations with resistance personnel, the narrator was in charge of water distribution. He informs his interlocutor that “J’ai été nommé pape dans un camp de prisonniers,”³⁵⁷ and this strange honor that was bestowed upon him would seem to conflate the discussion of colonial and ecclesiastical policies throughout this passage. He took advantage of this position to drink some water destined for a fellow prisoner who was dying: “j’ai bu l’eau, cela est sûr, en me persuadant que les autres avaient besoin de moi, plus que de celui-ci qui allait mourir de toute façon, et je devais me conserver à eux. C’est ainsi, cher, que naissent les empires et les églises, sous le soleil de la mort.”³⁵⁸ So we have an explanation for the imperial, and perhaps missionary, projects undertaken by the Europeans in the lands “under the death sun,” in that the eventual ruler over a new territory must simply convince himself that his ascendancy is in the best interests of the benighted people to be ruled for their own good. However, the moral strength of this argument is sapped from the beginning as the paternalistic attitude expressed here is simultaneously condemned by its association with fratricidal murder. The rather lame attempt to justify the colonial ambitions of Europe through the hackneyed “White man’s burden” is shown through the example of Clamence to be bankrupt of morality and simultaneously based upon murder by theft of the resources necessary to sustain life. That the episode that makes this message perfectly clear is set in North Africa obliges the reader to situate La chute within the context of Camus’s

³⁵⁷ La chute 126.

³⁵⁸ La chute 133.

other novels, all of which are set in Algeria. Furthermore, the fact that the Maghreb is the setting for this particularly important episode underscores the centrality of this space in Camus's body of work, as it is his focus throughout all of his major works of fiction. Even in his most apparently European novel, Camus is unable or unwilling to tell a story that does not revolve around the experiences of people of European stock on the northern shores of Africa.

In light of these passages and their ramifications, it seems clear that the perspective on imperialism as reflected in this short novel is ambiguous. On the one hand, a love for the spaces colonized and lost generates sympathy for those forever doomed to feel torn between their former tropical home and the gray, wintry world to which they have been forced to return. The descriptions of the Dutch wandering about their ancestral homeland with their heads, while literally shrouded in fog, figuratively in the islands they have left behind forever, leaves the reader with the impression that this is a people diminished by the failure of their imperial dream. Furthermore, the seeming addiction to their former island spaces in the forms of habitual gin-drinking and patronage of prostitutes who market themselves with an Indonesian air shows that these failed colonists are not only nostalgic but thoroughly wretched in the absence of this space they loved and lost. Clutching at various unsatisfying substitutes for the locus of their imperial project, the Dutch are in the process of turning that chapter in their national history into a full-blown fantasy, as the imagined pleasures of the colonial lifestyle are all that they still have access to. This "rêve à peu de frais,"³⁵⁹ a cheap dream that was of course very dear in the making, has transformed the Dutch from proud colonial masters of a beautiful, exotic island empire to gin-soaked lechers huddled into themselves in a cold, foggy, landscape that is nevertheless still largely defined by its contentious relationship with water. Instead of the

³⁵⁹ La chute 19.

beautiful waves of a tropical sea lapping at their shores as was the case in Java, the Dutch are now surrounded by a wall of icy, dark water that has them in its grip and whose metaphorical purpose as a wall is underscored by the fact that the water is only held back by literal walls in the form of Amsterdam's famous dikes. Indeed, from a tropical island paradise the Dutch now find themselves forced to return, using a word that is problematic in the case of any colonists who were actually born overseas, to an inverted island beneath the waves. The narrator's aversion to crossing bridges in the dark accentuates further the restrictive geography of Amsterdam and its water, for this reminds the reader of the canals that cut sections of this city off from others, further isolating and islanding the resultant spaces in which this strange tale plays out. Amsterdam, a sort of water-bound hell to which are consigned the unhappy Dutchmen who once lorded it over the tropical islands of Indonesia, is so unappealing as to generate sympathy for those forced to inhabit its gloom.

On the other hand, imperialism is shown to be a process rooted in murder which consists of obeying a blind instinct to dominate the easily oppressed under the pretense of this somehow being for their greater good. Clamence, in proclaiming his desire for domination, makes clear that the imperial drive, associated with the fascist one towards totalitarianism, is nothing but an amplification of the base human instinct to control all around. The theft of water from his erstwhile brother in arms, or at least fellow detainee, rendered even more morally bankrupt by his simultaneous Pope-worshipper relationship with his victim, is shown to be emblematic of the imperial process, for with a hypocritical excuse that suggested that this death was somehow for the good of the dying rather than the obvious fact that it was a self-serving act to prolong the life and power of Clamence himself, a new empire was born. There is indeed death under the death-sun, but the North African anecdote in La chute suggests that this death is brought into that space

by the actions of the imperialists themselves. Although some evocations of pleasure islands in this novel resonate with passages in La mort heureuse, Camus's unpublished first attempt at a novel, in which his island narrative is far less complex in its apparent happy acceptance of the imperial message behind that novel's main character living on the beach, it is clear that Camus has progressed far beyond his youthful embracing of the imperial project, and that he is now mired in the intensely ambiguous situation represented in this book by the Dutch, that is to say that he is torn between the country he loves and grew up as a part of and the cold reality of the so-called mother country to which he senses an exile may soon be unavoidable. The juxtaposition of the Dutch and Clamence's North African papacy obliges the reader to consider the experiences of the Dutch, specifically in their repatriation, in light of similar experiences that were anticipated to be just around the corner for colonists living under the death sun in the North African littoral.

At several moments in La chute, the narrator expresses nostalgia-filled paeans to a way of life that is no more: "Oh! soleil, plages, et les îles sous les alizés, jeunesse dont le souvenir désespère!"³⁶⁰ Although the narrator mentions that he made some trips to the tropics in his youth, his upbringing is solidly situated in Paris, which makes it harder to accept these sentiments as belonging to the narrator himself. It seems that the colonial way of life, or at least an idealized version of it, is here being evoked as a sort of paradise lost. Unlike the narrator, Camus himself did grow up on the beach, and he equates the moment of his realization that his carefree, hedonistic lifestyle was inherently fleeting with the moment he discovered culture by reading, in Algiers, Les îles, a book by his *maître*, Jean Grenier, at twenty years of age: "La vérité du monde était dans sa seule beauté, et dans les joies qu'elle dispensait. Nous vivions

³⁶⁰ La chute 150.

ainsi dans la sensation, à la surface du monde, parmi les couleurs, les vagues, la bonne odeur des terres. [...] Il nous fallait des maîtres plus subtils et qu'un homme, par exemple, né sur d'autres rivages, amoureux lui aussi de la lumière et de la splendeur des corps vînt nous dire, dans un langage inimitable, que ces apparences étaient belles, mais qu'elles devaient périr et qu'il fallait alors les aimer désespérément."³⁶¹ This passage makes quite clear that for the young Albert Camus and his *pied-noir* friends the islands of Jean Grenier were necessary to their realization of the fragility of their world. The insistence on Grenier's having come from other shores indicates the extent to which the littoral is central to the conception of the Algerian and *pied-noir* landscape, and the coincidence that Grenier's book was also focused on islands and their shores seems to explain the initial meeting of these two minds. Camus goes on in this preface to say that he was thinking of Les îles while writing everything in his literary career, a comment that has encouraged us in our study of islands and insularity in his novels.

In La chute, we find that this nostalgic love of a fleeting lifestyle is lovingly evoked, and yet simultaneously dissected for analysis of the system on which it is based. The narrator, speaking to his client, or victim, frequently interjects "cher" and other endearments into his conversation, ineluctably drawing closer ties between the two of them. Near the end of their time together, the juge-pénitent openly explains part of his technique for hooking his prey: "Alors, insensiblement, je passe, dans mon discours, du 'je' au 'nous.'"³⁶² This linguistic flanking tactic forces the interlocutor, and by extension the reader as well, into a deeper relationship with Clamence and his moral ambiguity. Indeed, the interlocutor is incriminated in the crimes of the juge-pénitent by his proximity to this character, both spatially and emotionally

³⁶¹ Albert Camus, preface, Les îles, by Jean Grenier (Paris: Gallimard, 1959) 10.

³⁶² La chute 146.

as well as by dint of sharing many of the juge-pénitent's characteristics, including nearly identical backgrounds and ways of life. The very nature of the title which Clamence has applied to himself shows clearly the guilt under which he feels he lives, and indeed he will share his "pénitent" status with his interlocutor as he introduces him to a sort of penitentiary. The sentence he will give his victim is the same under which he and the Dutch suffer: he will be placed in the "malconfort." This medieval prison cell, described by the narrator in a voice oozing appreciation of its vicious genius, was too small to allow the prisoner to stand or to stretch out, resulting in a permanent state of horrible discomfort. It seems that this torture device is analogous to the life led by the Dutch who were "there without being there," in that both constantly remind the victim that he is not, and can never again be, comfortable going about his daily life due to the poor fit of the space within which he finds himself constrained to stay. Compared to the fleeting joy of life in the sunny colonial tropics, the dank dungeon cell is all the more grim. Grenier's insight, which Camus claims drove his literary output over his entire career, that the inherent impermanence of the *pied-noir* lifestyle in North Africa made it all the more precious in memory, can be clearly seen in the Dutch and Amsterdam of La chute. The eponymous Fall, once placed in the context of a paradise lost, clearly not only refers to that of a woman leaping from a Parisian bridge, but also to that famous Fall of man in the Genesis myths. The evil realities underlying the colonial paradise, frankly analyzed in this novel through many discussions of fascist tendencies in Western man, are likely the sin responsible for the ultimate fall from grace experienced by the Dutch and the *pieds-noirs*, but they fail to make the memory of an apparently idyllic paradise any less painful and beautiful to those fallen men and women.

5. Last Words of *Le premier homme*

5.1. The Explicit Island Algeria

When Albert Camus died in an automobile accident in 1960, he was carrying the manuscript of *Le premier homme* in his briefcase. This novel appears to be the most thoroughly autobiographical of his works, as it explores the roots of a young European man from Algeria. While we can never know the precise form that this novel would have taken had Camus been able to spend years editing and polishing it, the draft version that was published in 1994 certainly has great literary merit in and of itself. As this novel is the *de facto* conclusion to Camus's literary output, we will analyze it in guise of a conclusion to our study of the island Algeria in Camus's novels. We are encouraged in this endeavor by the first page of the autobiographical novel, which refers to Algeria as "cette sorte d'île immense, défendue par la mer mouvante au nord et au sud par les flots figés des sables."³⁶³ The allegorical understanding we have been exploring throughout Camus's novels, of Algeria as a sort of island space, is here made quite explicit by Camus in the opening paragraph of his final novel. Indeed, the poetic description of an insular space surrounded by the Mediterranean Sea on one side and by the still waves of the Sahara on the other constitutes a lyrical confirmation of what we have suggested throughout this analysis, which is that Camus posited Algeria as an island space. In the frequent evocations of the Algerian landscape throughout his novels we have found many hints at this conception of the insular Algerian space, but in this passage, introducing the novel that most overtly describes the *pied-noir* culture, we find that Albert Camus undoubtedly was not only aware of some echoes of insularity in his Algeria, but that furthermore he wished to utilize this imagery in his most thorough attempt at describing the Algeria of the *pieds-noirs*.

³⁶³ Albert Camus, *Le premier homme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994) 11. Henceforth, all references to this work will include "*Le premier homme*" and a page number.

Indeed, the link between the island metaphor and the experience of the *pieds-noirs* is emphasized in this opening passage, because a wagon-load of brave pioneers, who will prove to be the protagonist's parents, are voyaging across the Algerian landscape that is so poetically described in the passage just cited. Furthermore, the *tabula rasa* aspect of the island space in the robinsonnade is evoked quite clearly here, when the narrator refers to "ce pays sans nom."³⁶⁴ This somewhat disingenuous sobriquet, surprisingly coming on the heels of specific references to the "crêtes marocaines" and the "hauts plateaux d'Algérie,"³⁶⁵ seems to warn the reader from the outset of this text that the islanded space in question is contested, since references to two specific Maghrebi geographical regions do not coexist easily with the nameless country evoked by the narrator. To accentuate this point, the narrator refers to the history of the North African space, reminding the reader that "pendant des millénaires les empires et les peuples"³⁶⁶ had traversed this space. This evocation of the long-contested history of the Algerian landscape obliges the reader to think of this island as one that has suffered waves and waves of foreign occupation, as the word "empires" suggests, and that has harbored many different cultures, here evoked through the word "peuples." This island space may resemble a *tabula rasa* when one first approaches it, but we see here that it is really more of a palimpsest, as succeeding empires have dominated this space only to vanish into the past, leaving this island to receive another group of people set on making it their domain. These historical evocations, together with the allegorical islanding of the landscape forming the backdrop for the events opening this novel, combine to lend an epic feel to the crossing of the landscape by the wagon hauling the parents of the protagonist to their new

³⁶⁴ Le premier homme 11.

³⁶⁵ Le premier homme 11.

³⁶⁶ Le premier homme 11.

domain. We will examine this novel's descriptions of the *pied-noir* culture and the Algerian landscape that contains it in the context of the end of that particular wave of domination in order to glean any commentary upon this situation from the *pied-noir* author, Albert Camus. We will also be able to draw conclusions based upon the narrative style itself, for in its fragmentation and lack of a single focus it may reveal some clues as to the author's mindset regarding the events, characters, and setting he has described in this, his final novel.

In the opening scene introduced by the preceding evocation of Algeria's islanded landscape, we find that the protagonist's parents are undertaking an arduous voyage to the isolated winery that is to become their domain. While their travels in a wagon are not exactly analogous to a dangerous sea voyage, there are still numerous parallels that point to an attempt on the part of the author to provide his reader with many of the key aspects of a *robinsonnade* in order to benefit from this large body of work and the connotations it brings with it. We see, for example, that their terrestrial mode of transportation, the aforementioned wagon, is rendered far more boat-like by the prevailing weather portrayed in this scene, a heavy, soaking rain; we follow the gaze of the (soon-to-be) mother of the protagonist towards "la route où des flaques commençaient déjà de luire."³⁶⁷ This watery road, the last stage of a long journey towards a new life, is depicted as a narrow path through a space of intense emptiness: "elle [la carriole] roulait au milieu d'un espace vide rendu plus vaste encore par les ténèbres."³⁶⁸ This invisible landscape lends to the scene an eerie, otherworldly air; nevertheless, the narrator obliges the reader to return to a more prosaic vision of this country when he describes the prevailing scents in the

³⁶⁷ Le premier homme 13.

³⁶⁸ Le premier homme 14.

damp air: “des odeurs d’herbes brûlées, ou, soudain, une forte odeur d’engrais[...]”³⁶⁹ These banal odors of the farmyard shift the epic tone of the passage towards a simpler, more earthy one, and serve to remind the reader that the characters here traversing this strange space are simple, if skilled, agricultural workers on their way to a new place of employment and labor.

5.2. An Insular Vineyard

As the wagon arrives at the “maison inconnue”³⁷⁰ which is its destination, another crisis takes shape and immediately washes out the sense of victory inherent in the safe arrival after a long and difficult voyage. The wife’s discomfort reveals itself to be labor pains, and the protagonist’s epic entry into this world is imminent. This inspires the soon-to-be father to foreshorten the robinsonnade’s traditional exploration of the new landscape: “L’homme prit à peine le temps de reconnaître une cuisine chaulée avec un evier carrelé de rouge, un vieux buffet et un calendrier détrempe au mur.”³⁷¹ After this cursory examination of his new territory, the man immediately heads upstairs, looking for perspective in altitude as do almost all castaways, although here this character must content himself with one storey of extra height rather than the central mountain of the quintessential island. Nevertheless, this brief period of exploration proves fruitful, as the man is able to return to his wife with a makeshift bed, and even if it still gave off “l’odeur du crin humide”³⁷² it is nevertheless a very obviously successful attempt by the man to take mastery of his new domain and to put together the necessary comforts to transform

³⁶⁹ Le premier homme 14.

³⁷⁰ Le premier homme 15.

³⁷¹ Le premier homme 16.

³⁷² Le premier homme 17.

the space into which he has been thrown into a home of sorts. After the man has gone off to find a doctor, his son is born before that specialist can intervene, and the woman he had found to help out comments on the arrival of this child after this long voyage: “En voilà un qui commence bien, dit la patronne de la cantine. Par un déménagement.”³⁷³ This simple phrase sums up the voyage to a new territory that we have focused on in this section, and also ties in inextricably to the advent of this baby, who will be the protagonist of this autobiographical novel. This child, born of parents in the midst of moving from one area to another, is associated immediately with this voyage. Furthermore, this pronouncement, coming from the lips of a woman who has just aided in the baby’s birth, and is thus at least a *de facto* “sage femme,” carries the weight of prophecy. We will analyze how this child, born of a displacement, will be searching for roots throughout this novel, and we will pay particular attention to the relationship of those roots to the Algerian landscape in which this first, epic scene plays out.

This first scene is also very interesting in that it provides an example of interaction between Arab-Algerian and European-Algerian, and unlike in L’étranger, that relationship is not represented as being inherently antagonistic. Nevertheless, we can see in the details of the interaction some reflections of the political relationship between these two groups. At first the “vieil Arabe” seems in control of the situation, as he is driving the horses that are pulling the wagon through the wet countryside towards the unknown house. However, when the European-Algerian begins to become impatient due to his wife’s discomfort, we see that he is able to command the Arab-Algerian: “Donne-moi les rênes.”³⁷⁴ The peremptory tone of this imperative, emphasized by the use of the familiar, or subordinating, “tu” form, is immediately

³⁷³ Le premier homme 23.

³⁷⁴ Le premier homme 13.

muted by the cheerful acquiescence of the Arab-Algerian, who also uses this form of address: “Comme tu veux.”³⁷⁵ Despite the linguistic parity we find in this interchange, the bottom line is that the Arab-Algerian shows himself quite willing to bend to the will of the European-Algerian, establishing their relationship as one of servant to master, even if this relationship seems to comport a certain familiarity. The fact that the European-Algerian is shown to have a greater mastery of horsemanship than his companion also places the two men on different planes, but once again this social stratification is muted by the easy interchange between the two men, which remains in the “tu” form throughout this chapter except once when the Arab-Algerian uses the “vous” form: “N’ayez pas peur. Ici, il n’y a pas de bandits.”³⁷⁶ This evocation of the danger of the countryside, albeit in an attempt to deny that danger, brings about a very clear expression of the power of the European-Algerian, who suggests that there are probably bandits, but that he is prepared for that eventuality: “Et il frappa sur sa poche étroite.”³⁷⁷ This pocket must contain a pistol, thus framing the power of the European-Algerian over this landscape and its inhabitants in a militaristic vein.

Once this moment of clarification of the power of the European-Algerian is past, the two men continue to cooperate in a surprisingly comradely fashion. Upon their arrival at the house, we see that both men act with economy of motion and expertise in the preparations necessary for the impending birth of a baby; while the expectant father is scrounging up bedding, “L’Arabe avait déjà allumé le feu et le garnissait de sarments de vigne avec des gestes précis et adroits.”³⁷⁸

³⁷⁵ Le premier homme 13.

³⁷⁶ Le premier homme 14.

³⁷⁷ Le premier homme 14.

³⁷⁸ Le premier homme 16.

Once the house is set up as well as possible given the urgency of the moment, these two men have another rapprochement, with the European-Algerian asking the Arab-Algerian about his family, which ultimately results in a request/order to have the Arab-Algerian's daughter-in-law come to aid with the childbirth. Then the following interaction occurs: "L'homme regarda le vieil Arabe immobile sous la pluie fine et qui lui sourit sous ses moustaches mouillées. Lui ne souriait toujours pas, mais il le regardait de ses yeux clairs et attentifs. Puis il lui tendit la main, que l'autre prit, à l'arabe, du bout de ses doigts qu'il porta ensuite à la bouche."³⁷⁹ In these three sentences we have perhaps the most intimate moment between *pied-noir* and Arab-Algerian in the entire body of fiction of Albert Camus. For this brief moment, we have the impression that these two men saw each other as just that, two men, and the discussion of the family of one and the impending expansion of that of the other seem to have brought these two men into a state of mutual comprehension. Nevertheless, we see that their different cultures immediately bring them back out of this moment, as the proffered handshake from the European-Algerian is transformed into a different gesture, "in the Arab fashion," that ends this interaction with the expectant father turning his back on his interlocutor and hitting the road, literally "faisant crisser le mâchefer."³⁸⁰ This chapter will end, after the safe birth of a baby boy, with another moment of intimacy between the "vieil Arabe" and the proud father. The Arab-Algerian is standing outside the room where a woman just gave birth, sheltering himself from the rain with a sack held over his head. He invites the European-Algerian to share this crude shelter, and after being told that

³⁷⁹ Le premier homme 17-18.

³⁸⁰ Le premier homme 18.

the latter has had a son, tells him: “Dieu soit loué, [...] Tu es un chef.”³⁸¹ While this chieftaincy foisted upon the recent father is implicitly due to his luck in having had a son and not a daughter, it still entails an Arab-Algerian accepting the suzerainty of his European-Algerian boss, and gives what would seem to be an historically accurate reflection of the relative social statuses of members of these two coexisting communities before the First World War in French Algeria. Despite this clarified social stratification, we see that the two men are portrayed physically in a much more egalitarian pose: “Elle [the rainwater] n’atteindrait pas la mer à l’est, et elle allait inonder maintenant tout le pays, les terres marécageuses près de la rivière et les montagnes environnantes, l’immense terre quasi déserte don’t l’odeur puissante revenait jusqu’aux deux hommes serrés sous le même sac.”³⁸² This land, surrounded and covered by water, called “quasi déserte” in an arguable reference to the “île déserte” that this land is compared to in its allegorical understanding as the setting of a quasi-robinsonnade, is observed by “two men” whose race and culture seem effaced from the image for a moment, but whose roles have been made clear by the preceding events and comments. Their interaction with this landscape boils down to the strong odor of the soil of the country, obliging the reader to consider them in terms of that same soil that in *L’étranger* was depicted as containing the roots of the *pieds-noirs* in its blood-red, contested depths.

5.3. Stranger in a Strange Land

The narrator, having introduced the relationship between the *pied-noir* and the Arab-Algerian, and having evoked the ties both of these groups felt to the Algerian soil, interrupts the

³⁸¹ *Le premier homme* 23.

³⁸² *Le premier homme* 23.

chronological flow of the text by skipping forward forty years for the next chapter. Here we are given a first look at the adult that came from the birthing scene just recounted, and we see that he is now in mainland France. The preoccupation with the landscape will continue in this chapter, however, and we see that the French countryside receives a far less poetic description than does that of Algeria a few pages earlier: “Quarante ans plus tard, un homme, dans le couloir du train de Saint-Brieuc, regardait d’un air désapprobateur défiler, sous le pâle soleil d’un après-midi de printemps, ce pays étroit et plat couvert de villages et de maisons laides.”³⁸³ In this opening sentence, the reader is informed of several very important details, such as that this man does not approve of the countryside he is observing, which is qualified as being limited in scope (“étroit”), uninteresting (“plat”), and overpopulated by visually unappealing villages and houses. Also, the northern latitude is made explicit in the weakening of the sunlight that shines in this land. It is impossible not to compare the description of this landscape with those given of Algeria throughout the fiction of Camus; even though the landscape being described here is near the sea, and thus superficially similar to the littoral country described in Camus’s earlier novels, we find that the strong sunlight, the colorful and fragrant soil, and the abrupt landscape features are all missing in this mainland French countryside, leaving an unfavorable comparison between the two landscapes. For example, we see that the feeble sunlight of the northern latitudes is described as “la lumière oblique,”³⁸⁴ reminding the reader of the phenomenon, unknown in the tropics, of the sun’s light being filtered at an angle through so much atmosphere that it loses a great deal of its power. Once the protagonist enters Saint-Brieuc, we see that “Il parcourait

³⁸³ Le premier homme 25.

³⁸⁴ Le premier homme 27.

maintenant les rues étroites et tristes, bordées de maisons banales aux vilaines tuiles rouges.”³⁸⁵ Once again the adjective “narrow” is used to describe the French environment, and the reader has the impression that the energy and vigor of the protagonist chafe at the restrictive limits on freedom of movement in this narrow land. In fact, every adjective in this sentence is strongly negative, practically dripping with contempt for this townscape’s ugliness, banality, and sadness. The storefronts of Saint-Brieuc also do not escape an ironic lambasting, as we are told that they contain “les chefs-d’œuvre de plastique et de nylon, les céramiques calamiteuses qu’on trouve dans toutes les villes de l’Occident moderne.”³⁸⁶ This frightful bric-a-brac is specifically tied to the modern Occident, leaving open the insinuation that one would not find such monstrosities in the Orient, once again forcing an unfavorable comparison between Algeria and France. This landscape is furthermore described as containing “fleurs pauvres,”³⁸⁷ tombs that are “prétentieuses et laides,”³⁸⁸ and a sky that is “plus pâle” and from which falls “une lumière légère puis obscurcie.”³⁸⁹ Finally, we find that in this overwhelmingly negatively-described setting, the protagonist also has difficulty scenting “la mer lointaine,”³⁹⁰ hinting that in this country the sea’s presence is a less powerful force than was the case in the littoral Algeria that made up the settings in the bulk of Camus’s earlier novels.

³⁸⁵ Le premier homme 27.

³⁸⁶ Le premier homme 27.

³⁸⁷ Le premier homme 27.

³⁸⁸ Le premier homme 28.

³⁸⁹ Le premier homme 29.

³⁹⁰ Le premier homme 29.

Throughout this chapter, we will see that besides the French scenery's negative portrayal, its inhabitants are described in overwhelmingly negative language, whereas the protagonist is shown to be noteworthy in his vigor, as we are told that he gave "une impression d'aisance et d'énergie."³⁹¹ It seems that the "air désapprobateur" with which this character observes the French countryside applies equally to its inhabitants, for although he is polite with everyone, he, or at least the narrator, seems to be making a constantly negative comparison between Jacques and the mainland French. The other occupants of the protagonist's train compartment give an idea of this disapproving gaze: "En face de lui, un homme aux cheveux rares et plaqués, moins âgé que ne le laissait croire son visage gonflé et couperosé, tassé sur lui-même, les yeux fermés, respirait fortement, gêné visiblement par une digestion laborieuse[...]"³⁹² As if this caricatural portrait of an alcoholic, gluttonous, prematurely aging man completely cut off from the world around him was not sufficient contrast with the elegant, youthful, energetic main character, we see that this compartment also contains a woman and her child, both of whom receive negative portraiture as well, including a mocking description of the woman's "singulier chapeau ornait d'une grappe de raisin de cire" and her child, with his runny nose and "visage éteint et fade."³⁹³ Furthermore, we notice that the particularities of these characters that make them appear ridiculous are linked to their habitat to a certain extent: the child's pale, lifeless face is clearly a result of his living in these northern climes, which leads us to reconsider the attributes of the other occupants of the compartment. The woman's wax grapes seem to compare unfavorably with the grape arbor in the preceding scene, in which the aroma of the earth was extremely

³⁹¹ Le premier homme 25.

³⁹² Le premier homme 26.

³⁹³ Le premier homme 26.

strong and vibrant; her grapes will lack vitality and aroma in exactly the same way her son's face lacks the healthy glow imparted from the sub-tropical sun. The main character's lithe body, springing step, and high level of energy has its counterpart in the wine-ridden male passenger who seems to be using all of his limited energy resources to digest whatever heavy meal he recently ingested.

The contrast between the main character's physical attributes and those of the mainland French whose environment he is experiencing at the outset of his search for his father (as the name of the chapter indicates) seems to be, more generally, one between the French Algerian and the mainland Frenchman. In case the reader does not assume that this man, forty years after the birth in the farmhouse in Algeria, is the result of that scene, we have a specific reminder that this man is of Algeria, when we read that his journey is oriented around accomplishing a task set for him by "sa mère, restée en Algérie."³⁹⁴ This phrase makes perfectly clear that this character's origins are in Algeria, and also that he has left that country for this pale, northern one populated by people lacking the vitality that flows from him. The sharp contrast here between the northern people and this representative of the French-Algerian, or *pied-noir*, or Mediterranean man seems overwhelmingly positive in favor of the latter, as it relegates the former to a slug-like creature. However, this division is rendered far more equivocal by the marginal note left by the author at the beginning of this chapter: "Dès le début, il faudrait marquer plus le monstre chez Jacques."³⁹⁵ This note obliges us to reconsider the portraits of Jacques (the main character) and the mainland French, for the vitality, energy, and even politeness of this character is here colored by monstrosity, a strange and puzzling twist. Furthermore, the conditional in this marginal text

³⁹⁴ Le premier homme 28.

³⁹⁵ Le premier homme 25.

seems to imply that the aforementioned monstrosity is insufficiently marked in this chapter, and that the author sought to make it even more obvious. What is monstrous about Jacques' jaunt to Saint-Brieuc and his brief interactions with the people on his train? Part of this monstrosity must be the detached, superior manner in which he observes the shortcomings of these northerners and their countryside, which immediately applies this same monstrosity to the readers, for we share that point of view. As we continue to analyze passages from this autobiographical novel, we will attempt to better understand the monstrosity here referenced and what, if anything, it has to tell us regarding the *pied-noir* worldview and/or the Algerian island that gave it birth.

As Jacques Cormery visits the grave of the father he never really knew, this chapter suddenly takes on insular imagery in what may be the most crucial scene in the entire novel. Having been shown to a little memorial stone in a section of the cemetery maintained by "le Souvenir Français,"³⁹⁶ the protagonist gazes disconnectedly at his unknown father's resting place. He certainly does not give his full attention to this exercise, as we see that he is instead trying to get a fix on the distant sea: "[il] tentait de saisir derrière l'odeur des fleurs mouillées la senteur salée qui venait en ce moment de la mer immobile et lointaine."³⁹⁷ It is during this moment of seeking the sea that the flow of time in this scene, and indeed in this entire novel, will be shattered: "le tintement d'un seau contre le marbre d'une tombe le tira de sa rêverie."³⁹⁸ This ringing, caused by the juxtaposition of stone (marble) and water (the bucket) in the context of a man seeking the aroma of the sea in a walled cemetery, will island the protagonist temporally. As he discovers by reading the dates on his father's tombstone that he died younger than the

³⁹⁶ Le premier homme 29.

³⁹⁷ Le premier homme 29.

³⁹⁸ Le premier homme 29.

present age of his now-grown son, we read “La suite du temps lui-même se fracassait autour de lui immobile, entre ces tombes qu’il ne voyait plus, et les années cessaient de s’ordonner suivant ce grand fleuve qui coule vers sa fin.”³⁹⁹ We notice with great interest here that the metaphor for the flow of time is that of a river, and that furthermore the protagonist is shown clearly to be an island in the middle of this flow of time, with the watery force of the flow of time crashing into him without making him budge. The insular position of the protagonist is further enforced by the use of a form of the rubric “entre x et y” in this passage, with Jacques said to be surrounded by tombs. The liquid time in which Jacques is a temporal island is shown to have completely lost its normal flow, becoming chaotic as it pounds against the shores of Jacques: the years “n’étaient plus que fracas, ressac et remous.”⁴⁰⁰ This imagery of whitewater crashing and swirling around the protagonist shows simultaneously the enormous temporal shock of the inversion of relative ages of father and son and the extent to which Jacques has been islanded by this event, leaving the waters around him dangerously unpredictable and chaotic.

As this scene plays out, we see a protagonist that is forced to review his life in comparison with the truncated one of his progenitor, and the vocabulary of the Robinsonnade continues to play an important role, but this time with the unexpected twist that mainland France will be described as the strange land: the father was “un homme qui lui avait donné justement cette vie pour aller mourir aussitôt sur une terre inconnue de l’autre côté des mers.”⁴⁰¹ This inversion of the Robinsonnade geographical paradigm, with the historically “mother” country described as the unknown land across the sea, and its reinforcement through the apparently

³⁹⁹ Le premier homme 30.

⁴⁰⁰ Le premier homme 30.

⁴⁰¹ Le premier homme 31.

mortal danger of the journey to that unknown land, forces the reader to reconfigure Algeria as the home country and mainland France as the land of danger far across the sea. In “cette terre où il était passé furtivement,”⁴⁰² Jacques Cormery’s father had followed the call of the unknown motherland to join “ce sol [...] jonché d’enfants”⁴⁰³ where his tombstone would one day disrupt the flow of time and strand his adult son in an island of broken time which will precipitate the bulk of this novel. The spell of the bucket on the marble breaking, the protagonist returns to himself in the “paysage de tombes et de ciel qui l’entourait.”⁴⁰⁴ Once again surrounded by landscape features in the familiar paradigm of “entre x et y ,” Jacques prepares to leave his father in “l’interminable solitude où on l’avait jeté puis abandonné.”⁴⁰⁵ The solitude of the island adventurer in his desert island grave in France is underscored by a loud explosion in “Le ciel désert”⁴⁰⁶ as a supersonic aircraft booms through the sound barrier. The (relatively recent, in 1960) phenomenon of the sonic boom once again reminds the reader of the friability of time, for the aircraft that broke the sound barrier is described as invisible, when in fact it is unseen because it is moving faster than the sound of its passage and so is already gone before its impact is felt, in effect creating yet another temporal paradox to close this chapter.

⁴⁰² Le premier homme 31.

⁴⁰³ Le premier homme 30.

⁴⁰⁴ Le premier homme 31.

⁴⁰⁵ Le premier homme 32.

⁴⁰⁶ Le premier homme 32.

5.4. A Visit with the Master of The Islands

The spell of fractured time having faded, Jacques Cormery heads off to the reunion that had really prompted his visit to Saint-Brieuc more than the tomb of an unknown father, his old friend, Malan. This fictional character seems to be transparently based upon Jean Grenier, both because of the obvious role of “maître” that he plays for the protagonist and also because in the title of the chapter we find the parenthetical reference “J. G.”⁴⁰⁷ In his introduction to a collection of essays by Jean Grenier entitled Les Îles, Camus had written that throughout his literary career he had never stopped thinking about Les Îles, and the impact of this sentence when one ignores the underlining in many ways sparked this entire approach to Camus’s fiction.⁴⁰⁸ In this chapter, the narrator reminds us of the presence of the sea in the environs by pointing out “des petits morceaux d’algues séchées, qui, avec l’odeur du sel, évoquaient seuls la proximité de la mer.”⁴⁰⁹ (The word “seuls” in this citation, however, seems to lend some distance between this “faubourg proche de la route des plages”⁴¹⁰ and the sea itself; perhaps the reader is meant to understand that this French city has its back turned to the sea just as Oran is shown to do in La peste, which would place Malan’s retreat in the context of a literal one from his earlier life of voyage and discovery.) In this littoral space of retreat for his old friend, Jacques will share his recent experience and resolution to find his father, and his friend will point out some of the likely pitfalls of such an endeavor. The description of Malan compares him to a Chinese man until pointing out that his eyes marked him as “un Occidental de grande sensibilité

⁴⁰⁷ Le premier homme 33.

⁴⁰⁸ Jean Grenier, Les îles 13.

⁴⁰⁹ Le premier homme 33.

⁴¹⁰ Le premier homme 33.

et de grande culture.”⁴¹¹ The insistence upon Occidentalism here seems to be at the basis of the relationship between these two men, even though they met in the Orient, specifically in Algiers, as Jacques’ explanation of his love for Malan makes clear: “[...] lorsque j’étais très jeune, très sot et très seul (vous vous souvenez, à Alger?), vous vous êtes tourné vers moi, et vous m’avez ouvert sans y paraître les portes de tout ce que j’aime en ce monde.”⁴¹² This evocation of a foolish, solitary youth in Algiers, which will be explored in coming chapters as part of the search for his father and himself, places Malan in the position of the initiator of the maturation of the young Jacques, and in effect places him in a paternal position, since he engendered the man that is now before him, declaring his love for him. Furthermore, if the reader is to assume that Jacques, like the Albert Camus he resembles so closely, is a literary man, then this initiation is literary in nature, and perhaps even tied to the islands evoked in Jean Grenier’s captivating book of essays. Whether or not this is the case, this reunion ends with Jacques “seul dans le vent et le faubourg désert”⁴¹³ hearing over and over in his head the haunting final comment of Malan: “Il y a en moi un vide affreux, une indifférence qui me fait mal...”⁴¹⁴ This void within Malan, the revelation of which seems to have been provoked by Jacques’ unexpected declaration of love for the old man, shows this well-cultured Westerner to be no more than a shell of a man, as he surrounds this painful emptiness. This image of the man most respected and loved by Jacques, a sort of surrogate father, at least for Jacques’ intellectual development, as an inverted island whose emptiness bespeaks emotional bankruptcy even as his outward appearance seems normal,

⁴¹¹ Le premier homme 35.

⁴¹² Le premier homme 36.

⁴¹³ Le premier homme 40.

⁴¹⁴ Le premier homme 40.

is echoed within Jacques who had told his old friend of his own lack of caring for the vast majority of those around him in similar terms: “Pour tout le reste, j’ai honte de mon indifférence.”⁴¹⁵ The echoes caused by these internal voids in Malan and Jacques resonate as the chapter ends, leading to a maritime voyage into the past that will explore some of the roots of the emotional bankruptcy of these two men, formerly of Algeria, now living in mainland France.

5.5. Childhood Robinsonnade

Jacques decides to return to Algeria to visit his mother and perhaps glean some new details regarding the life of his father, and as his cruise progresses he recalls details of his own childhood in a chapter entitled “Les jeux de l’enfant.”⁴¹⁶ Despite the name, however, the memories are both of childhood games and of the stern, more or less abusive treatment he received from his grandmother. According to André Aciman, Le premier homme “is about one thing only: growing up in extreme poverty in Algiers.”⁴¹⁷ Nevertheless, he then adds that it is also about “the threatened feeling of transience among the French living in a hostile Arab land.”⁴¹⁸ We see that the beginnings of such evocations are signaled by a reference to another work in which colonial anxiety is announced by Defoe’s intertext: the descriptions of childhood on this boat trip to Algiers are concluded by a reference to Céline, when the narrator tells us that “Il [Jacques] trouverait Alger au bout de la nuit.”⁴¹⁹ In Céline’s novel, which is quite concerned

⁴¹⁵ Le premier homme 38.

⁴¹⁶ Le premier homme 41.

⁴¹⁷ André Aciman, “From Alexandria,” MLN 112 (1997): 686.

⁴¹⁸ Aciman 686-687.

⁴¹⁹ Le premier homme 56.

with the disaster of colonialism, Bardamu encountered a mysterious character actually named “Robinson” in the sections dealing most directly with colonialism, when he was working for a trading company in the African rain forest. In the retroactive context, then, of a journey to the end of the night, we read some of the most lyrical evocations of a poor, but in the main happy, childhood. Furthermore, many of the details of the childhood games ensure that the specificity of the setting is not forgotten, and that this childhood is understood as being tied to the places, weather, inhabitants, and flora and fauna of North Africa in the first quarter of the twentieth century. The emphasis on the maritime voyage necessary to reaching Algiers reminds the reader of this region’s physical separation from mainland France, and once again evokes the Robinnsonnade in the obligatory sea journey before arriving in the island space. Once the rumbling of the passenger ship’s engines have carried Jacques back to the childhood rumbling of flies trapped in a house during rest hour, we see that the child, presumably the young Jacques, is described using the rubric “entre *x* et *y*” in the following description of the child’s response to the imprisonment of rest hour: “L’enfant, pris entre les deux déserts de l’ombre et du soleil, se mettait à tourner autour de la table sans trêve, du même pas précipité, en répétant comme une litanie: ‘Je m’ennuie! Je m’ennuie!’”⁴²⁰ Here, the little boy rebels against forced inaction by engaging in frenetic, repetitive activity in the narrow, insular space between two impenetrable deserts, which also evoke the desert island in which he finds himself each afternoon. Once his grandmother had put a stop to this behavior, he finds himself in yet another constrained space, this time between his grandmother and the wall in her bed, trapped because he had escaped in the past to continue his chanting around the table.

⁴²⁰ Le premier homme 43.

The voyage across the Mediterranean provokes strange emotions in the adult Jacques, as we see that he felt “une sorte d’angoisse heureuse à l’idée de revoir Alger.”⁴²¹ This contradictory emotional state shows that the relationship between Jacques and Algiers must be a complex and intense one, as it conjures anxiety that is nevertheless somehow happy. Although already aware of how painful it will be to eventually return to mainland France, the act of which he describes as being digested by the “ganglions de misère et de laideur,”⁴²² of its suburbs and cities, here on the sea he has escaped the mainland France that is also described as a prison, as he is able to amuse himself thinking of how discomfited the guards must be to realize that their charge has gotten away under their noses. Finally, he returns in his mind to “l’enfance dont il n’avait jamais guéri, à ce secret de lumière, de pauvreté chaleureuse qui l’avait aidé à vivre et à tout vaincre.”⁴²³ This childhood, described both as a disease from which he has never recovered and as the basis for his strength and success in living life, will be explored in memories that will reveal it to have been in many ways configured as parallel to the adventures of many young heroes forced to look to their adaptability and native strength in Robinsonnades.

Throughout this chapter, the reader is exposed to descriptions of several childhood games through Jacques’ reverie inspired by the rumblings of the engines of a passenger ship that is carrying him from France to Africa. Although these games have varied structures, they share the common elements of being makeshift, make-do distractions carried out by a small group of children in the absence of any adult presence. Indeed, the frolicking of Jacques and his buddies only intersects the presence of Jacques’ grandmother on the frontiers of playtime, and her only

⁴²¹ Le premier homme 44.

⁴²² Le premier homme 44.

⁴²³ Le premier homme 44.

role seems to be to (unsuccessfully) attempt to keep Jacques from the explorations and games in which he engages alongside his companions of (mis)fortune. In an urban terrain that is described as a wilderness, Jacques and his friends concentrate their play around an area they refer to as the “champ vert,”⁴²⁴ the description of which belies the greenness and emphasizes the clutter of this vacant lot: “C’était une sorte de terrain vague derrière une tonnellerie où, entre des cercles de fer rouillé et de vieux fonds de tonneau pourrissant, des touffes d’herbes anémiques poussaient entre des plaques de tuf.”⁴²⁵ This space, then, barely green and only arguably a field, is characterized by the patent danger of bits of rusty iron and also by that most alluring of flotsam from the Robinsonnade, the wooden barrel. The fact that the boys could only access this space after passing through the “station obligatoire”⁴²⁶ of an abandoned fountain transformed by neglect and decay into a swamp increases the sense of their play space being separated from the adult world. The principal game engaged in within this space, called “la canette vinga,” involves defending a circular (insular) space from attacks from outside. The defensive weapon, a blue racket, bespeaks the sort of improvisation traditional for Robinsons, and the attacking weapon, a hand-sharpened wooden spear, evokes both the weapons of war of the “savages” that menaced so many castaways and the home-made arsenals of the Robinsons themselves.

In their infrequent but favorite expeditions to the beach, we see the young Robinsons engaging in all manner of behaviors appropriate for such children. Along their route, one of the first things they see is a stable full of “chevaux, grosses bêtes pattues venant de France et ouvrant

⁴²⁴ Le premier homme 46.

⁴²⁵ Le premier homme 47.

⁴²⁶ Le premier homme 46.

sur eux des yeux d'exilés, abrutis de chaleur et de mouches."⁴²⁷ The poor state of adaptation of these specifically French horses to the climate and fauna of North Africa, and their "exiles' eyes," are in sharp contrast to the little group of (probably literally) *pied-noir* children, at home in the dust, heat, and squalor. Still along their way was the garden "ou l'on cultivait les essences les plus rares."⁴²⁸ Despite the purportedly high purpose of this collection of tropical trees and plants, to Jacques and his friends, as to any good Robinsons, the point of the flora is its use in providing sustenance, and so they spend their time in this garden not looking at exotic plants but trying to knock down palm fruits from the bunches hanging high in the crowns of palm trees. Many expert stone-throws later, the boys slip from the garden with their treasure: "empilant les cocos [palm fruits] sur leurs mouchoirs sales, ils mastiquaient avec délices les baies fibreuses, sucrées et grasses à écœurer, mais légères et savoureuses comme la victoire."⁴²⁹ The very specific (and accurate, if our own childhood memories of these fruits are to be believed) description of these palm fruits, particularly pertaining to the eating thereof, underscores the importance of living off the land. As in any Robinsonnade, finding sufficient calories is a major undertaking when left to one's own devices in the tropics, and the boys here prove to be more than equal to this important task. Indeed, the reference to the oiliness of these fruits, which are in fact the source of palm oil, reminds the reader that these boys knew of one of the richest potential sources of energy in their habitat.

The favorite play area for the young Jacques and his mates was the beach, and getting to the beach from their poor *pied-noir* neighborhood was an adventure in itself. Aside from passing

⁴²⁷ Le premier homme 51.

⁴²⁸ Le premier homme 51.

⁴²⁹ Le premier homme 53.

in front of the exiled horses from France and the food-gathering activities already discussed, the young boys were obliged to cross the “route dite moutonnaire,”⁴³⁰ a sort of animal highway that is specifically linked to a certain market in Algiers, once again insisting on geographical specificity. The boys then had to cross an industrial zone, which is, itself, described as we have seen insular spaces described throughout Camus’s work: “Entre la route et la mer, des fabriques, des briqueteries et une usine à gaz étaient séparées par des étendues de sable recouvert de plaques d’argile ou de poussière de chaux, où blanchissaient des débris de bois et de fer.”⁴³¹ This eyesore, called a “lande ingrate”⁴³² by the narrator, is shown by its stretches of sand to in fact be part of the beach itself, so the boys play on a beach covered with flotsam and jetsam, once again part and parcel of the Robinsonnade paradigm. The connection between this industrial zone and the part of the beach the boys think of as “la plage des Sablettes”⁴³³ is underscored by the description of the beach, where “Le sable était un peu noir, et les premières vagues n’étaient pas toujours transparentes.”⁴³⁴ So, on this polluted beach which is in fact an extension of an industrial zone, the boys will nevertheless sport about in the water and carefully divvy up any available treasure, usually in the form of difficult-to-obtain, golden French fries. These boys, swimming “sous le dur soleil”⁴³⁵ in their birthday suits, are transformed by the pleasure of sun and water from ragamuffins whose poverty made crumbs of fried potato into the

⁴³⁰ Le premier homme 53.

⁴³¹ Le premier homme 53.

⁴³² Le premier homme 53.

⁴³³ Le premier homme 53.

⁴³⁴ Le premier homme 53.

⁴³⁵ Le premier homme 54.

richest of treasures to something quite different: “Ils régnaient sur la vie et sur la mer, et ce que le monde peut donner de plus fastueux, ils le recevaient et en usaient sans mesure, comme des seigneurs assurés de leurs richesses irremplaçables.”⁴³⁶ (This description seems to spring from the same source as the evocation of life in Algeria in Camus’s preface to Les Îles by Jean Grenier.) This power of the littoral experience to change little boys into kings once again follows the maturational pattern of the Robinsonnade, whereby boys, marooned on their desert island, would be forced to mature quickly into men through the very act of fending for themselves in their new island possession.

The many insistences upon the Robinsonnade intertext and its importance for Le premier homme in this analysis are confirmed in the strongest possible manner when the narrator describes one last environment of Jacques’s childhood playtime. When the boys for one reason or another could not go all the way to the beach, and particularly when the weather was less propitious for outdoor games, the boys gathered in a cave complex attached to Jacques’s house that served as the storage area for the inhabitants of his building. These caves, “des antres sans issue ni lumière, taillés dans la terre même, sans aucune séparation, suintant d’humidité,”⁴³⁷ were a place where the boys could go without any risk of interruption from the adults in their lives and where they engaged in various interesting pursuits. The boys played with the strange insects that inhabited the caves, they made makeshift tents from old pieces of sacking, and they even attempted to make campfires: “ils allumaient des petits feux qui, enfermés dans cet air humide et confiné, agonisaient en fumée.”⁴³⁸ These attempts at creating shelter and the rudiments of

⁴³⁶ Le premier homme 54.

⁴³⁷ Le premier homme 48.

⁴³⁸ Le premier homme 50.

civilization are once again reminiscent of the Robisonnade, as the quest for basic needs is often described in a quite similar fashion in those novels. However, the greatest confirmation that the narrator wishes his readers to associate the various childhood games eponymous to this chapter with the Robisonnade paradigm comes in the description of the boys in their cave on days of serious rain: “Les jours d’averse, le sol saturé d’eau de la cour humide laissait couler le surplus des pluies à l’intérieur des caves régulièrement inondées, et, montés sur de vieilles caisses, ils jouaient aux Robinsons loin du ciel pur et des vents de la mer, triomphants dans leur royaume de misère.”⁴³⁹ This specific reference to their play as being anchored in the Robisonnade tradition (for the plural form of “Robinsons” immediately carries us from the original text by Defoe to the many imitators that followed it) ensures that the reader cannot overlook the centrality of the Robisonnade pattern and myth to the experience of childhood that is being portrayed in this novel. Furthermore, the poetic expression “kingdom of misery” highlights the way in which the Robisonnade pattern can reconfigure a seemingly impoverished experience into one that, if poor in material terms, is nevertheless rich in experiential ones. This novel’s apparently autobiographical nature then leads us to the understanding that Camus, himself, understood his own experience as having strong ties to a Robisonnade, which further strengthens our supposition that Algeria, to Camus, is understood as an insular space, and that in addition to this it is associated with the themes of the Robisonnade, including the inevitable conflict between the castaway(s) and the “savages” that feel entitled to ownership of the island space be right of prior knowledge and occupation. Throughout Camus’s fiction we see hints towards the inevitability of conflict between those like Camus, the *pieds-noirs*, and the other groups that also

⁴³⁹ Le premier homme 51.

feel attached to the Algerian (insular) landscape. In this, his final fiction, Camus, explains to his readers that the seeds of the image of Algeria as an island have their origins in his childhood, living much of the time with little or no input from adults in a sort of Robinsonnade childhood, which in this passage is spelled out as precisely that.

5.6. The Adventure Turns Sour

After this epic depiction of a childhood spent acting out the behaviors of a castaway on the North African shore, the narrative moves back to the subjective present to relate the arrival of the adult Jacques at the Algiers apartment in which his mother still lives. This chapter divides its attention between descriptions of Jacques's mother and reflections on race through the perspective of Jacques's father up until the time of his death and then in light of a bomb blast in Algiers. Jacques's mother is described repeatedly in this chapter in terms of insularity and isolation, once again underscoring the idea of the *pied-noir* as an island-dweller, constantly surrounded by barriers and thus under the same pressures, and with the same limited horizons, of a castaway on a desert island. When Jacques first catches sight of his mother, she is said to be in precisely the same place as she always is: "à la même place que jadis, sur l'étroit et unique balcon de l'appartement entre les deux pièces, au-dessus de la marquise du coiffeur."⁴⁴⁰ This use of the "entre x et y " paradigm to describe the situation of Mrs. Cormery is even further emphasized by the narrowness of the space in which she awaits her son's return, as well as by the barbershop sign that limits her space from below.

As soon as Jacques and his mother have gotten reacquainted, Jacques notices that his mother begins looking at him strangely every so often leading him to the impression that "il était

⁴⁴⁰ Le premier homme 57.

de trop et dérangeait l'univers étroit, vide et fermé où elle se mouvait solitairement.”⁴⁴¹ This passage once again confirms the narrowness of the space inhabited by Mrs. Cormery, and furthermore insists on this space’s natural state of solitude, since even the addition of one person, at that a person who once inhabited this space, is enough to overpopulate the area and provoke unease on the part of Mrs. Cormery. The adjectives “étroit, vide et fermé” insist upon this space as that of an island, and specifically a desert island, as the space’s limited horizons are paired with emptiness. The isolated existence of Jacques’s mother as described in this passage is emphasized further by the fact that this space is not merely her environment, but her entire universe. Indeed, a few lines later we see that Jacques has always seen his mother surrounded by a “barrière invisible” behind which she is specifically said to be “isolée.”⁴⁴² This isolation, or islanding, of Jacques’s mother behind an invisible barrier is shown to be related not only to her continued survival at an advanced age, but also to her inability to interfere when her mother used to beat Jacques and his brother. In fact, the barrier is once again tied to insularity when the narrator tells us that it developed through Mrs. Cormery being “au milieu des reliefs gras et du linge sale des autres.”⁴⁴³ The miserable existence described in this “entre x et y” expression once again strongly suggests that the island inhabited by Jacques’s mother is of the most desert variety, far from the paradise islands of happier Robinsonnades.

Later in the chapter, the narrator tells us the precise geographical understanding of Jacques’s mother: she “savait seulement qu’elle vivait sur de la terre près de la mer, que la

⁴⁴¹ Le premier homme 59.

⁴⁴² Le premier homme 60.

⁴⁴³ Le premier homme 61.

France était de l'autre côté de cette mer qu'elle non plus n'avait jamais parcourue."⁴⁴⁴ This passage would seem to indicate that to the confused and naïve geographical mind of this *pie-noir* woman, Algiers was not part of France, but rather an ocean away as would be any other island possession. Nevertheless, her insistence on the littoral placement of her environment shows that she is not completely wrong in her imagination of Algeria's geography, which might encourage the reader to take a second look at her other suppositions as well. The association of Mrs. Cormery with island spaces is shown to extend back many generations, when it is pointed out that her family had emigrated to Algeria from "Mahon don't elle ne savait même pas que c'était une île, ne sachant d'ailleurs pas ce qu'était une île puisqu'elle n'en avait jamais vue."⁴⁴⁵ After all the insular imagery associating this woman with island spaces, this passage would seem to be ironic, on the order of someone who can not see the forest for the trees. By insisting on the ancestral island of Mahon, Jacques's mother is still further solidified in the depiction of her as an islanded woman, and the invisible barriers behind which she lives are suggested to go back many generations, just as do her roots in Algerian soil. The emotional isolation in which Mrs. Cormery lives is made very clear when, after hearing, apparently without comprehension, that her husband had been killed by shrapnel in the European war, her instinct was to place herself in an islanded space, locking herself in her room and cowering behind four walls. Her isolation is emphasized further when, as she cowers in her bedroom clutching to herself the letter telling of her husband's death, the reader is reminded that she cannot read this letter, as she is also encased in her illiteracy, particularly poignant in a literary text. This chapter ends with another explosion, echoing the one that killed her husband decades earlier, and when her son suggests

⁴⁴⁴ Le premier homme 68.

⁴⁴⁵ Le premier homme 68.

that she move to France, she immediately declines, stating that she is too old and that France is too cold. The tropical island existence that she has led her entire life, and which in fact appears to be a family tradition going back generations, has too strong a grip on her to allow her to decide freely to depart, even if her island home holds some threat to her safety. The final impression of Mrs. Cormery left upon the reader is of a stubborn old lady who will not be talked out of her home and lifestyle, but who would prefer to die in familiar surroundings than to live in unfamiliar, cold ones, across the sea in unknown France.

5.7. Race to the Finish

This chapter, so concerned with the insular existence of Jacques's mother, also provides the reader some very interesting insights into the mindset of Jacques's father, particularly concerning race. The first indication that this subject will be addressed in this chapter comes after the narrator's description of his mother's coquettishness, observable in the way that she carefully chose, cared for, and put together her inexpensive clothing. This leads to the following observation: "Mais tous, et les hommes surtout, tenaient, comme tous les Méditerranéens, aux chemises blanches et au pli du pantalon."⁴⁴⁶ This attempt to describe the Mediterranean race through its sartorial habits may seem a bit superficial, but nevertheless it places in discussion the concept of such a race and installs a certain pride as one of the core components of this race's self-identity. While one might be tempted to understand the "Méditerranéens" in the largest possible sense, especially given the "tous" in this passage, as all the inhabitants of the shores of their eponymous sea, the specific reference to the crease in the trouser-legs seems to limit this to those inhabitants of the Mediterranean littoral who affect Western styles of dress. This makes

⁴⁴⁶ Le premier homme 60.

the reference seem to apply most clearly to the *pieds-noirs*, particularly since this entire passage has an implied contrast to the world of mainland France, given that Jacques has just returned to Algeria from across the sea and is once again noting the clues that mark out this space from the one he had been experiencing just before his crossing.

After this introduction to the issue of race, with pride being evoked as the central quality of the *pieds-noirs*, this chapter will go on to present several observations upon race, often from the perspective of the *pieds-noirs*, and generally in the context of various wars. Henri Cormery, fighting for the greater glory of France in Morocco at the beginning of the twentieth century, is shown to react angrily to the mutilations of two members of his unit, observing that the people who had cut the throat of their enemies, emasculated them, and placed their severed organs in their mouths, “n’*étaient pas des hommes.*”⁴⁴⁷ This denial of the humanity of North Africans of Arab descent leads to the observation of another soldier in Cormery’s unit that many Frenchmen are committing similar atrocities (even in Henri Cormery is refraining from doing so), to which Cormery responds “Alors, eux non plus, ce ne sont pas des hommes.”⁴⁴⁸ This egalitarian rejection of the humanity of those committing atrocities, which paradoxically seems to suggest some sort of rapprochement in the middle of a bloody, colonial war, between the North Africans of Arab and European descent, leads Cormery to shout out the following, ambiguous phrase: “Sale race! Quelle race! Tous, tous...”⁴⁴⁹ The second exclamation point seems to beg to be replaced by a question mark, particularly since Cormery seems to answer his own quasi-question by affirming that all the races are “dirty.” This moment of crisis for the young Henri Cormery

⁴⁴⁷ Le premier homme 66.

⁴⁴⁸ Le premier homme 67.

⁴⁴⁹ Le premier homme 67.

seems to lead him to an egalitarian hatred, expressed in racist terminology, of all races, or at the very least of all races that perpetrate atrocities. However, in the context of a dirty, racist war, it seems unlikely that a young soldier of the French Empire would remain ambivalent to the two sides in that war as his comments seem to imply, and indeed the last sentence of the vignette makes that clear: “Et il était entré sous sa tente, pâle comme un linge.”⁴⁵⁰ In the context of race and racial hatred, the paleness on the face of Henri Cormery, doubtless caused by the emotional drain of the events he witnessed and by his outburst, nevertheless reinforces his appurtenance to a specific race, in this case the one with the paler skin in this particular racial divide. The words of Henri Cormery suggest that in his anger and disgust he is able to transcend race, but the physical description of his body shows that his own racial identity is still strong, even if this marks him as belonging to a “sale race” that commits atrocities in the name of its cause.

War seems to provide simultaneously the best chance for peaceful cooperation between the two main people groups in pre-Independence Algeria while also placing into clear relief the differences between these groups. As the narrator recounts the story of Henri Cormery’s brief period of service in Europe during the first world war, we read that “le soleil n’était pas assez fort pour tuer les couleurs comme en Algérie, si bien que des vagues d’Algériens arabes et français, vêtus de tons éclatants et pimpants, [...] cibles rouges et bleues qu’on pouvait apercevoir à des centaines de mètres, montaient par paquets au feu, étaient détruits par paquets[...].”⁴⁵¹ This passage places the Arab-Algerians and the European-Algerians in the same boat regarding the impractical uniforms of the “zouaves,” and in their common use as cannon fodder in this European “territory.” The ironic turnabout here of Europe being the

⁴⁵⁰ Le premier homme 67.

⁴⁵¹ Le premier homme 70.

territories wherein the colonial wars play out reverses the pattern that had developed over the preceding century in North Africa, including the conflict in which Henri Cormery had already observed the atrocities discussed earlier. Nevertheless, this passage illustrates one unfortunate means by which the two main populations of Algeria were rendered equal through the democratizing effect of German artillery. Later on that same page we see the logical results of this egalitarian slaughter of the zouaves, when we read that “chaque jour des centaines d’orphelins naissaient dans tous les coins d’Algérie, arabes et français, fils et filles sans père qui devraient ensuite apprendre à vivre sans leçon et sans héritage.”⁴⁵² These orphan Algerian children, whatever their ethnic background, are shown to be affected in precisely the same fashion by the slaughter of their fathers in faraway France, and one of the effects of their orphaning is the necessity to live without paternal guidance, the effects of which are carefully explored in numerous *Robinsonnades*. Indeed, the poor financial prospects that drove many young Robinsons to sea could be summed up in this passage’s insistence on the lack of inheritance due to the premature deaths of their fathers.

The discussion of race in the context of pre-Independence Algeria is further explored in this chapter through a bomb-blast that Jacques and even his deaf mother hear from her apartment. This echo of a coming war (or one that has already started, depending on how one defines war) forces member of the community in which Jacques grew up (without guidance or inheritance) to reassess their community, particularly in terms of inter-racial relations. The first indication that the Algiers that Jacques has returned to is more or less at war is when, from the balcony, Jacques notices soldiers in the street: “Une patrouille de trois parachutistes en armes passait en bas dans la rue, en file indienne, regardant de tous côtés. L’un d’entre eux était noir,

⁴⁵² Le premier homme 70.

grand et souple, comme une bête splendide dans sa peau tachetée.”⁴⁵³ Not only does this patrol’s passage, on alert for danger, indicate that the neighborhood may be less than safe, but the very racially-charged language in this description obliges the reader to contemplate race while considering this patrol and what it represents on the very streets in which Jacques and his buddies played, albeit without supervision, but certainly without any overt clues as to danger in the area. The description of the black soldier, comparing him to a leopard or other spotted, black beast of prey, seems irredeemably racist, and certainly reminds the reader that here, at least, is a member of a race that is not one of those contesting the Algerian landscape. Simultaneously, the presence of this man reminds the reader of the many other regions touched by French imperialism, and also that apparently the French are still using people from colonial possessions to fight in their wars. If there is any doubt that this passage is intended to provoke contemplation of race in Algeria, the use of the expression “Indian file” would seem to put that to rest, ensuring that this passage and the events it introduces will be observed from a point of view that is squarely interested in the different races present in this neighborhood during the impending bomb blast.

As Jacques watches from the balcony of his mother’s apartment, he notes the different people passing in the streets, including *pied-noir* “ouvriers” and “Arabes.”⁴⁵⁴ The curious detail that one Arab child is dressed up as a French paratrooper is juxtaposed with another sighting of the multiracial patrol, and then an explosion rips through the neighborhood. As soon as the bomb-blast occurs, people begin running in all directions, and Jacques observes a moment of inter-racial cooperation: “une famille arabe était entrée chez le mercier en face, pressant les

⁴⁵³ Le premier homme 72.

⁴⁵⁴ Le premier homme 73.

enfants de rentrer, et le mercier les accueillait, fermait la porte en retirant le bec-de-cane et restait planté derrière la vitre à surveiller la rue.”⁴⁵⁵ This rather surprising activity shows both that the Arab family feared reprisals from the *pied-noir* crowd for the presumably Arab-sponsored bombing and that some, enlightened, members of the *pied-noir* community were aware of this apparently real threat and were willing to take direct actions to avoid such reprisals. Indeed, as Jacques runs towards the activity in the wake of the explosion, he sees a group of (European-Algerian) men shouting, and hears one of them say, in the direction of an Arab-Algerian, “Cette sale race.”⁴⁵⁶ While Jacques takes the accosted Arab-Algerian under his wing and convinced his childhood friend Jean to shelter the man from the mob outside, the reader has the somewhat contradictory impression that the entire group of *pieds-noirs* was riled up, but that only one of them actually wanted to lynch the lone Arab-Algerian. After Jacques has led the threatened man to safety, the angry and violent *pied-noir* is shown to be angry at this betrayal by one of his own: “l’ouvrier regardait Jacques de travers.”⁴⁵⁷ Nevertheless, this man is rational enough to suggest that Jacques examine the “bouillie” before suggesting that the Arab-Algerian is really blameless. Jacques observes, apparently dispassionately, the screams of “la colère et la souffrance”⁴⁵⁸ at the scene of the bombing, then returns to his mother’s side. The racial tension between Arab-Algerians and European-Algerians in this scene is tempered by the actions of some members of the *pied-noir* community to shelter innocent Arab-Algerians, but the reader is left with the impression that these few acts of decency might be exceptions rather than the rule, particularly

⁴⁵⁵ Le premier homme 74.

⁴⁵⁶ Le premier homme 74.

⁴⁵⁷ Le premier homme 75.

⁴⁵⁸ Le premier homme 75.

since whenever there is a large group of people rather than individuals the mob mentality seems much more prevalent.

The tensions between representatives of different races in this chapter, resulting in the bomb-blast and the succeeding near-lynching, place significant emphasis on race. The final reference to race in this chapter is a description of Jacques's mother: "Elle avait grandi, comme toute sa race, dans le danger, et le danger pouvait lui serrer le cœur, elle l'endurait comme le reste."⁴⁵⁹ This race steeped in danger, the European-Algerians, or *pieds-noirs*, is shown to have gained special resistance to danger through its trials and tribulations in the past. Nevertheless, Jacques immediately suggests to his mother the seemingly only possible retreat, coming with Jacques to live in mainland France. Mrs. Cormery immediately rejects this apparent escape: "elle secouait la tête avec une tristesse résolue."⁴⁶⁰ This steadfast sadness, perhaps emblematic of the *pieds-noirs* clinging to their Algerian roots despite the winds of war as evidenced by the bomb-blast in the heart of this impoverished section of European-Algerian Algiers, seems to be an attempt at explaining why these people did not easily abandon the North African littoral when it began to seem inevitable that they would be forced to do so. Mrs. Cormery's explanation of her hesitation combines the banal and the poetic: "Oh! Non, il fait froid là-bas. Maintenant je suis trop vieille. Je veux rester chez nous."⁴⁶¹ Added to her distaste for the French climate and what might be a crotchiness born of age, the widow Cormery evokes the all-important fact that Algeria is her home, and not only hers, but that of her people, as we see through the use of "chez nous" rather than "chez moi." This stubborn clinging to the Algerian island home by this little

⁴⁵⁹ Le premier homme 76.

⁴⁶⁰ Le premier homme 76.

⁴⁶¹ Le premier homme 76.

old lady paints a portrait of the difficulty of ever attempting to solve the unrest in Algeria by a retreat to France: Algeria, not France, is this woman's ancestral home, and she is willing to brave bomb-blasts on her street in order to avoid having to abandon her home.

5.8. Literary and Cultural Heritage

Le premier homme grapples literarily with the illiteracy that filled the life of the young Jacques. The chapter entitled "La famille" commences with a description of the manner in which Jacques's unlettered mother speaks, and then launches into an explanation of her and her family's lack of education. We read that Jacques's mother "parlait d'un seul coup, par petites phrases simples et qui suivaient comme si elle se vidait de sa pensée jusque-là silencieuse."⁴⁶² This unadorned manner of speaking, with no literary pretensions or richness, may be compared to Albert Camus's plain style of writing, and seems to have its roots in illiteracy. The source of this lack of literary richness, according to this text, is the strange death of Jacques's Mahonais ancestor, "poète à ses heures et qui composait ses vers perché sur une bourrique et cheminant dans l'île entre les petits murs de pierre sèche qui bornent les jardins potagers."⁴⁶³ This literary forebear of Jacques's, whose literary production is concretely associated with an insular space that seems to have provided either the inspiration for poetry or at least the space in which it was able to be written, appears to have overcome very prosaic surroundings and a lack of stimuli by transforming little vegetable gardens into a poetic space. The specifically insular nature of this space seems to support our supposition that Camus associates island spaces with literature by the *pièdes-noirs*, since we see here that the literary fore-runner of Jacques in this apparently

⁴⁶² Le premier homme 77.

⁴⁶³ Le premier homme 81-82.

autobiographical novel had recourse to island spaces in his literary production. Unfortunately for this ancestor, his literary ambitions would be the end of him: “C’est au cours d’une de ces promenades que, trompé par la silhouette et le chapeau noir aux larges bords, un mari bafoué, croyant punir l’amant, fusilla dans le dos la poésie et un modèle de vertus familiales.”⁴⁶⁴ We note with interest here that the death of this ancestor of Jacques’s is written in such a way as to personify poetry in the form of this murder victim, as it was poetry itself that was shot in the back. This tiny anecdote follows the pattern of the island in Camus’s novels by showing it as a space that encourages literary production but in whose limited landscape conflict with other members of the community seems inevitably to cause death and destruction. It also serves to explain the illiteracy in the household in which Jacques grew up: “Le résultat lointain de ce tragique malentendu où un poète trouva la mort fut l’installation sur le littoral algérien d’une nichée d’analphabètes qui se reproduisirent loin des écoles.”⁴⁶⁵ Here we see that this event is blamed for the lack of letters in Jacques’s family, and that the insularity of the space in which this ancestor was shot is mirrored in the insistence on the littoral situation of the family in the aftermath of this island murder.

In a strange and convoluted manner, literature and the drive to produce it is shown to have resulted in several generations of unlettered *pieds-noirs* inhabiting the insular, or at the very least littoral, space that is the Algeria of this novel and Camus’s other novels as well. The illiteracy of Jacques’s grandmother is shown to comic effect in the portrayal of her outings to the cinema with Jacques, during which the young boy would have to read the texts from these silent films to his grandmother, resulting in his attempts to read loudly enough that she could hear him

⁴⁶⁴ Le premier homme 82.

⁴⁶⁵ Le premier homme 82.

over the ambient noises in the cinema without resorting to a volume that would earn Jacques the disapprobation of the other movie-goers. However, the impoverishment of the quality of life caused by this illiteracy is made poignantly clear in descriptions of Jacques's mother, whose deafness made her unable even to profit from her son's ability to read the film's texts. She is shown to be incapable of enjoying film, radio, newspapers, and books, leaving her with only two choices for passing the time: watching the street below her apartment and taking naps. The chapter closes with the following description of how this woman spent her days: "regarder de nouveau par la même fenêtre le mouvement de la même rue qu'elle avait contemplé pendant la moitié de sa vie."⁴⁶⁶ Nevertheless, it is this life that she refuses to leave for a new existence in France, for although she is clearly bored, she is nevertheless stubbornly attached to her life in Algiers, and cannot conceive of another existence elsewhere. Her horizons, foreshortened by an illiteracy that was her birthright due to the death of her literary progenitor, are as sharply limited as those of the insular space in which she lives.

The portrait of the childhood of the young Jacques Cormery that forms the bulk of this autobiographical novel continues in chapters relating the boy's relationship with his uncle, named at different times Ernest and Étienne, and his schooling. While both of these experiences provide the young Jacques with surrogate-paternal relationships in the forms of his uncle and his schoolteacher, the Robinsonnade aspects of growing up in contact with nature and with very little adult supervision will continue concurrently with these sections. For example, in one of the first anecdotes regarding Jacques's relationship with his uncle, we see that while Jacques is out swimming in the ocean with Étienne/Ernest his environment is described using the rubric "entre x et y." "[Jacques] avait peur mais il ne le disait pas, fasciné par cette solitude [...] entre le ciel

⁴⁶⁶ Le premier homme 94.

et la mer.”⁴⁶⁷ Here we see once again the insular existence of Jacques and his people, here in the person of his uncle, always between the sea and some other barrier. We see also that this insularity and solitude both frighten and fascinate the young *pied-noir*, revealing the complicated relationship he maintains with the insular, Algerian space in which he struggles to survive. While the addition of an adult into this insular space might seem to depart from the *forme fixe* of the Robinnade, we see that Étienne/Ernest is, in many ways, a primitive Robinson much like his nephew, and indeed his primal nature is linked to the title of this novel when he is described as possessing an “innocence adamique”⁴⁶⁸ in regards to his interests and eating habits. This uncle who initiates Jacques into the “nature sauvage”⁴⁶⁹ of hunting trips in the mountains surrounding Algiers, who swims out to sea with him into a frightening, insular space from which he could clearly discern the southern Mediterranean shore as “une ligne invisible”⁴⁷⁰ marking the limits of his island habitat, this uncle is compared to the eponymous “first man” of this text, suggesting that his primitive *joie de vivre* and visceral attachment to the landscape he inhabits are characteristic of the primacy regarding the land that this book explores through autobiographical vignettes of *pied-noir* life.

Growing up in the *pied-noir* slum is described by the narrator as being similar to the primitive existence of the Robinnade hero, as we have shown from childhood play described in earlier chapters. In the chapter relating Jacques’s schoolboy experiences, we see that this theme continues. For example, Jacques and his buddy regularly interact with the fauna native to

⁴⁶⁷ Le premier homme 97.

⁴⁶⁸ Le premier homme 98.

⁴⁶⁹ Le premier homme 104.

⁴⁷⁰ Le premier homme 97.

their landscape in a typically cruel boyhood fashion: “Il s’agissait pour les deux enfants d’arriver assez silencieusement derrière les poubelles pour rabattre brusquement le couvercle sur le chat qui se trouvait dans la poubelle.”⁴⁷¹ This behavior, which resulted in a cat exploding out of the trash can, is described as being dangerous because of the savagery of these cats “nés et grandis dans un quartier pauvre.”⁴⁷² Clearly, the savagery inherent in being born and bred in such a neighborhood was not limited to the feline inhabitants of Belcourt. The boys also interacted with dogs, in this case trying to save them from the dogcatcher rather than torturing them as they did the cats. Both of these anecdotes insist on the presence in the Algerian landscape of wild animals, even if these animals are not quite as exotic as many beasts in Robinsonnades. However, while insisting on the wild nature of the Algerian island landscape, the narrator simultaneously reminds the reader that for these young *pieds-noirs*, the truly exotic locale was the France about which they studied in their classes, as the footnote immediately following the cat-torture episode indicates: “Exotisme la soupe aux pois.”⁴⁷³ This seemingly obscure reference is made abundantly clear a few pages later when an evocation of snowy France and pea soup in a warm house are said to be “l’exotisme même.”⁴⁷⁴ Indeed, the relationship between the young Jacques and his supposedly home country is shown to exist purely in a mythic state, relegated to the level of the religion that was nominally adhered to by Jacques’s family: “On était catholique comme on est français, cela oblige à un certain nombre de rites.”⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷¹ Le premier homme 132.

⁴⁷² Le premier homme 132.

⁴⁷³ Le premier homme 132.

⁴⁷⁴ Le premier homme 137.

⁴⁷⁵ Le premier homme 155.

The equation of Frenchness with an obligation paints this relationship in a somewhat negative light to begin with, and this is further underscored by the analogy to Catholicism, since the entire book (and, indeed, the entire body of work of Camus) seems steeped in atheism, with religious ritual relegated to the realm of the ridiculous or absurd. This lip service to French nationality is extremely superficial compared to the matter-of-fact description of the *pied-noir* children as they listen to their teacher read aloud from a novel of the First World War: “les enfants africains.”⁴⁷⁶ These African children, to whom France was a far-off, exotic locale, are said to know nothing but “le sirocco, la poussière, les averses prodigieuses et brèves, le sable des plages et la mer en flammes sous le soleil.”⁴⁷⁷ The Algerian landscape, the true home for these young Algerians of European descent, always comes down to the barrier of the beach and the sea, limiting their point of view to an insularity born of geography, poverty, and Adamic innocence.

5.9. Calling a Cat a Cat

The final chapter of the first part of Le premier homme, “Mondovi: La colonisation et le père,” addresses the issue of colonialism as it relates to Jacques and his family, as well as the extended family of the *pieds-noirs*, in perhaps the most direct fashion we may find in the fiction of Albert Camus. This chapter explores the arrival of the *pieds-noirs* in Algeria, relates their epic struggle for survival, and makes some very clear references to the realization that the French Algerian project was doomed to failure in the fairly short term. This chapter is also very interested in memory and how it works for people like the European-Algerians, and it contains

⁴⁷⁶ Le premier homme 140.

⁴⁷⁷ Le premier homme 136-137.

the first instance of the narrative point of view shifting from the third to the first person, giving an increasingly powerful argument for the reading of this novel as autobiographical, and also seeming to imply that the narrator has less than ironclad control over the flow of the narrative in this text. This very slipperiness of the narrative will lead to observations about the psychology of the *pieds-noirs* at the end of French Algeria's timeline.

“Mondovi: La colonisation et le père” moves back and forth between several time periods over the course of its two dozen pages, alternately following the adult Jacques on a pilgrimage to the farm where he was born and relating the epic journey to Algeria of French revolutionaries over a century earlier, with the addition of anecdotes about various moments thrown in by people the adult Jacques finds on his trek through the moribund wine country of the Algerian hinterland. The tale of the journey of the Parisians to Solférino is couched in terms of a maritime voyage, which is not surprising since their trip predated commercial flights across the Mediterranean. However, the maritime nature of their journey is underscored by the narrated fact that they went by boat all the way from Paris. Their journey by barge, rather than road or rail, to the point where they were able to embark on a paddle steamer places the entire odyssey in the context of the dangerous sea voyages of the robinsonnade. Even the journey through French canals is described as an epic undertaking, with the insistence on the “bruit soyeux et l'eau sale à hauteur de tête”⁴⁷⁸ lending an air of danger to the somewhat prosaic form of transport, involving as it did horses hauling the barges along perfectly calm canal water. These colonists, “les durs des barricades,”⁴⁷⁹ “les ouvriers de 48,”⁴⁸⁰ are shown already in the holds of their barges to be

⁴⁷⁸ Le premier homme 173.

⁴⁷⁹ Le premier homme 172.

⁴⁸⁰ Le premier homme 173.

adapting to unusual circumstances and to be thus displaying the initiative expected of anyone embracing a Robinson-esque adventure, in this case by creating makeshift shelters out of sheets. These colonists, the forebears of Jacques, his family, and the rest of the *pieds-noirs*, are described as “nouveaux romanichels” heading towards “un pays inconnu.”⁴⁸¹ While the comparison to the wandering gypsies might not add to the heroic nature of the endeavor, their gumption in lighting out for the territories, particularly when said lands were wholly unknown to them, lends to these voyagers an epic quality. In their boat, ironically named “Le Labrador,” these colonists head across the Mediterranean “vers les moustiques et le soleil.”⁴⁸² Mosquitoes and sun, defining here the Algerian tropical landscape described so lovingly throughout Camus’s fiction, are compared to the relatively tame North American, and temperate, lands that would have been an alternative choice for a colonial destination, but the reader cannot help but approve of the more virile choice of challenging terrain over the comparatively facile adaptation to a Canada that resembles in so many ways the France recently abandoned. The epic voyage to Solférino concludes triumphantly, with the people of Bône thronging the docks to see the “aventuriers verdâtres,”⁴⁸³ still ill from the violent mistral-induced storms during their passage, arrive on the Algerian soil. A final poetic evocation of Algeria concludes this reverie on the part of Jacques, who is attempting to sleep on his airplane while this epic plays out, as we see these greenish adventurers “venus de si loin, ayant quitté la capitale de l’Europe avec femmes, enfants et meubles pour atterrir en chancelant, après cinq semaines d’errance, sur cette terre aux lointains

⁴⁸¹ Le premier homme 173.

⁴⁸² Le premier homme 173.

⁴⁸³ Le premier homme 173.

bleuâtres.”⁴⁸⁴ The bluish limits on the horizons may seem to imply endless possibilities, but the juxtaposition of this description with the much-later over-flight of the Kabylia mountains by Jacques reminds the reader that these are really mountains the colonists see in the distance, and this realization allows the portrait of the Algerian landscape to be revealed as it is depicted throughout Camus’s fiction, as being between various barriers, here a storm-tossed sea and cold, dark, blue mountains. This evocation of the limited horizons of the Algerian landscape points to the ultimate futility of the French Algerian project, and indeed the subsequent descriptions of the Solférino colony’s beginnings, with massive deaths, warfare, and disease, while pointing to the hardiness of the survivors, nevertheless belies any depiction of Algeria as a paradise space.

There is a constant tension in this novel between the search for memories relating to the unknown father and the lack of traces left by people like Jacques’s father on the landscapes through which they passed. One of the central characteristics of Algeria is identified at the beginning of the chapter by a *pied-noir* speaking to Jacques: “Puisque vous êtes du pays, vous savez ce que c’est. Ici, on ne garde rien. On abat et on reconstruit. On pense à l’avenir et on oublie le reste.”⁴⁸⁵ The fact that being from Algeria immediately implies a knowledge of the lack of historical memories associated with this space leads to the conclusion that not only is the space void of memory, but its inhabitants are as well. The use of the non-specific pronoun “on” here further contributes to the lack of historical specificity, for while this certainly applies to the *pieds-noirs*, in the use of “on” as a substitute for “we,” it also allows for any number of other groups to have engaged in this frenetic course towards the future, with the past forever abandoned to oblivion. Indeed, the reference to knocking down and building, in succession,

⁴⁸⁴ Le premier homme 173-174.

⁴⁸⁵ Le premier homme 166.

reminds the reader that Algeria is viewed by the *pieds-noirs* as a space that has been sequentially settled by various waves of colonists, implying that the current occupants of the pronoun “on,” the *pieds-noirs*, are likely to have their buildings and other cultural artifacts knocked down in their turn. In fact, this same *pied-noir* interlocutor tells Jacques a bit later that his father, when ordered to evacuate his vineyards, plowed them into the ground with the following rationale: “puisque ce que nous avons fait ici est un crime, il faut l’effacer.”⁴⁸⁶ This old *pied-noir* farmer’s probably ironic use of the word “crime” to describe the carefully planted and tended grape vines nevertheless leads to the decision to erase the traces of his passage through this space. He knocks down, leaving us to assume that someone else would eventually build something else in the same space.

The ability of the Algerian landscape to erase history is also evident in Jacques’s reflections upon his father as he rides in a plane: “il essayait en vain de revoir, d’imaginer son père qui disparaissait derrière ce pays immense et hostile, fondait dans l’histoire anonyme de ce village et de cette plaine.”⁴⁸⁷ Here we see that the adult Jacques is incapable even of imagining his father, as the country itself melts away any specificities of his father’s experience and places him in an “anonymous history.” Of course, the ever-present confusion in French between “history” and “story” means that we cannot be sure if it is the history of this particular *pied-noir* that remains anonymous, or if it is rather his story that can never be known in its particulars. This latter possibility has the greater immediate impact upon this particular narrative, since Jacques is seeking to learn about his father’s past in a literary context. Indeed, the lack of past seems to be a crucial element of the *pied-noir* make-up, for we see later that not only is Jacques’s

⁴⁸⁶ Le premier homme 168.

⁴⁸⁷ Le premier homme 172.

father described as “émigrant lui aussi comme tous ceux qui vivaient et avaient vécu sur cette terre sans laisser de trace,”⁴⁸⁸ but that this lack of marks of passage is characteristic of all those who have ever inhabited the Algerian space. Generations of colonists are described as having lived in the Algerian space “sans passé,”⁴⁸⁹ and they are said to have “disparu sans laisser de traces.”⁴⁹⁰ Finally, Algeria is specifically named as the causative factor in this lack of memory: “Un immense oubli s’était étendu sur eux, et en vérité c’était cela que dispensait cette terre.”⁴⁹¹ Algeria, then, dishes out oblivion and forgetfulness upon its inhabitants, going on after their deaths and disappearances without the slightest mark of their passage.

This depiction of the colonial space is a variant of the common trope in Robinsonnades of the *tabula rasa*, but here the blank slate does not lend itself to the colonial imagination as was typically the case in those texts, but rather seems to continually erase itself, calling into sharp question the viability of any imperial project upon these shores. In fact, the narrator makes clear that the *pieds-noirs* had been able to leave one faint mark of their passage through the Algerian blank slate in the form of literal slabs of stone in their graveyards, but even this attempt to indelibly mark Algeria through the generations of European-Algerian dead is shown to be a failure as these are said to be “illisibles.”⁴⁹² The impossibility of reading the names and dates on these slates shows that no trace will remain of the *pieds-noirs*’ passage in this space, and this failure is specifically one tied to literature through the act of stymied reading. Indeed, as the

⁴⁸⁸ Le premier homme 178.

⁴⁸⁹ Le premier homme 178.

⁴⁹⁰ Le premier homme 179.

⁴⁹¹ Le premier homme 179.

⁴⁹² Le premier homme 181.

pieds-noirs come to grips with the fact that they are just like “l’immense cohue des conquérants maintenant évincés qui les avaient précédés sur cette terre et dont ils devaient reconnaître maintenant la fraternité de race et de destin,”⁴⁹³ their repetition of this age-old destiny is made clear through writing’s failure. In an autobiographical novel, evocations of the failure of the written word and its association with the failure of an entire people, not only to keep their homeland but to disappear wholly into historical oblivion, mark the impossibility of the literary project to recreate the fading past. This chapter will conclude, after repetition of the now-familiar insistence upon Algeria as an island space, with the beginning of the unraveling of the narration of this text in the form of the splitting of the narrator, a splitting that is operated by geographical feature.

5.10. An Imaginary Epic

As Jacques drowns in his airplane seat as he flies over Kabylia,⁴⁹⁴ he imagines the arrival of the Parisian colonists in Solférino, describing their new home using the familiar insular rubric “entre x et y:” “rien qu’un espace nu et désert, ce qui était pour eux l’extrémité du monde, entre le ciel désert et la terre dangereuse.”⁴⁹⁵ The use of wording that we have seen tied to insular imagery immediately places this region to be colonized in the context of an island space, and the repetition of the word “désert” suggests one of the more challenging islands to colonized. However, even as the space is described as being deserted, the narrator freely admits to the

⁴⁹³ Le premier homme 181.

⁴⁹⁴ André Aciman has described his reading of this passage while on a flight and his subsequent realization of the impossibility that must have faced Camus in trying to return home in “From Alexandria,” MLN 112 (1997): 683-697.

⁴⁹⁵ Le premier homme 174.

presence of the “Arabes groupés de loin en loin,”⁴⁹⁶ reminding the reader that, in fact, this space is anything but empty of inhabitants. This seeming contradiction may be tied to a dangerous ignorance, as the word “dangereuse” is followed by an asterisk referring to a marginally-noted “inconnue.” This land is, therefore, simultaneously dangerous and unknown, from the point of view of the *colons*, and while after one hundred years of habitation in this space the *pieds-noirs* will come to know it well, it will still remain dangerous as evidenced by the forced evacuation of farms in this region even as Jacques flies above it.

Jacques, realizing that his quest to know his father is doomed to failure in part by the lack of traces left behind this man, finally decides that the mystery that surrounds his father is due, above all else, to poverty: “Mais finalement il n’y avait que le mystère de la pauvreté qui fait les êtres sans nom et sans passé.”⁴⁹⁷ Just as he had remarked upon the paucity of decorations, and thus landmarks, in the poor flat he shared with his grandmother, mother, and uncle, he states here that his father, and by extension the *pieds-noirs* as a whole, have left no trace of themselves on the Algerian landscape. This landscape is described as “cette île immense entre le sable et la mer,”⁴⁹⁸ once again making perfectly explicit the perceived insularity of Algeria, a space defined by being between barriers and thus far from the wide-open vistas of potential colonial exploitation conjured by, for example, the name of the paddle-steamer that presumably brought his ancestors to the North African littoral, “Le Labrador.” In this island space of limited horizons, which the author calls a “pays sans nom,” that very anonymity calls out from deep within Jacques, and we read that it is this call from within that makes him realize that “il faisait

⁴⁹⁶ Le premier homme 174.

⁴⁹⁷ Le premier homme 180.

⁴⁹⁸ Le premier homme 180.

partie aussi de la tribu.”⁴⁹⁹ In other words, Jacques’s tribal identity is rooted in the lack of roots, is identified with the lack of identity, and these paradoxes flow from this island Algeria, not deserted of people but of the traces of their manifold passings. Finally, we read that Jacques’s ancestral home is “la terre de l’oubli où chacun était le premier homme.”⁵⁰⁰ The logic of this explanation of the eponymous first man derives from the lack of memory that is characteristic of the Algerian space, impregnated as it is by poverty; where there is but forgetfulness, all is continually experienced afresh, and thus each man is the first one to tread this landscape. However, since Jacques is able to refer to the many waves of settlement that have washed over the Algerian shore, even if he cannot see any traces from these arrivals, he here acknowledges that his ancestors’ arrival a century earlier was not really the first claiming of this space, and indeed the frequent references to the “Arabes” who mutely observe the arrival of the *colons* confirms this knowledge. Nevertheless, on an emotional and subjective level, the anonymity inherent in this “land of forgetfulness” allows the *pied-noir* character of Jacques to forget the prior inhabitants of the space in which he was raised and to figure his people’s history as that of the first men to explore and subdue this desert island space. These ruminations seem to touch so deeply upon the quest for identity of Jacques that they lead to a fracturing of the narrative logic of the text, for the narrator briefly abandons his third-person perspective: “La Méditerranée séparait en moi deux univers, l’un où dans des espaces mesurés les souvenirs et les noms étaient conservés, l’autre où le vent de sable effaçait les traces des hommes sur de grands espaces.”⁵⁰¹ Here, in a passage which credits the northern boundary of the Algerian island with splitting the

⁴⁹⁹ Le premier homme 180.

⁵⁰⁰ Le premier homme 181.

⁵⁰¹ Le premier homme 181.

narrator's universe, we see that the narrator refers to himself with the pronoun "moi," suggesting that here the author speaks more directly of his own experiences than those of the pseudo-fictional Jacques.

Furthermore, we see that the splitting of the universe of the narrator/author is here operated by the Mediterranean, mirroring the split in identity of the *pieds-noirs* who were both French and Algerian, and yet fully neither, divided in two by this powerful marine barrier. On the Algerian side of the Mediterranean, the Saharan wind erases men's passing like so much sandpaper rubbed against their footprints, while on the French side of this sea we see that names, and presumably other words, are preserved. In fact, this passage suggests a certain impossibility to write about Algeria in anything but the mainland French space, as there, although one is separated from Algeria by this universe-splitting sea, at least the sand-laden wind will not immediately erase whatever is written down. The two universes of the narrator/author are central to his identity, and yet only that of the Algerian side is in danger of disappearing if he fails to take advantage of the French side to create a permanent record. In the context of the evacuation of the very *pied-noir* farms in which Jacques was born in the opening passages of this autobiographical novel, we find the realization that all aspects of his life in Algeria risk vanishing in the effacing sands of the desert wind just as has already happened to his birthplace. The urgency of preserving some aspects of this life, and indeed of the very culture that gave it birth, ruptures the narrative and causes the emergence of this "moi" that seems to cry out from a deeper level of consciousness, perhaps even directly from the author himself in this draft novel.

5.11. The Impossibility of Memory

In the relatively short second part of Le premier homme, entitled “Le fils ou le premier homme,” the narrator describes the transition of Jacques from little boy from the poor neighborhood of Belcourt to a young man, with particular emphasis on his high-school experiences. This part of this autobiographical novel commences with Jacques heading towards “un monde inconnu”⁵⁰² and concludes with Jacques being described as having been born “sur une terre sans aïeux et sans mémoire.”⁵⁰³ The link between Algeria’s geographical insularity and the impossibility of remembering the events that transpire within its confines is repeatedly explored and emphasized.

The second part of Le premier homme continues the effort apparent throughout the first part of placing this narrative in the context of a latter-day Robinsonnade, both through specific references to Jacques’s environment as insular and through more oblique nods to that literary tradition utilized by Albert Camus to discuss the colonial nature of the *pied-noir* experience in Algeria. For example, when the narrator is describing Jacques’s vacation experiences at a hospital for handicapped veterans, one of the central episodes involves Jacques playing in the wind by holding up a very recognizable emblem of the tropics and the Robinsonnade landscape, a palm frond. In fact, he even harnesses the wind for transport, using this frond as a sort of improvised sail. The tropical lushness of this playtime environment is further emphasized by a catalogue of the flora of this space: “D’immenses eucalyptus, des palmiers royaux, des cocotiers, des caoutchoutiers”⁵⁰⁴ are described, all impressive tropical species exploited by

⁵⁰² Le premier homme 186.

⁵⁰³ Le premier homme 261.

⁵⁰⁴ Le premier homme 221.

colonists and Robinsons alike for their various products as well as for their utility in producing watercraft and shelters. The tropical bounties emphasized here are in stark contrast to that concurrent, yet contradictory, image of Algeria as a desert island space, particularly as Jacques begins through his days on the other side of town at his high school to leave his neighborhood behind. We read that Jacques began to question the very existence of his *quartier*, asking himself “Existait-il, d’ailleurs, ce quartier, et n’était-il pas ce désert qu’il devint un soir pour l’enfant devenu inconscient?”⁵⁰⁵ This desert landscape, confused with the rest of Jacques’s dreamscapes, seems to imply that Jacques’s recent change in perspective has led him to view his neighborhood in a new light. Indeed, this idea is strongly underscored when we read that “Le quartier entier devenait alors, en juillet, comme une sorte de labyrinthe gris et jaune, désert dans la journée” over which “le soleil régnait féroce.”⁵⁰⁶ This desertification of Jacques’s childhood landscape, colored by the tints of the Saharan dust, reminds the reader that despite the existence of areas of lushness that allowed the implantation of the *pied-noir* culture in Algeria, this space remains firmly in the kingdom of the ferocious sun, and that this power’s ability to turn all into dusty desert will ultimately trump the more clement forces in this landscape.

The insularity of this neighborhood that was for Jacques the center of his family and cultural existence in Algeria is made perfectly explicit when the final sub-chapter, “Obscur à soi-même,” is introduced by the statement that “la vie avait été ainsi dans l’île pauvre du quartier.”⁵⁰⁷ This poor, or desert, island space is thus evoked clearly in the introductory sentence of the chapter that will attempt to conclude this entire autobiographical novel, placing it in a very key

⁵⁰⁵ Le premier homme 230.

⁵⁰⁶ Le premier homme 237.

⁵⁰⁷ Le premier homme 255.

location in this text. The insularity of Jacques's neighborhood, here emphasized so heavily, must be understood as a central fact of the adventurous childhood explored in this novel, and added to the already-observed propensity for Jacques and his buddies to play at being Robinsons we feel fully justified in our hypothesis that for Albert Camus, the Algerian space is understood at least metaphorically as an island, and indeed specifically an island in the literary context of the Robisonnade. That Jacques himself is figured as a Robinson-like castaway is also made explicit in this chapter, when, after once again describing Jacques as being located in an insular space defined by the rubric "entre *x* et *y*," this time with the sea and the mountains of the interior forming the boundaries, we read of Jacques that he inhabited a "pays où précisément il se sentait jeté, comme s'il était le premier habitant, ou le premier conquérant, débarquant là [...]."⁵⁰⁸ In this description of Jacques feeling that he had arrived in the Algerian space by landing, or being thrown onto this shore, we see his similarity to a castaway arriving on his island. The specifically imperialistic context of the Robisonnade is not glossed over here, as Jacques is said to feel both like the first inhabitant of this space and like its first conqueror. The specific reference to conquest in this passage relating a young *pied-noir*'s accession to the Algerian space makes very clear that the narrator is not afraid to emphasize the Robisonnade preoccupation with colonial conquest, for indeed here this point of view is shown to be inherently linked to the long-running conceit of the *pied-noir* as Robinson. Finally, the conquest referred to in this passage is even tied clearly to the Arab-Algerians, when we read that this conqueror, arriving in this insular space, found "autour de lui ce peuple attirant et inquiétant, proche et séparé."⁵⁰⁹ The identity of this unnamed people is indicated by the reference to the veils on their generally-

⁵⁰⁸ Le premier homme 257.

⁵⁰⁹ Le premier homme 257.

unseen women, and the adjectives used to describe these other inhabitants of the Algerian island show the conflicted relationship between conqueror and conquered.⁵¹⁰ This passage is particularly interesting for this study because it is in effect a clear admission of the anteriority of the claim on the Algerian space of the Arab-Algerians, since the *pied-noir* castaway/conqueror is shown to be surrounded by them upon his arrival, when he is supposedly the first man, in many ways putting the lie to that eponymous conceit.

The race or species of Jacques, and by extension of the other members of his community, is reflected upon at some length in the second part of Le premier homme. This race is first developed in sharp contrast with the French people, as we read that in comparison with a high-school classmate from France who returned to France regularly, Jacques and his friend Pierre “se sentait d’une autre espèce, sans passé, ni maison de famille, ni grenier bourré de lettres et de photos, citoyens théoriques d’une nation imprécise où la neige couvrait les toits alors qu’eux-mêmes grandissaient sous un soleil fixe et sauvage.”⁵¹¹ The use of the word “species” to discuss national identity moves this discussion to the physical, biological world, implicating blood in this question of identity as well as the physical trappings of Frenchness. The lack of a past is shown to be parallel to the lack of anything more than a theoretical attachment to the presumed mother country, which is furthermore once again depicted as being completely foreign to the experiences of these young *pieds-noirs*. As we have already seen, it is repeated in this chapter that being

⁵¹⁰ This relationship is also shown in fairly clear contrast in the matter-of fact statement regarding the Sainte-Victoire church: “Cette petite église occupait l’emplacement d’une ancienne mosquée.” (Le premier homme 199) We note the perhaps unintentional irony of the name of this church and the clear message of domination it conveys.

⁵¹¹ Le premier homme 192.

French “entraînait un certain nombre de devoirs” and that “la France était une absente.”⁵¹² This image of France as a sort of absentee-landlord of the *pieds-noirs*, occasionally making claims upon these overseas, theoretical citizens but generally having no direct impact upon their lives once again affirms the divide between these two universes, earlier attributed to the Mediterranean Sea. Indeed, we even read that “la vie de Jacques se partagea inégalement entre deux vies qu’il ne pouvait relier l’une à l’autre.”⁵¹³ While this specifically refers to the divide within Algeria between the world of education and that of ignorance, it also echoes this unequal duality in the species that Jacques represents in this novel.

The concept and terminology of species again raises its head when Jacques is working during the summer vacation from high school. Frustrated by the pointless repetition of his job, we read that Jacques “s’isolait”⁵¹⁴ in the Turkish toilets that reminded him of his home. Within this recreated island that reminded Jacques of his neighborhood (that “poor island”) we read that “Quelque chose s’agitait en lui d’obscur, d’aveugle, au niveau du sang et de l’espèce.”⁵¹⁵ While the result of this agitation seems to be masturbatory in nature, its source is tied to the obscurity within his identity that comes from his race, his blood. There is another passage relating to Jacques’s summer work that seems to refer to his race, also tied to the young man’s olfactory sense. In the context of a passage that describes Jacques walking all over the port and the boats docked there, we read of the “ponts surchauffés dont le goudron fondait.”⁵¹⁶ Here at the end of

⁵¹² Le premier homme 191.

⁵¹³ Le premier homme 230.

⁵¹⁴ Le premier homme 247.

⁵¹⁵ Le premier homme 247.

⁵¹⁶ Le premier homme 249.

Albert Camus's last novel we find an echo of one of the earliest passages in his first published novel, that melting tar on a surface destined to be walked upon, reminding us of the association between that tar and the people described in all the literary output between these two passages, the *pieds-noirs*. The darkness, or obscurity, inherent in the discussion of Jacques's attachment to Algeria, is referenced very clearly when we read of the "racines obscures et emmêlées qui le rattachaient à cette terre splendide et effrayante."⁵¹⁷ Once again this late novel seems to reach back to Camus's first, with its reference to these twisted roots that we observed in the scene of Meursault's mother's burial. This text, just like those before it, is still struggling to express the relationship between the members of the *pied-noir* race with this problematic shore. Finally, an apparent moment of inattention in this second part of Le premier homme forces the reader to consider this novel as at least largely autobiographical: in the context of an explanation of how Jacques's mother was able to sign for her war-widow's pension checks, we read that a neighbor "lui avait appris à recopier le modèle d'une signature Vve Camus qu'elle réussissait plus ou moins bien mais qui était acceptée."⁵¹⁸ The insurgence of the author's veritable last name in this passage serves to erode the boundary between the fictionalized "Jacques Cormery" and that other personage who shares so many details of his childhood, Albert Camus. In this lapse of the narrator's division between fiction and autobiography, as in the use of "moi" at the end of the first part of Le premier homme, we must see the very fragile nature of the fictional sheen on this clearly autobiographical text, and thus we are justified in making some conclusions regarding the message this text conveys from the autobiographical point of view.

⁵¹⁷ Le premier homme 258.

⁵¹⁸ Le premier homme 189.

5.12. Conclusion

Throughout the novels of Albert Camus we have seen a trajectory of island imagery and the various tropes of the Robinsonnade. In his practice novel, La mort heureuse, Camus's first protagonist, Mersault, lives the life of a Robinson on the Algerian beach in an attempt to come to terms with his impending death from tuberculosis. This book, which Camus chose never to publish, nevertheless indicates that the author had recourse to the robinsonnade genre and its components from the very outset of his literary career. However, we see in his later novels that Albert Camus seems to have seized upon the subtle criticism of the imperial project that can be observed in what we know to be a major robinsonnade that he read, studied, and even taught as a boy: L'île mystérieuse by Jules Verne. Just as Verne's protagonists threw themselves into the colonial project only to ultimately be reminded of its destiny of failure by their island colony's self-destruction, Camus's *pied-noir* protagonists increasingly find themselves torn between the ancestral project of colonizing Algeria and an increasing realization that Algeria will self-destruct rather than allow their colonization process to continue. Furthermore, rather than the friendly beaches of La mort heureuse, starting with Meursault's deadly encounter on the beach in L'étranger we see that the insular Algerian landscape is shown to be confining in that its well-defined boundaries are impossible to traverse, leading to inevitable conflict over the narrow spaces that are occupied by members of different, and naturally antagonistic, Algerian communities.

When plague strikes in La peste the stifling, confining nature of the Algerian landscape is further underscored by the quarantine procedures that are put into place in Oran. While, as O'Brien has successfully argued, the Arab-Algerians are largely absent from this text, the

context of colonialism is not less important in this work. The metaphor of plague itself is shown to refer to the colonial process, as parallels are drawn between the European occupation of the Algerian shore and the microbial infestation of the bodies of the Oranais, and indeed of their very city itself. By insisting on the specificity of the Oranais setting in his careful descriptions of the geography of Oran, Camus obliges his readers to consider this morality play not only as speaking of a struggle against fascism but also as a depiction of the, perhaps related, phenomenon of colonialism. The lingering microbial spores insisted upon at the end of this novel imply strongly that there was no resolution to the underlying problems described in La peste, rendering this novel quite pessimistic regarding the future of Oran and, by extension, Algeria and its *pied-noir* inhabitants.

Even Albert Camus's most unusual novel, La chute, which by its setting in Holland and its eponymous fascination with the decline of the West, shows that the author was drawn to the imagery of the Robinsonnade throughout his fiction. The island Amsterdam described in this novel and its deep connection with much more recognizable colonial islands indicate that this tale, rather than a break in the pattern of preoccupation with the ramifications of and probable outcomes for the colonization of Algeria, represents the confirmation that this pattern is central to Albert Camus's works. The strange anecdote of a Papacy founded on fratricidal murder, and its North African setting and clearly articulated relationship with fascism and colonialism, ensure that this work cannot be considered outside the framework of the Algerian situation as it appears throughout Camus's novels.

In Le premier homme, Camus's last words on the subject are fairly gloomy from the perspective of a *pied-noir*; the only trace his tribe has left on the North African landscape, their tombstones, are doomed to be erased. André Aciman sums up: "Camus, after all, was *pied-noir*."

History, as he foresaw so clearly, would eventually displace his kind and make them *strangers*, this time, however, not strangers in occupied Algeria, but on their own ancestral French soil.”⁵¹⁹ Paul Merlo also finds in Le premier homme “la douloureuse intuition que la France allait se dégager du problème algérien.”⁵²⁰ This realization that the French-Algerian culture was coming to an end, as painful as it must have been for Camus, is clearly evident in Le premier homme and can also be seen in Camus’s earlier works. Far from assuming the French colonial project in Algeria to be immutable, as the late Edward Said suggested in Culture and Imperialism, Camus instead provides in his novels proof that he knew it would soon be changing drastically. In L’île mystérieuse, the reader is invited to admire the settler/castaways even though the trajectory of the novel ultimately points to the failure of their colonial venture. Although Verne pointed out certain excesses on their part, and even an innate violence, the reader continues to feel sympathy for these industrious settlers as they struggle to tame a savage island landscape. From a childhood spent, as Lottman tells us, “dreaming of islands” and reading this very novel by Jules Verne, the centrality of the island motif became even more pronounced after the intervention of Jean Grenier’s Les îles. This book, which according to Camus was what allowed him to see that his own personal robinsonnade on the Algerian coast was fragile and about to self-destruct, never left Camus throughout his many, but still too few, years as a writer. In Le premier homme, the book upon which Camus was working at the time of his tragic death in early 1960, we have the literal last words and testament of this *pied-noir* writer, and they too are preoccupied with the situation of his people in what he was raised to see as his homeland. Camus, far from reifying

⁵¹⁹ Aciman 684.

⁵²⁰ Paul Merlo, “Les Derniers Mots du *Premier Homme* De Camus,” in “Albert Camus 18: la réception de l’oeuvre de Camus en U.R.S.S. et en R.D.A.,” Raymond Gay-Crosier ed., (Paris: La Revue des Lettres Modernes, 1999) 96.

the French colonial project in his novels, was in fact a prophet of its failure. In this final novel, the eponymous person with primacy in the Algerian landscape is never identified with complete certainty, but in fact dissolves into a multiplicity of personas ranging from a Mahonnais poet to a Parisian revolutionary to Cain. The association of these first men with that first murderer seems to be Camus's final acquiescence that the moral foundations of the *pied-noir* culture are less than pure. Nancy Wood states that Camus tries "to come to terms with a legacy he well knows to be implicated in colonial oppression [...] yet one whose meaning he refuses to reduce to that fact alone."⁵²¹ This acknowledgement cannot force him to abandon his love of the Algerian landscape he painted so poetically throughout his literary output or his idealistic hope that somehow, unlike in his novels, violence would not be the ultimate outcome for Algeria. We know, sadly, that Camus's novels have proven to be closer to Algeria's reality than were the non-literary remarks Camus made at various points in his career. Pierre Nora, in his seminal history of Algeria's *pied-noir* community written concurrently with Le premier homme, says of these people: "Au plus profond des sentiments leur aventure est si coupable qu'ils n'osent ni la reconnaître ni l'écrire."⁵²² Nora's recognition that the history of the *pieds-noirs* in Algeria is a sort of adventure tale squares with what we have been arguing throughout this analysis, and his coupling of the adventure tale with a guilt that makes expression of the tale well nigh impossible may go some distance towards explaining why Camus used allegory and the powerful intertext of the robinsonnade to express part of that history from his perspective. With the residual guilt of association with the colonial injustices that Camus himself pointed out in some of his journalistic writings, we see that Camus, the novelist, operated in a mode not dissimilar to that of

⁵²¹ Nancy Wood, "Colonial Nostalgia and *Le Premier Homme*," French Cultural Studies 9 (1998): 179.

⁵²² Pierre Nora, Les Français d'Algérie, (Paris: Julliard, 1961) 189.

the juge-pénitent, Clamence, in La chute in that he is sharing his story for the edification of his interlocutors. The novels of Albert Camus predict that, like the colonial process reflected in the robinsonnade, the danger, confrontation, and exploration of the Algerian space would be followed by a return to the mother country. In the final summation, the Algerian situation probably followed the robinsonnade genre more closely than Albert Camus would have chosen, but that does not mean that he failed to predict this in his novels of the Algerian island.

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