

## ‘La vraie patrie’: Camus and Algeria

J’ai avec l’Algérie une longue liaison qui sans doute n’en finira jamais, et qui m’empêche d’être tout à fait clairvoyant à son égard.

Camus, *Petit guide pour des villes sans passé* (1947).

There can be no question of covering in a single chapter a topic as frequently and as hotly debated as ‘Camus and Algeria’.<sup>1</sup> Even the seemingly more modest target of ‘Camus’s Algeria’, to do it justice, would demand a cast of characters, both private and public; a time-frame, both personal and collective; a tableau of the fears, aspirations and interests opposing some groups, uniting others. It would, moreover, call for a historical overview of a period stretching, for Europeans, from the seemingly impregnable colonialism of the 1920s and 30s to the self-doubt and turmoil of post-World War II decolonisation; for indigenous Algerians, from a demand for French citizenship and equal treatment before and after World War I, to a war of independence launched in 1954; and for Camus himself, from the « Algérie heureuse » of *Noces* (Algiers, 1938) to the « Algérie déchirée » of his *Chroniques* (Paris, 1958). Taken globally, the term ‘Algeria’ itself – more specifically, the representation thereof in his œuvre – runs the risk of encouraging a homogenising overview, hence oversimplification, at variance with both its complex constructed status and the fact that Camus’s texts and characters portray widely divergent situations. These range from the *douceur* of bountiful nature in his lyrical essays, to the harshness of stone and desert; from portraits set in the banality of the urban *quotidien*, to extremes of isolation or conflicted contact. What follows, therefore, seeks only to explore in a selection of texts what underpins Camus’s ties to his birthplace, and some of the presuppositions operative in debates on the French Algerian dilemma, as he confronted it.

1930 : French Algeria’s centenary year. In the midst of the excitement surrounding the celebrations, the left-wing journalist Victor Spielmann published a pamphlet that adopted a viewpoint that would have bemused – or exasperated – most European Algerians: *En*

---

<sup>1</sup> See for instance : Edward Saïd, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) ; Ali Yédes, *Camus l’Algérien* (2003) ; David Carroll, *Albert Camus the Algerian : Colonialism, Terrorism, Justice* (2007) ; Stéphane Babey, *Camus, une passion algérienne* (2013) ; Amina Azza-Bekat, Afifa Bererhi, Christiane Chaulet-Achour, *Quand les Algériens lisent Camus* (2014); Philippe Vanney (ed.), *L’Algérie de Camus* (2014) ; Alice Kaplan, *Looking for « The Stranger »*. *The making of an existential masterpiece* (2016). [Full details in the bibliography].

*Algérie. Le Centenaire au point de vue indigène.*<sup>2</sup> This militant journalism – like Camus’s ‘Misère de la Kabylie’ a few years later – sought to deflate the rhetoric and complacency of an occupation which, since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, had monopolised the high moral ground. The flood of pronouncements around 1930 is aptly illustrated by these few bombastic lines from the Chair of the Centenary Committee:

Association des intérêts, effort commun des Français et des indigènes se conjuguant et s’harmonisant pour le plus grand bien du pays, conquête des âmes par le sentiment de bonté et de justice [...] tels sont les principes [...] que l’Administration française [...] a respectés constamment.<sup>3</sup>

Practice often clashed with principle, of course, and only one year earlier, in 1929, a Circular of the Algiers’ Governor-General had issued a formal ban on the use of the *cravache* (riding crop or walking stick) on indigenous Algerians by members of the Administration. It was also in 1929, recalls Spielmann, that lawyers of the Algiers Bar Association, faced with « repeated and disgraceful » miscarriages of justice, petitioned for the abolition of Special Tribunals [*Tribunaux d’exception*] and the abuses they encouraged (expropriation, ‘native taxes’, artificially low land leases, imprisonment without trial etc.).<sup>4</sup> Systemic injustice and mistreatment against which the major francophone newspapers in the colony - *L’Islam*, *Le Rachidi*, *L’Ikdam*, *Le Cri de l’Algérie* – had long campaigned.<sup>5</sup>

Imposing modernity on the region after the invasion of El Djezaïr in 1830, all agreed, had been a long, arduous (but worthwhile) task. Yet, while following annexation in 1848, the territory (renamed *Algeria* in 1838) evolved from military control into three French *départements* and a *Gouvernement-Général*, experientially it remained a disputed zone, and relations between European and autochthonous populations reflected the shifting ground of the internal frontiers erected and protected by French law. Resistance by the indigenous population, and constant redefinition by the coloniser of *indigène*, *sujet*, *Musulman*, *Néo-Français*, *citoyen*... marked, and thwarted, French efforts at differentiation and homogenisation - the former to establish a North African French identity, the latter to ensure its dominance.<sup>6</sup> Between the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries French nationality laws, legal and administrative procedures etc. sought to fix key notions like nationality and citizenship.

---

<sup>2</sup> Algiers : Editions du Trait-d’Union (1930).

<sup>3</sup> Conseil Municipal de Paris, Supplément au Bulletin Municipal Officiel, 13 Aug. 1930.

<sup>4</sup> On the profession, see : Christian Phéline, ‘Les Avocats “indigènes” dans l’Alger colonial’, *Textures du Temps* (17 sept. 2016).

<sup>5</sup> See my *Writing French Algeria* (Oxford : Clarendon, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> See Fernand Braudel, *L’identité de la France* (Paris: Arthaud, 1986); Gérard Noiriel, *Le Creuset français, Histoire de l’immigration, XIXe-XXe siècles* (Paris : Seuil, 1988) ; Daniel J. Sherman, *The Construction of Memory in Interwar France* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1999).

Summarily, two debates can be said to have dominated the period: the first, politico-legal, the shifting implementation of established European concepts of integration and belonging (*jus solis / jus sanguinis*); the second, ideological, especially as implemented in the cultural arena, in the notion of belonging popularised by Maurice Barrès (1862-1923), who gave it both a geographical and historical scope in an emotive temporality grounded in la « terre et les morts ». Regionalism – and resistance to Republican centralism – often served as a vehicle for this, an embodiment of the integral nationalism developed by the French reactionary Right. It constituted an exclusionary force which demonised both the (non-French) migrant and many of the counter-currents that developed between the turn-of-the-century Dreyfus affair and the 1940s: cosmopolitanism, humanitarian liberalism, individualism, bohemianism, the Gidian *bâtard* or the Existentialist *étranger*. In Algeria, the vast enterprise of administrative surveying and sub-dividing (especially during the late 19th century), like the subsequent gallicisation of tribal patronymics and place-names imposed by the Authorities, were thus measures designed to appropriate and reshape what had first been rendered legally null and void. This supposedly blank slate repressed the evidence of both the methods used and the alterity on which it was actually grounded, projecting instead a phantasmatic and comfortable Republican homogeneity in the colourful, dynamic and productive North African replica of metropolitan France that the Centenary was meant to showcase.<sup>7</sup>

This official discourse was challenged by many in the colony, obviously, for in wresting the occupied territory into something new the settlers were also reshaping themselves into something other. In appropriating the newly-coined term *Algerian* they signalled and defended that difference, vis-à-vis both Metropole and indigenous population. Relations were always ambiguous, indeed since the early days of tension between the army and civilian immigrants, leading the *colons* to overcompensate for what the Paris Authorities deemed the unsavoury character of many of those shipped to the colony – vagrant, impoverished, immoral or, after the upheavals of 1848 and the Commune of 1871, rebellious and oppositional. While the territory's detractors focused equally on the backwardness of the indigenous population and the uncouthness (and unreliability) of the medley of European immigrants, it also had its supporters and a very effective lobby group, who talked up the potential for national development, productivity etc. The settlers of Algeria, while they could not escape a feeling of cultural inferiority vis-à-vis bourgeois France (which had only disdain

---

<sup>7</sup> The 1931 *Exposition coloniale* in Paris also mixed celebration and display of French supremacy. Cf. Centre des Monuments nationaux, Catalogue for *Paris et ses expositions universelles. Architectures, 1855-1937* (Paris: Editions du Patrimoine, 2008).

for all *néo-Français*), reacted by projecting a self-image of virility and strength, in tune with conditions, demands, and solutions responsive to the reality on the ground. They claimed, indeed, that only the colony had the energy needed to re-dynamise a feeble, over-intellectual Metropole; projecting a self-image in keeping with Fanon's description in *Les Damnés de la terre* - and incorporated into *Le Premier homme* in the shape of a « vieux colon. A l'antique. Ceux qu'on insulte à Paris » (OC IV 850) :

Le colon fait l'histoire. Sa vie est une épopée, une odyssée. Il est le commencement absolu : « Cette terre, c'est nous qui l'avons faite ». Il est la cause continue : « Si nous partons, tout est perdu, cette terre retournera au Moyen Age ». En face de lui, des êtres engourdis, travaillés de l'intérieur par les fièvres et les 'coutumes ancestrales', constituent un cadre quasi-minéral au dynamisme novateur du mercantilisme colonial.<sup>8</sup>

Such (self-) perceptions and positioning did not evolve in distinct spheres within the colonial contact zone, of course, and the impact they had – *pace* the colonial vision of the day - was never unidirectional. The Muslim population was too proximate to be seen as exotic, the Metropole too dominant to be ignored, and the colony too productive to be marginalised. Hence, any homogenising vision that was projected developed more in response to inherent tensions and perceived threats than to sociocultural or political progress – a vision grounded primarily in race for the late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century generation of Louis Bertrand, in geography in the case of the Algerianists and later writers like Camus, Gabriel Audisio or Emmanuel Roblès.

The imported – and unevenly implemented – education system in which Camus was such a singular success aimed to instil, in the *indigène*, notions of hygiene and European family values; in the immigrant working-class, bourgeois notions of domesticity and (supposedly as a consequence) morality. As neither population was deemed as yet fit for French (middle-class) status, accession to the *polis* was to be permanently postponed. And while this practice was challenged by the educated Muslim *évolués* emerging from the colonial education system, this group too could be held at bay as mere mimics (especially by a *colon* class not known for investing in culture itself...). Throughout that period, anti-German feeling on the one hand (after 1870 and 1914), British imperial rivalry and the drive to expand a French Empire on the other, gave rise to an exacerbated « sense of the enemy » among right-wing intellectuals and in the media, theorised by Maurice Barrès in the founding

---

<sup>8</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre* (Paris : Maspero 1974), 17-18.

distinction 'Moi - anti-Moi', and heavily promoted by Louis Bertrand.<sup>9</sup> By the 1920s, essentialising the 'Muslim' of colonial Algeria (like the revanchist German after 1918 and the Treaty of Versailles) reinforced the dominant structures of exclusion, but simultaneously failed to hide their ambiguities. On the one hand, Algeria exemplified France's geo-political dynamism and flexibility during a period of intense nation-building, together with the claim to embody universal values, as manifest in its declared policy of assimilation. On the other hand, it exemplified the accompanying instability inherent in defending national borders against outsiders while inventing and imposing internal socio-economic, legal and cultural barriers to integration by (potential) insiders.

In practice all this concerned only the elite, the working-class colonial habitus (as we shall see in *Le Premier homme*) actually having very little contact with either the metropolitan residents or the indigenous population, while sharing many of the prejudices of the day regarding native living-conditions, mores, morality etc. Replicating, in short, precisely the prejudices that bourgeois Europe had harboured vis-à-vis the working-class (and especially the unemployed and vagrants) since the industrial revolution. Locally influential writers like Bertrand, a virulent critic of the 'lower orders' (and organised labour) in the towns of metropolitan France, was prepared to incorporate them in the colony in the period before World War I because *Latins*, while striving to racialize the notion of respectable mores, arguing that improvement was beyond the capacities of 'races' benighted by Islam. Such 'enemies within' facilitated the colonial intellectuals' disregard for the fact that the tropes and motifs of their Latin cultural tradition were not self-generated or natural, but the product of largely unacknowledged traffic between European and non-European. To give but one example: explorers and settlers frequently equated the harsh (*hostile*) land into which they ventured with the native inhabitants, a convenient and fruitful slippage once settler self-definition came to equate 'taming' the land with dominating its inhabitants. In Bertrand's fictional portrayal of these populations, when seeking to evoke the threats facing the internal (racial) boundaries that structured his vision of the colony, he systematically lauded the figures of the fisherman, docker and construction-worker, heroic agents of capitalist colonial productivity. And, when evoking the interior (the *bled*), he considered the long-distance wagon-driver and the farmer-settler as paragons of colonial adventure and endeavour. Such self-congratulatory icons, and the colonialist world view they embodied, were

---

<sup>9</sup> See for instance, *Le Sens de l'ennemi* (Paris : Fayard, 1917), and *Les Pays méditerranéens et la guerre* (Paris : La Renaissance du Livre, 1918).

enthusiastically promoted by the novelists of the Algerianist movement which took shape in the early 1920s and dominated the colony's cultural scene by the early 30s when Camus began his career.

\*

From the *vaste pays* of 'L'Hôte' to the *île immense* of *Le Premier homme*, via Tipasa where « le monde recommençait tous les jours dans une lumière toujours neuve » (OC III 613), Algeria in Camus's œuvre is perceived first and foremost as a limitless territory. And yet, paradoxically, very few of his characters ever experience it; most, on the contrary, being either withdrawn, hemmed in or imprisoned. And when they travel – to an old people's home outside Algiers (*L'Etranger*), to a (realistic) village in the southern high plateaux ('La Femme adultère'), to the desert and a (phantasmatic) Taghâsa ('Le Renégat'), for instance – the outcome is unwilled, unexpected or unwelcome; and solitude engulfs them because of the judgement, indifference or violence of their environs. The imaginary geography that feeds Camus's Algeria and is so admired by readers, in short, stems less from the bulk of his published fiction than from his discursive texts – *Noces* (1939) and *L'Été* (1954) in particular. Critical reception thereof – and of the ontology developed from it – can be summarised in the words of the introduction to the Gallimard Pléiade reedition of 2006:

C'est une expérience authentique qui est à l'origine de l'analyse et du chant lyrique [...]. Camus concilie, dans un langage sensuel et précis, la réalité charnelle et l'exaltation [...]. A la fois par ce qu'il vit ou a vécu, et par le récit inspiré qu'il en fait, il est partie prenante de la vision mythique qu'il propose (OC I xxvi).

The validity of both the analysis and the ethics, in short, is grounded in the 'authenticity' of the personal and experiential. This is a process called into play most openly in *L'Envers et l'endroit* and *Noces*, but it clearly applies throughout. The key topoi of beach, sea and light feed a recurrent and enthusiastic evocation of the privileged arena for both « la joie des sens » (OC I 122) – conveyed by terms such as *noces*, *libertinage*, *baiser*, *entente amoureuse*... – and the heightened intellectual awareness of « l'unité [qui] s'exprime en termes de soleil et de mer » (OC I 124). The focus in such places is explicitly the present, lived variously as threshold, fleeting fusion, or stasis. And as a result, Camus's essays could be described in terms of Doreen Massey's contention that « the most common formulations of the concept of geographical space in current debate associate it with stasis and nostalgia, and with an enclosed security ».<sup>10</sup> As the beach scene in *L'Etranger* reveals, however, the latter was an

---

<sup>10</sup> Doreen Massey, *Space Place & Gender* (London: Polity Press, 1994), 167.

illusion in a colonial territory. No place was secure, even in a case like ‘L’Hôte’: once rejected by the local population, the protagonist is forced into internal exile in a place chosen – privileging geography - precisely for its protective isolation. Place in Camus’s Algeria, in short, even when seemingly uninhabited, is always already appropriated, whether by the settlers’ instrumental approach to nature as resource, or through the resilience of indigenous nomadic and tribal rights and practices that the *colons* had hastened to dismantle (re-imagining Algeria as *terra nullius*).

Such instability stems largely from the fact that place, like space and time, is a social construct. It is a location singled out by individuals or groups and endowed by them with exceptional properties, its permanence guaranteed (and protected) by real or imagined boundaries. Identified and endowed with symbolic meaning in this way, it stands against what is outside/elsewhere. Hence, rather than being merely (or primarily) a geographical location, it is the result of a cultural process, the creation of a web of sociocultural relations in a given space, identified as homogenous, coherent and fixed. The first major drive to map the colonised territory had been undertaken by the French occupation army, of course. And as the coastal economy developed and port cities like Algiers or Oran expanded to meet demand, they were increasingly contrasted with the isolated and tough conditions associated with life in the interior. Remapping by surveyors, engineers, lawyers and administrators, like the settler land-grab, sought to lock down the unease and mobility that occupation had provoked in the former Ottoman regency. Further reinforced by historians of the local Ecole d’Alger like Stéphane Gsell,<sup>11</sup> it was incorporated into the ideology of conquest by the colony’s European novelists. Together they worked to retain sole access to authoritative discourse, to resist the dialogue inherent in transculturation, to erect and protect solid cultural and ethnic boundaries within the contact zone that Algeria (like any colony) could not avoid becoming. Bertrand’s *Le Sang des races* (1899) or Robert Randau’s *Les Colons* (1907), like Camus’s *Etranger*, ‘La Femme adultère’, ‘L’Hôte’ and ‘Le Renégat’ (*L’Exil et le royaume*), or Roblès’ *Les Hauteurs de la ville* (1948), figure among the major French Algerian texts that evoke the ambiguities at work therein and the multiple responses generated.<sup>12</sup>

Since group identity coalesces around specific places, becoming sites of collective memory, such places can be called upon to mobilize identity into configurations of solidarity whenever a perceived threat emerges (in the shape of a counter-narrative, for instance). In the

---

<sup>11</sup> Appointed to a Chair in North African History at the prestigious Collège de France in 1912.

<sup>12</sup> On the importance of the Roblès novel, see Driss Chraïbi, ‘Emmanuel Ben Roblès’, *Revue Celfan* (1982).

case of Algeria, this was done primarily around ruins, the remnants of Roman occupation.<sup>13</sup> Sites such as Tipasa, Timgad, Cherchell or Djemila, initially the focus of conventional archaeological study, were transformed by writers like Bertrand (and, to a lesser extent, Randau and the Algerianists) into ideologically charged places of Latin exceptionalism whose symbolic meanings become enmeshed in the psycho-geography (re)shaping Algeria before and after World War 1.<sup>14</sup> While topographically anchored, such ruins are primarily places infiltrated by the operations of desire and imagination, places valorised specifically because uninhabited, hence (supposedly) not challenged by the Other. Consequently, in claiming such places as a strictly European inheritance and investing them with a temporality that reconnected Roman past and French present, Bertrand and those who shared his vision of North Africa rendered the ‘Arab’ irrelevant, merely a recent interloper, a nomadic presence that left no trace.

But place, and the meaning thereof, are in reality never single, never static, and their boundaries are irremediably porous. Since place is always an intersection and a process, it changes over time, not least because of interaction – however unwilling – with the outside (in the case of Algeria, with both France and other Mediterranean locations). Place, in short, as numerous proponents of deep ecology argue, is like the human beings that construct it, « not a thing in an environment, but a juncture in a relational system without determined boundaries in time and space ».<sup>15</sup> For some writers fixity may be invoked as an ideal, whether as stable collective reference points in Bertrand’s grand ‘Latin’ narrative or, on the contrary, as intensely individualistic moments in Camus’s immersion in ‘presentness’. But it is a characteristic inherent in neither subject nor habitat. While some of Camus’s early essays might suggest that places like Tipasa exist in a permanent present and offer (a glimpse of) stasis, their historical dimension and political import irrelevant, they recur in his *œuvre* precisely because they had already been integrated into the colonial elite’s grand narrative. Far from being simply the expression of an existential – and sensual - immersion in the *hic et nunc*, such places are key elements in Camus’s counter-discourse. Dominated by history in Bertrand’s racialised version, they are declared devoid of (or immune to) history by Camus. Consequently, his dismissal of history among the ruins elides the fact that it is precisely time (memory) that has actually created the construct, not as a mere adjunct of place, easily

---

<sup>13</sup> A ‘Service des Monuments Historiques de l’Algérie’ was founded in 1880.

<sup>14</sup> See *Writing French Algeria* chap. 3; and the detailed analysis of Patricia Lorcin, *French Historical Studies* (XXV ii, Jan. 2002).

<sup>15</sup> Arne Naess, *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle. Outline of an Ecosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 79.



dismissed, but as a founding part of its being-in-the-world. Despite the immediacy that Camus gives to pieces like ‘Noces à Tipasa’ through specific spatial, temporal and sensual detail, they are not simply the spontaneous recording of a personal, lived experience, not merely a décor or precondition for a quasi-mystical human experience, their beauty inherent, self-sufficient. The fact that they are openly presented within a divergent vision – « bien pauvres sont ceux qui ont besoin de mythes » (OC I 107) - is proof that they are enmeshed in the intertextual discursive network shaping Algeria. At the centre of this network, the monologic and self-congratulatory rhetoric exemplified by the Centenary, a rhetoric that instrumentalises History in order to justify European precedence and provide the *lettres de noblesse* needed to dignify an occupation characterised primarily by labour, movement and the displacement resulting from appropriative, profit-driven commercialism.

The Nature-grounded ethics promoted by Camus as a radical alternative relied also on less high-profile places and depended on the ability to invest them with sufficient singularity and permanence to contribute to that world view. Experience being primarily place-based – local, immediate, organic – identity develops in large part as identification with place, and ‘La Maison mauresque’, a text of Camus’s student days, is an early example of his desire to ground the alternative in a specifically Algerian vernacular. It is to architecture that he returns in 1954 with ‘La Maison du colon’ (‘Le Minotaure ou la halte d’Oran’) when ridiculing a settler mentality defined as « la hardiesse du goût, l’amour de la violence, et le sens des synthèses historiques » (OC III 578).<sup>16</sup>

The Weltanschauung driving Camus’s texts was widely appreciated by a critical discourse which, in the post-war wave of individual liberation, paid scant attention to the colonial intertextual dialogue at work in an œuvre purportedly born of lived experience. Camus’s claim that he owed everything to Algeria was taken to mean the profusion (and harshness) of the natural world, the energy, dignity and ‘virile’ mores of its working-class and indigenous populations. Yet it is arguable that it is in less well-known brief episodes and cruder figures, closer to the (Algerian) *barbares* frequently extolled in his œuvre, that we actually engage with the spaces and experiences most in keeping with what is said to be Camus’s ‘visceral’ attachment to Algeria, Nature, the Mediterranean. These figures display a raw, physical existence and the drive to satisfy basic appetites; and in so doing they recall the concrete world of the Algerianist colonial novel. The libertinage and nudity extolled in

---

<sup>16</sup> The other well-known cases being the Oran of *La Peste* and the Taghâsa of ‘Le Renégat’ (and, beyond Algeria, the Amsterdam of *La Chute*).

‘Noces à Tipasa’ (OC I 196-7), the « femme gluante de sueur » in a Palma bar in ‘Amour de vivre’ (OC I 65), the « bagarre de Coco » that concludes (in the local dialect) ‘L’Été à Alger’ (OC I 126-7), the young people in the cinemas and on the beaches, are concrete cases of a life « près des corps et par le corps » (OC I 119). It is in the simplicity, honesty and stubbornness of such lives, in their « précipitation à vivre qui touche au gaspillage » (OC I 121) that Camus locates the *innocence* that he repeatedly extols as the essential quality of Algeria’s working-class population (hence of the *héros païen* of *L’Étranger*).<sup>17</sup>

Camus’s evocation of natural spaces giving access to key values frequently called upon a deeply personal immersion in the scopic, olfactive and tactile.<sup>18</sup> Hence such an experience might seem hard to replicate in an urban environment where movement dominates, and where individual experience is primarily (inter)action. « Nous vivons le temps des grandes villes », Camus declared in ‘L’Exil d’Hélène’ (OC III 599), deploring a modernity dominated by History. Yet in his texts, the disengagement of a Meursault or the withdrawal into the *bled* of the protagonist of ‘L’Hôte’ provide less concrete evocations of collective involvement than Bertrand’s immigrant workforce and the Algerianists’ settlers, their “presence” grounded in physical and mental effort, labour and sweat, crude conviviality and neighbourly familiarity.<sup>19</sup> In the colonial novel, clothing, food, dialects, sexuality and local mores form a realistic patchwork consciously designed to educate a metropolitan readership. Dismissing such conventional realism and favouring, on the contrary, « des mythes organisés » (OC IV 1345), Camus resorts only to minor, urban figures - the coopers of ‘Les Muets’ or the locals of Algiers, for instance – to evoke the place-bound relationships that ground a character’s identity and, indeed, their story. Yet in singling out a locality within an urban environment – Belcourt, Bab-el-Oued, Hydra, the Casbah - giving it a reputation (as beautiful, deprived, bourgeois, *indigène*...), his texts rework established topoi of occupancy/activity, both private and public. The process is neatly summarised in ‘Petit guide pour des villes sans passé’, an openly tongue-in-cheek concentrate of the finest and most picturesque qualities of places, hence a guide for the (supposedly) discerning outsider (OC III 595): a café on Algiers’ rue Michelet; a bar on Oran’s Boulevard Gallieni; Algiers’ *ville arabe*, Oran’s *village nègre*, Constantine’s *quartier juif*... This banter at the expense of the much-maligned visitor to Algeria opens onto what Camus deems essential in his own relationship:

En ce qui concerne l’Algérie [...] je puis bien dire au moins qu’elle est ma

<sup>17</sup> Robert Champigny, *Sur un héros païen* (Paris : Gallimard, 1960).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Michèle Monte, ‘Sobriété et profusion : une rhétorique du paysage dans *Noces* et *L’été* d’Albert Camus’, *Babel. Littératures plurielles*, vii (2003).

<sup>19</sup> “Presence” refers throughout to the euphemism used in colonial discourse to mask occupation.

vraie patrie et qu'en n'importe quel lieu du monde, je reconnais ses fils et mes frères [...]. Oui, ce que j'aime dans les villes algériennes ne se sépare pas des hommes qui les peuplent (OC III 596).

With that sense of solidarity, of a *hic et nunc* grounded in concrete community, contact and emotional ties, we are at the heart of Camus's ethics and politics. His 'Algeria' is less a place than a population, and the eventual loss thereof, consequently, would involve not merely territory but fraternity.<sup>20</sup> In cases like *L'Étranger* and *La Peste*, although characters rarely venture beyond familiar environs, or inhabitants are enclosed « like rats », they are local communities situated within dynamic colonial towns, arenas for action (rather than the palimpsests or histories of European cities). Oran, in particular, is seen as a place of excess, the rendezvous of all the bad taste of Europe and the Orient (OC III 569), parody of the East/West *bassin/confluent* topos at the centre of Camus's claims regarding a new Mediterranean culture (in his speech at the opening of the Maison de la Culture in 1937). It is, however, a suitable arena for « la sympathique naïveté d'[un] peuple marchand » (OC III 570); hence a reminder once again that the mercantile world view derided elsewhere - and used throughout Camus's oeuvre as foil to the *dénuement* and disengagement of his own characters - is not irremediably negative.

Given that Algiers – *pace* the spokesmen for the colonial lobby - already had urban organisation prior to the arrival of the French in 1830, they were obliged to accommodate this. And while the three major axes of the town - Bab-el-Oued, Bab Azoum and Bab-al-Gazira - continued to structure movement, this was overlaid by a bipartite city structure that satisfied a dual French need: room for expansion, commerce and freedom of movement for the European settlers; containment and invisibility of the indigenous population, widely identified with the diseases that haunted the European population.<sup>21</sup> Containment was achieved primarily by concentrating the indigenous inhabitants largely within the area of the Casbah. This planning policy may have enhanced control and given the impression of an effective *cordon sanitaire*, but it also led to a psychological tension recurrent in settler colonies, as the protagonist acknowledges in the closing section of *Le Premier homme*, 'Obscur à soi-même':

Ils étaient si nombreux dans les quartiers où ils étaient concentrés, si nombreux que par leur seul nombre, bien que résignés et fatigués, ils faisaient

---

<sup>20</sup> Hence his impatience, in several polemics, with opponents who decide, decree, pontificate in the abstract, as *outsiders* – a position shared with Bertrand and the Algerianists, fierce critics of both “amazed traveller” and naïve Paris politician.

<sup>21</sup> Population density helps explain the *aisance* of some, the *grouillement* associated with others : 2-2,500 (per hectare) in the Casbah, contrasted with the 380 *petit-blancs* of Bab-el-Oued, or the 200 of Belcourt. See Volker Barth, *Paris et ses expositions universelles. Architectures 1855-1937* (Paris : Edit. du Patrimoine, 2008).

planer une menace invisible qu'on reniflait dans l'air des rues certains soirs...  
(OC IV 912).

Under the pressure of new arrivals - primarily from the Mediterranean and the Algerian hinterland – demographics meant that new districts (Belcourt, Mustapha ...) developed rapidly in the 1870s, part of the rapid westernisation of the city which, from around 1900, reinforced the structured inequality that was, everywhere, the colonial city.<sup>22</sup> Camus's evocations of Algiers and Oran merge the personal and the fictional in these environments, and factors such as the invisibility of the 'Arab' population in *La Peste*, the anonymity of *la Mauresque* and the group loitering in Meursault's *quartier* in *L'Etranger* - leitmotifs of every reading of his novels – concretise the boundaries established by a European settler population content to portray the indigenous as marginalised, vagrant or subservient workforce. This absence/anonymity is, for numerous critics, the hallmark of a colonialist discourse/attitude. It is arguable, on the contrary, that the real threat for the European population was in fact the 'Arab' presence, especially when concretised by crossing the invisible line that defined their respective spaces.<sup>23</sup> To be 'in the wrong place', intentionally or otherwise, was throughout the colonial period, a high-risk position.<sup>24</sup> And, beyond the much-discussed anonymity/invisibility topoi, it is perhaps an indication of how effectively Camus's fictional texts portray a eurocentric vision of Algeria that when containment becomes an explicit (indeed, a moral) issue, when freedom of movement is curtailed by the Authorities and places declared out of bounds, when proximity is openly linked to contagion, and resistance is then presented as natural, as developed in *La Peste*, it is when (because) they affect the Europeans.

\*

If we turn now to *Le Premier homme* to query Camus's last treatment of belonging as the site of the everyday, it is clear that the material has undergone the least transposition, thanks to its autofictional format and, especially, to its unfinished status. As a result, we perceive more clearly how the fictional Subject evolves in strictly localised contexts, far removed from the global, overarching vision that is normally evoked when discussing Camus and Algeria. Although set in Algiers, the world of the hero-as-child, Jacques Cormery, is not the town of Algiers; it is a European working-class *quartier* within that ensemble, whose primary function in the opening chapters is to fuse community and place. The streets,

---

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Jean-Louis Miège, 'Algiers, colonial metropolis', in *Expansion européenne et décolonisation : de 1870 à nos jours* (Paris : PUF, 1993).

<sup>23</sup> See Christiane Chaulet-Achour, *Albert Camus, Alger : "L'Etranger" et autres récits* (Paris : Séguier, 1999).

<sup>24</sup> See in particular the transgressive figure of Smaïl in Roblès' *Les Hauteurs de la ville* (1948).

squares, open spaces and beach that constitute the protagonist's world, the sum of personal trajectories that make up his *quartier*, seem uncompromisingly depreciative: *rues sèches et poussiéreuses; grilles rouillées; eau croupissante; pourrissant; maisons misérables; cages délabrées; terreau verdi; cuvettes rouillées et trouées; cave puante et mouillée; maçonnerie à demi détruite; escalier obscur et puant....* Whereas Louis Bertrand and the Algerianists would have reserved such descriptions for 'Arab' *quartiers*, here there is neither narrative distance nor judgement, and it becomes clear that, as Michel de Certeau argues, « le quartier s'inscrit dans l'histoire du sujet comme la marque d'une appartenance indélébile dans la mesure où il est la configuration première, l'archétype de tout processus d'appropriation de l'espace comme lieu de la vie quotidienne publique ».<sup>25</sup> Via the immersion that marks *Le Premier homme*, in short, Camus is actively constructing allegiance to a local working-class Algerian identity, forged in response to this poverty and bleakness.

And yet, at the centre of this psycho-geography, grounded in the decidedly local and personal elements described, and reinforced in the novel through the local names given to specific places – *le Champ vert*, *le jet d'eau* (OC IV 765) or *la rue moutonnaire* (OC IV 769) – the neighbourhood is revealed as a secure personal microcosm yet home to the disquieting dualism that haunts life in the colony. Violence thus stalks the text: past violence in the hinterland via the reference to razzias and mutilations, shutters and locks; present violence in Algiers via the bombs of urban *bandits*; violence lodged in the narrator's psyche, since if the town was a vast playing-field for (boyish) energy by day, it was a « mystérieux et inquiétant » space at night, traversed by anonymous shadows « inondée(s) de gloire sanglante” - not (yet) blood, but the red light of a local drugstore.

Since appropriation by outsiders (in Algeria's case via *peuplement*) is at the heart of all colonialism, and *Le Premier homme* Camus's attempt to bypass the overtly political and give the French presence not just a moral but an ethological grounding instead, these opening chapters seek to establish the *making of* an « Algerian ». Far from being a simple décor, in short, the *quartier*, which brings private and public spaces together, is a constituent element of the child's identity no less important than the family's Menorca/Alsace origins or *petit-blanc* status, the position of (illiterate) war widow or (outstanding) scholarship boy. Prior to *Le Premier homme*, streets in Camus's oeuvre are not interesting in themselves; he rarely evokes concrete surroundings for instance, unlike earlier writers like Loti or Bertrand. The

---

<sup>25</sup> Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard, Pierre Mayol (eds.), *L'Invention du quotidien* t.2 (Paris : Gallimard, 1994), 23.

street, for Camus, was of interest only when it became an arena or theatre, and the narration is normally from the point of view of an onlooker, not a participant: Meursault and the cinema crowd; an old neighbour and his dog; Tarrou watching an old man spitting on cats... Even the Casbah, zone of fantasy, fascination and disquiet for a multitude of writers and painters after 1830, remains little more than an evocative name, the narrator providing merely a glimpse of the lurid interior of a « café maure, tout au bout de la ville arabe » (OC I 48). In *Le Premier homme*, in contrast, even when the pages on the protagonist's return as an adult expand 'Algeria' into a mix of immensity, hostility and forgetting, « la patrie définitive des hommes de sa race » (OC IV 172, 179), the chapters on the circumscribed spaces of the neighbourhood resist that erasure and function, on the contrary, as the guarantors (« la mémoire exacte ») of place-bound identity (OC IV 57). As Michel de Certeau and Luce Giard write in 'Entre-deux' :

Nos habitats successifs ne disparaissent jamais totalement, nous les quittons sans les quitter, car ils habitent à leur tour, invisibles et présents, dans nos mémoires et dans nos rêves. Ils voyagent avec nous.<sup>26</sup>

In Camus's case, movement seems to dominate that childhood habitus but, less obviously and more lastingly, memory of place is primarily embodied in smells : *école, écuries, lessive, cabinets, salles de classe, laine chaude, poils de chien...* Decidedly everyday, but valorised as concentrates of « la chaleur terrible de la vie », they can occasionally open the imagination to glimpses of other, more refined spaces: *rouge à lèvres, parfum de bergamote ; jasmin et chèvrefeuilles sur les hauts quartiers* (OC IV 913).<sup>27</sup> What is in evidence in the opening stages of the novel (despite these triggers to re-emergent memories), as Camus switches between chapters concretely evoking the past and chapters covering his (re)turn to unfinished and increasingly conflicted business in the present, is the tension generated by the growing awareness that this past, however exemplary, is not an adequate ground on which to base the future, whether personal or collective. Tension, consequently, between what Heidegger called in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1971) *dwelling* (namely the rootedness or spiritual unity that can develop between humans, things and their environs) and the unpalatable awareness that *les camarades, le coiffeur espagnol, le marchand de poisson [Malgais] du marché, le ménage arabe, or les épiciers [Mzabites] du quartier*, are, whatever his plea for fraternal coexistence, no longer « neighbours ».

---

<sup>26</sup> De Certeau and Giard, *L'Invention du quotidien*, 210.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Peter Dunwoodie, 'Negotiation or confrontation? Camus, memory and the colonial chronotope', in Christine Margerrison, Mark Orme, Lisa Lincoln (eds.), *Albert Camus in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Amsterdam : Rodopi, 2008).

\*

Faced with a late 1950s horizon where the country was riven by increased violence, the possibility of continued cohabitation was becoming increasingly unlikely. While Camus called for dialogue, justice and equality, he remained adamantly opposed to all talk of independence, rejected as both « une formule purement passionnelle » and the product of (Nasser-driven) Arab imperialism.<sup>28</sup> Given that he felt obliged to give up his contribution to *L'Express* in 1956, *Le Premier homme*, at that point, was clearly a platform allowing him to explore multiple aspects of the – longstanding and now acute – « Algerian question », even if his text is itself also essentially *passionnel* (birthright, the labour of ancestors, poverty etc.). If French-Algerians were to be considered *indigènes* (OC IV 389), *autochtones* (OC IV 390), as Camus insisted, then the local rootedness discussed above was to be evidence of the validity of the claim. On the other hand, positioning the material of Part I within the global category of 'Recherche du père', and reaching the conclusion that he had always in fact been « seul, sans père [...] comme tous les hommes nés dans ce pays » (OC IV 860, 861), entails relinquishing the claim that (family, tribal) roots suffice. It acknowledges that while the past is a founding part of present identity, it is an inadequate base for projecting a (shared) future. And it recognizes, finally, that the challenge ahead is to « aborder ensuite, seul, sans mémoire et sans foi, le monde des hommes, son temps, et son affreuse et exaltante histoire » (OC IV 861). The intent can thus be seen as overtly political, seeking to ground and promote non-confrontational belonging in the face of a legacy of conflict and the current violent rejection of continued coexistence. And it is, precisely, the reduced scope of a *petit-blanc* existence that facilitates this move, since

[l]a mémoire des pauvres est moins nourrie que celle des riches, elle a moins de repères dans l'espace puisqu'ils quittent rarement le lieu où ils vivent, moins de repères aussi dans le temps d'une vie uniforme et grise (OC IV 788).

There is, at this point, an alternative to the *espace-temps* of the Father, symbol of loss and absence, of the Law and Authority: « Maman. Ce qui dure dans l'histoire des hommes » (OC IV 957). The protagonist's mother, in the concrete environs of their Algiers home, and the Mother figure at the symbolic level to which the narrator resorts repeatedly, is a figure vested with the full psychological and emotional weight of belonging. She is the personification and emotional centre of a place that, in its singularity, intensity and 'presentness', does not change. Hence, the source to which the narrator can always return (OC IV 761, 773, 853). Even a terrorist bomb on the Sunday morning of the son's visit changes

---

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Actuelles III, Chroniques algériennes*, 'Algérie 1958', 385-394.

nothing:

« Viens avec moi en France », lui dit-il, mais elle secouait la tête avec une tristesse résolue : « Oh! Non, il fait froid là-bas. Maintenant je suis trop vieille. Je veux rester chez nous ».

*Là-bas* <> *chez nous*: there is no doubt about the position from which the Mother speaks.

France is an imagined space, an indistinct elsewhere, « un lieu obscur [...] une nuit indéfinie [...] une région mystérieuse dont on parlait » (OC IV 782). All critics agree that the mother figure is to be interpreted as the moral and emotional centre of the novel, hence the epitome of a *petit-blanc* class. For Camus, a population defined by absence of agency: forced to migrate to Algeria « parce qu'ils crevaient de faim » (OC IV 781); neither possessing nor even seeking to possess, because daily life is just a matter of survival and 'France' is a tenuous notion, at best. And the citizenship that so many Algerian *assimilés* and immigrant *néo-Français* had fought to obtain was merely

une notion de patrie [qui] était vide de sens pour Jacques, qui savait qu'il était Français, que cela entraînait un certain nombre de devoirs, mais pour qui la France était une absente (OC IV 866).

Here again, it is proximity that defines identity, and there is little consciousness of a wider imagined community, as the closing pages of the last chapter ('Lycée') make clear : « [leur] vie avait été ainsi, dans l'île pauvre du quartier, liée par la nécessité toute nue » (OC IV 910). This population played its role as mere supporting cast in the colonial saga, between the Belcourt tramway stop, the Place du Gouvernement and the rue Bab-Azoun; in the familiar context of arcades, the bazar, cafes; between the formal equestrian statue of the Duke of Orleans and a little store selling Arab fritters (OC IV 868-875). Beyond the lycée (and the barracks) at the end of this daily journey were *la ville arabe*, *le jardin Marengo*, *le quartier pauvre et à demi espagnol de Bab-el-Oued* (OC IV 874). And at the end of the tramway line – ironic evidence of the cost of colonial delusions - the *Maison des Invalides* built to treat Algerians wounded in World War 1, where now the cooler air is enjoyed by Algiers' locals as « l'air de France » (OC IV 885). The figure of the mother, against such a backdrop, underscores Camus's argument that such a restricted, localised existence and naïve world view could scarcely even be allocated a place within the binary paradigm that shaped the colonialist discourse of the day.

In anchoring *Le Premier homme* so resolutely in memory and neighbourhood, and in seeking to make the material so concrete, Camus was striving to erect a bulwark of permanence against the onrush of anti-colonialist change, to integrate into the growing clamour of the colonial dispossessed a counter-narrative of sacrifice, innocence and loss.



And, more generally, to counter what is contingent in history. But the parts attributed to *colon*, *petit-blanc* and *indigène*, to manipulator and mystified, in this historical fresco could be neither transparent nor innocent. Camus, as we saw, was at pains to establish a disconnect between family and colonial, and to do this he foregrounded their poverty, their status as non-possessors driven strictly by the need to get through « les longs jours de peine ajoutés les uns aux autres pour faire une vie » (OC IV 775). What matters here is to understand that, for Camus, this was not simply a fact but a *virtue*. Innocent *because* poor, they are victims - not merely of material but of cultural deprivation: his grandmother illiterate (OC IV 783), his uncle Ernest part-mute (OC IV 762) and totally deaf (OC IV 799), his mother illiterate and « isolée dans sa demi-surdit , ses difficult s de langage » (OC IV 775).

For Camus, these *petits blancs* live in Algeria, but own no part of it; their dispossession is thus as absolute as that of the colony's other poor, the indigenous majority. This forms the bedrock of his claim to their moral right to remain, to the right to be considered *indig ne*, indeed to 'Arab'-European equality, because he saw possession as the morally reprehensible basis of all colonial relations. And it explains, perhaps, much of the polemic in which he was embroiled, for few opponents perceived or accepted the status of *saintet  laique* (first broached in *La Peste*) attributed to the community surviving in that « narrow, empty and closed universe » (OC IV 772). And few would agree that autonomy or independence could be assessed merely as the (more or less plausible) political means to bring an end to the one-sidedness of possession. For Camus, *Arabe* and *petit-blanc* were indissociable as joint victims, and thus joint potential beneficiaries when the system was reformed.

The ambiguities inherent in the « presence » of Europeans in Algeria – even Europeans *de bonne volont * (Memmi) - thwart the narrator's overt ambitions and resurface in the preparatory Notes in relation, most problematically, to the mother and current terrorism. The occasion is an exchange between Cormery and an Arab friend named Saddok: « Objectivement, elle est responsable (solidaire). - Change d'adverbe ou je te frappe » (OC IV 922). The novel was being constructed to rebut precisely this attribution of responsibility (guilt) and, despite noting that the protagonist is already opposed to terrorism, the confrontational retort generated foreshadows the global polemic that was to be unleashed at the Nobel Prize press conference when Camus was accused of upholding the safety (hence

rights) of his mother in the face of Algerian demands for justice.<sup>29</sup>

For Camus, in short, the mother represents a community, and he treats their ethnological case as unassailable. The Notes, however, also contain another, less definitive position :

Jacques qui s'était jusque-là senti solidaire de toutes les victimes, reconnaît maintenant qu'il est aussi solidaire des bourreaux. Sa tristesse. Définition (OC IV 938).

The unfinished state of the text makes it impossible to ascertain either the cause or the stages of this evolution, indeed even the identity of the *bourreaux*, let alone its relation to the target Camus had seemingly set himself: to tell the story of « ce que deviennent les valeurs françaises dans une conscience algérienne, celle du premier homme » (OC IV 941).<sup>30</sup> The moral dilemma it poses, on the other hand (much more intractable than the 1940s' 'Ni Victimes ni bourreaux' of *Actuelles I*) does help to explain why the quest that Cormery undertook goes beyond a simple nostalgic (re)turn to the past or description of the current status quo; why the text in Part II veers towards « the son or the first man ». As David Harvey argues when discussing place, « the preservation or construction of a sense of place is an active moment in the passage from memory to hope, from past to future ».<sup>31</sup> *Le Premier homme*, much admired for its autobiographical honesty, its concrete account of a past colonial experience that is both individual and collective, is in fact resolutely future-oriented. Louis Bertrand's « rootedness » was racially exclusive and passeist.<sup>32</sup> Given the violence of the current confrontation in Algeria, Camus strives, on the contrary, to be consensual and optimistic. His recourse to imagination to fill out the narrator's quest once the family-based (re)construction of the figure of the father has failed - via the third-party memoirs very present in the Notes<sup>33</sup> - thus supports bell hooks' argument that « instead of looking back with nostalgia to some idea of place which it is assumed already exists, the past has to be constructed ».<sup>34</sup> When that construction, in *Le Premier homme*, proves an inadequate base for the future because blurred and incomplete, it is, as Bachelard stresses in *Poetics of Space*,

---

<sup>29</sup> Most critical opinion now acknowledges that Camus was rejecting the methods, i.e. terror by both FLN and State. See also Guy Dugas, 'Camus, Sénac, Roblès: les écrivains de l'École d'Alger face au terrorisme', in *Albert Camus in the 21st Century* (2008).

<sup>30</sup> Camus's preface to the *Chroniques algériennes* (discussed below) makes the targets explicit: blind terrorism (against civilian targets), collective punishment, torture, censorship, justified as "effective".

<sup>31</sup> *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (London: Blackwell, 1996), 306.

<sup>32</sup> Bertrand's position owes a great deal to the Barrès notion of "racinement" driving these European economic migrants in the rapidly modernising Algeria in which they assertively made themselves at home (see *Les Déracinés* (1897) or *Scènes et doctrines du nationalisme* (1902).

<sup>33</sup> OC IV 919, 922, 925, 933.

<sup>34</sup> Bell hooks, *Yearning. Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (London: Turnaround, 1991), 171.

because « imagination separates us from the past as well as from reality, it faces the future ».<sup>35</sup> Cormery's lycée education, in a family where books are like alien intruders, is an example of psychological and cultural dislocation (unlike primary schooling), not just taking him out of his Belcourt neighbourhood but opening onto a new world. Like the other forms of forced (and always incomplete) assimilation prevalent in the colony, the estrangement and loss (surfacing as *gêne*, *honte*...) are justified solely by the promise of future success:

Bien que la plus ancienne de sa vie fût en réalité ce quartier, sa vie présente et plus encore son avenir étaient au lycée. Si bien que le quartier, d'une certaine manière, se confondait à la longue avec le soir, le sommeil et le rêve (OC IV 893).

And the last developed section, 'Obscur à soi-même', focuses at length on the future-oriented certitude and self-assurance of the young protagonist (success in the colony, of course, being measured in relation to the metropolitan arena).

\*

In the case of colonial Algeria, the French Subject and the authorised version of their occupation were, at the time of writing, violently challenged. Colonial space was, inescapably, always a disputed space; and even the detailed evocation of Camus's *quartier* cannot disguise the fact that, while the working-class cohabited, communities were divided. Hence the need for an alternative legitimacy. The publication in 1958 of *Chroniques algériennes* provided an insight into Camus's position.

It opens with his well-known piece 'Misère de la Kabylie', written in 1939 for the left-wing Algerian newspaper *Alger républicain*, and when Camus refers to it in the 1950s it is usually to prove, firstly, that his engagement with the Algerian question predates the current conflict; and secondly that, as an Algerian, having done more than a journalistic field-trip or two, he knows what he is talking about.<sup>36</sup> His conclusion? Find the means to merge the efforts of the two communities, the *conquérants inquiets* and a *peuple plus sage* (OC IV 336). This is followed by a self-declared investigative journalism piece from *Combat* (OC IV 339) after a three-week field-trip, deploring the violent *events* (OC IV 337) in Algeria in 1945 and concluding that beyond (European) resentment and (Muslim) fear/hostility, the objective must be the *reconquest* of Algeria through the systematic application of metropolitan France's democratic regime, synonymous for Camus with « la force infinie de la justice »

---

<sup>35</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space* (Boston Mass.: Beacon Press, 1969), 64.

<sup>36</sup> A claim frequently voiced by the Algerianists, too, when facing what they saw as the political naivety or woolly paternalism of Paris government and politicians. *Algériens nous sommes!* was not merely a political slogan; it was an assertion of identity (difference) and autonomy.

(OC IV 351). This was 1945, of course, hence perhaps Camus's unshakeable belief in democracy as defence against extremism, and as universal model (of Justice). But as Frantz Fanon, for instance, was to argue in *Les Damnés de la terre* in 1961, not everyone shared that belief, and certainly not the independence fighters of French North Africa, Vietnam, or the Belgian Congo. The belief in (French) democracy remained, nevertheless, at the heart of Camus's politics and, allied with his belief in the virtue of poverty, ensured that the polemic around the Algerian question remained a dialogue of the deaf.

It was, nevertheless, in a spirit of dialogue that Camus gave his support to a new newspaper, launched by the Algerian socialist Aziz Kessous in 1955. And it is in his letter to Kessous that Camus best articulates the personal crisis and turmoil of the period: « J'ai mal à l'Algérie en ce moment, comme d'autres ont mal aux poumons » (OC IV 352). « Condemned to live together »: Camus's realism summarizes the position developing in *Le Premier homme*, namely support for the efforts of Arab democrats and French liberals to move beyond the separation fostered by violence, to forget the past in order to « relanc[er] la communauté franco-arabe d'Algérie sur la route de l'avenir » (OC IV 354). Here, and in all his texts, his starting-point is the *inseparability* of Algeria's two populations, and the subsequent dilemma throughout was to limit the damage each inflicted on the other in order to find a common solution on which to build a common future (of justice and equality), as his unsuccessful 'Appel pour une trêve civile' was to demand in January 1956. This was an unacceptable premise, of course, for opponents who saw in the colony only two mutually antagonistic forces – (French) *Algériens* and *Indigènes* – and defended a system which, for some 125 years, had legislated in favour of inequality and the monopolisation of power (both political and economic). Equally unacceptable for the majority, Camus's projection of a “Franco-Arab” future that rejected the long-established principle of assimilation as sole gateway to citizenship – in Camus's words, a repeated lie, always offered, never implemented (OC IV 387). In *Alger républicain* in 1939 he had argued that the coloniser had a duty to « aid[er] les peuples conquis à garder leur personnalité » (OC IV 336). In 1958, acknowledging that the colonial era had come to an end, he proposed a federation which would respect the two communities « aux personnalités différentes » (OC IV 392). But no anticolonialist, and no supporter of the French Republican model – for whom the mix of liberties, rights and duties grounded 'frenchness' – could back a federation that continued to distinguish between Algeria's (future) citizens on ethnic/religious grounds. To do so would have implied recognizing the *de facto* viability of internal frontiers – no longer as frontiers reinforcing conquest or exclusion, obviously, but as a cultural reality regulating civic and

political life in the territory.<sup>37</sup>

This was Camus's last public intervention in the conflict, a concrete political proposal bringing to a close a journalism launched in the 1930s and which, between 'L'Algérie déchirée' in *L'Express* in 1955 and 'L'Algérie 1958', had retraced the *dialogue dément* (OC IV 356) that allowed the extremism of all parties to flourish. A journalism explicitly positioned as, primarily, pedagogical, a « work of disintoxication » (OC IV 303). With this in mind his first lesson was for the French, called upon to recognize that 80% of French Algerians were not *colons* but wage-earners or shopkeepers (OC IV 359), hence had benefited little from colonisation and so should not serve as scapegoats for « les immenses péchés de la France colonisatrice » (OC IV 360). Second, that major reform, in a spirit of justice, had to be accepted by a French Algerian population willing to recognize that Algeria was not France (OC IV 358), that assimilation could not be their objective, « le peuple arabe [ayant] gardé sa personnalité qui n'est pas réductible à la nôtre » (OC IV 362). And finally, to Algerian militants, a double plea: to avoid the excesses that haunt all violent reactions against oppression (as *L'Homme révolté* had argued); and, in paragraphs informed by ideology as much as pedagogy, to achieve « l'accession rapide des peuples musulmans à des conditions de vie moderne » (OC IV 364) under continued French guidance. The aim was to turn relations of power and authority into mutual respect and equality, but without fully acceding to the fact that it was the Europeans alone who retained the power to reconfigure the relationship – the alternative being the FLN whose legitimacy, in any case, was not recognized. Deemed incapable of successfully managing their country as independent agents, the militants are thus called upon to support extensive reform in order to found « une justice claire et forte, l'union des différences, la marche confiante vers un avenir exemplaire » (OC IV 371). While the rhetoric contains echoes of communism's *lendemains qui chantent*, the reform agenda being proposed was out of step with the decolonising moment which, from Dien Bien Phu in 1954 to the end of the Algerian War in 1962 (officially recognized by France in 1999) brought such radical change.<sup>38</sup>

With hindsight one can see that the exemplarity that Camus had in mind, to be

---

<sup>37</sup> Assimilation meant not giving up one's religion but abandoning Coranic law (on polygamy, repudiation, inheritance rights etc.) in favour of the French Code civil. For a lucid summary of the legal system in Algeria, see the résumé of Patrick Weil, *Qu'est-ce qu'un Français ?*, in 'Français, Juifs, Musulmans ... en Algérie de 1830 à 1962', in *Histoire coloniale et postcoloniale* (July 2003) : <http://histoirecoloniale.net/Francais-Juifs-Musulmans-en.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Among the proliferation of material on the war of independence, see Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace* (London : Macmillan, 1977) and, with fuller analysis of the FLN, Martin Evans, *Algeria: France's Undeclared War* (Oxford: OUP, 2012).

embodied in his federal solution (and a French *commonwealth*), could be deemed flawed, since he argued - as the Algerianists and others did throughout the 1920s and 30s - that the Algerian *peuples* or *communautés* did not constitute a nation, since the patchwork territory had always been ruled in the past by Romans, Ottomans etc. By nation here, it would seem that what is at stake is the concept, following European models, of a territory delimited by recognised boundaries, with a culture, a legal system, an Administration, a collectivity capable of coherent organisation guaranteeing justice and equality for all citizens. El Djezaïr, and the Ottoman Regency, clearly had not met these criteria; and French Algeria was deemed (as yet) no better defined. What Camus deplored were abuses and inadequate progress, not French control *per se* which, if properly applied, could only be beneficial (a liberal position analysed at length by Albert Memmi). What he rejected – despite the ambiguities inherent in his proposed federation - was withdrawal into what today’s discourse would call a *politique identitaire* that would merely prolong separation and confrontation. What was challenged here is, repeatedly, the existence of a nation-state, the historically-proven existence of a real geopolitical entity to which, after ousting the French, the population could return. But what is actually being ignored (as Fanon understood so well) is what today historians like Rogers Brubaker term nationhood: the imagined community constructed to represent a specific ethnonational group. Not (yet) a reality (as a State), this was a force whose collective identity was growing out of collective action against colonial rule (and those who had learned to benefit from it); resistance, frequently brutal, coalescing the patchwork of both past and present.<sup>39</sup> Camus resisted the unravelling of the French foundational narrative on Algeria, just as he resisted the imposition of the FLN’s counter-narrative, arguing, as he had done since the 1930s, that the Algerian question was essentially a problem of social justice and equality, that the French presence in Algeria could be moved beyond the blunt occupying/belonging paradigm. That the current violence could be suspended in order to open up (through dialogue) a space in which a (yet-to-be-legislated-for) equality-based social formation could emerge. The longstanding conflict in colonial Algeria over land, labour and law had gradually evolved into a wider conflict surrounding belonging and identity. In trusting in the ability of a just system to reform the former, Camus hoped to influence the latter. Adamant, consequently, about the intangibility of the rights of Europeans, and about the need for radical reform to establish the rights of Muslims, Camus’s closing pages

---

<sup>39</sup> See Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism reframed. Nationhood and the national question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996); Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991).

acknowledge that *Chroniques* is a story of failure. The act of republishing them, however, amounted to a demonstration of his refusal to concede that, despite the violent polarisation and subsequent loss of moral compass on both sides, Algeria was « lost »:

C'est en fonction de l'avenir qu'il faut poser les problèmes, sans remâcher interminablement les fautes du passé. Et il n'y aura pas d'avenir qui ne rende justice en même temps aux deux communautés d'Algérie (OC IV 303).

If events after Camus's death rendered that impossible for the majority of the European population, 50,000 French Algerians emulated his mother, refusing to abandon *chez eux* for exile *là-bas*. Even when *chez eux* became *l'autre Algérie* that Camus could never support because, while he had long shown himself to be anticolonialist, he was adamant that such a country could only be « contre ou loin de la France » (OC IV 305). In short, independent.

\*

Le premier qui ayant enclos un terrain s'avisait de dire : « Ceci est à moi », et trouva des gens assez simples pour le croire, fut le vrai fondateur de la société civile. Que de crimes, de guerres, de meurtres, que de misères et d'horreurs n'eût point épargné au genre humain celui qui, arrachant les pieux ou comblant le fossé, eût crié à ses semblables : « Gardez-vous d'écouter cet imposteur ; vous êtes perdus si vous oubliez que les fruits sont à tous et que la terre n'est à personne ! »

(Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine des inégalités*)<sup>40</sup>

*Le Premier homme* is an unfinished attempt to convince Camus's homeland of the truth of Rousseau's argument, to promote justice and thus abolish the threat of exile:

Rendez la terre. Donnez toute la terre aux pauvres, à ceux qui n'ont rien [...] l'immense troupe des misérables, la plupart arabe, et quelques-uns français et qui vivent ou survivent ici par obstination et endurance [...] (Alors [...] je reviendrai dans ce pays). (OC IV 944)

While this had become increasingly urgent and implausible, the fossilized confrontation in Algeria had pushed Camus and others of his generation to propose an alternative as early as the 30s. It was, to adapt the terms of Ernest Bloch in *The Principle of Hope* (1954), a utopian model of the « not-yet-become », a world in flux, still coming into being, a process rather

---

<sup>40</sup> Cf. On-line Edition [www.rousseauonline.ch](http://www.rousseauonline.ch), version du 7 octobre 2012 (accessed April 13, 2018).

than a place, a travelling towards rather than an arrival. In seeking to bypass the systemic rigidity ruling Algeria, I would argue, it is of this space that Camus dreamed, as ‘La Pensée de midi’ – oft derided by his opponents – made clear in 1951:

Nous autres méditerranéens vivons toujours de la même lumière. Au cœur de la nuit européenne, la pensée solaire, la civilisation au double visage, attend son aurore. Mais elle éclaire déjà les chemins de la vraie maîtrise (*L’Homme révolté*, OC III 319).

By the 1930s, when he began his career, the (re)mapping of colonial Algeria had hardened into a policy of obdurate exclusion of Algeria's indigenous population and, most problematically, of its growing French-educated elite - exclusion that the Popular Front government of 1936 did little to alleviate. For young left-wing French Algerian intellectuals like Camus, the forces keeping the internal boundaries in place reflected only the economic and political self-interest of the European middle-class. In response, like his friend Gabriel Audisio, Camus sought to promote a consensual spatio-cultural alternative, opening Algeria's coastal frontier onto the entire Mediterranean as a contact zone, a space of mobility and exchange. Algiers (for Camus) and Marseilles (for Audisio) – already intermediaries as major ports – were at the centre of the cultural network they envisaged in an expansive move symbolised in the title of a short-lived literary periodical they launched with friends in 1938, *Rivages*. It was a manoeuvre which, for admirers of Greece such as Camus, sought its legitimisation in the historically well-established notion that the Mediterranean had long been an exceptional space of connectivity and exchange. Indeed, Audisio continued until the 1950s to envisage a Mediterranean humanism, a space in which mixity could overcome the damage caused by racial exclusion. The Mediterranean, he declared repeatedly, is

a place of encounters, affinities, creation and fertility symbolised by so many images and myths; that is the Mediterranean; in the words of (Paul) Valéry, a ‘machine for making civilisation’.<sup>41</sup>

In Camus's words, at the opening of Algiers' *Maison de la Culture* in 1937,

Il y a une mer Méditerranée, un bassin qui relie une dizaine de pays. [...] Bassin international traversé par tous les courants [...]. L’Afrique du Nord est un des seuls pays où l’Orient et l’Occident cohabitent. Et à ce confluent il n’y a pas de différence entre la façon dont vit un Espagnol ou un Italien des quais

---

<sup>41</sup> *Algérie, Méditerranée : Feux vivants* (Limoges : Rougerie, 1958).



d'Alger, et les Arabes qui les entourent. (OC I 566, 569).

This was clearly not the Mediterranean of Antiquity, nor the Mediterranean mapped by the French Ministère des Affaires Maritimes, from Colbert to the Revolution. Not even the Mediterranean of our millenium, not least because Muslim culture is largely absent.<sup>42</sup> It is, on the other hand, an imagined outlet, actively repositioning 'Algeria' within a Mediterranean made up of sites of exchange, crossings, markers of a fluidity with the potential to undo the rigidity of both the colonialist closure of the 1930s and the nationalist paradigms of the 50s.

And it was, perhaps, to that (future) "Algeria" – simultaneously local/personal and expansive/collective – that Camus was referring in 1951 when quoting René Char:

"L'obsession de la moisson et l'indifférence à l'histoire, écrit admirablement René Char, sont les deux extrémités de mon arc" (L'Homme révolté, OC III 320).

---

<sup>42</sup> Paul-F. Smets, 'Albert Camus. Sa vraie Méditerranée', in *L'Europe et la Méditerranée* (2001) ; Alek Baylee Toumi, *Albert Camus précurseur. Méditerranée d'hier et d'aujourd'hui* (New York/Bern/Berlin : Peter Lang, 2009) ; Neil Foxlee, *Albert Camus' New Mediterranean Culture. A Text and its Contexts* (Oxford/Bern/Berlin : Peter Lang, 2010).

- Azza-Bekat, Amina, Bererhi, Afifa, and Chaulet-Achour, Christiane (eds.), *Quand les Algériens lisent Camus*. Algiers : Casbah, 2014.
- Babey, Stéphane, *Camus, une passion algérienne*. Paris : Balzac Editeur, 2013.
- Barth, Volker, *Paris et ses expositions universelles. Architectures 1855-1937*. Paris : Edit. du Patrimoine 2008.
- Braudel, Fernand, *L'identité de la France*. Paris : Arthaud, 1986.
- Baudicour, Louis de, *Des Indigènes de l'Algérie*. Paris : Douniol, 1852.
- Baylee Toumi, Alek (ed.), *Albert Camus précurseur. Méditerranée d'hier et d'aujourd'hui*. New York/Bern/Berlin : Peter Lang 2009.
- Bloch, Ernest, *The Principle of Hope*. Cambridge MA : MIT Press, 1995.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, 'L'Identité et la représentation. Eléments pour une réflexion critique sur l'idée de région', *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 35 (1980)
- Brubaker, Rogers, *Nationalism reframed. Nationhood and the national question in the New Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Carroll, David, *Albert Camus the Algerian: Colonialism, Terrorism, Justice*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.
- Carter, Erica and Donald, James (eds.), *Space and Place*. Chadwell Heath : Lawrence & Wishart, 1993.
- Certeau, Michel de, Giard, Luce, and Mayol, Pierre (eds.), *L'Invention du quotidien t.2*. Paris : Gallimard, 1994.
- Chaulet-Achour, Christiane, *Albert Camus, Alger : "L'Etranger" et autres récits*. Paris: Séguier, 1999.
- Dunwoodie, Peter, *Writing French Algeria*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1998.
- Evans, Martin, *Algeria: France's Undeclared War*. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Fanon, Frantz, *Les Damnés de la terre*. Paris: Maspéro, 1961.
- Foxlee, Neil, *Albert Camus's New Mediterranean Culture. A Text and its Contexts*. Oxford/Bern/Berlin: Peter Lang, 2010.
- Gottdiener, Mark and Lagopoulos, Alexandros (eds.), *The City and the Sign*. New York : Columbia University Press, 1986.
- Guide Michelin, *La France, l'Algérie et la Tunisie*. Clermont-Ferrand, 1905.
- Hall, Catherine (ed.), *Cultures of Empire*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.
- Hamet, Ismael, *Musulmans de l'Afrique du Nord*. s.l., 1913.
- Harvey, David, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*. London: Blackwell, 1996.
- hooks, bell, *Yearning. Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. London: Turnaround, 1991.

- Horne, Alistair, *A Savage War of Peace*. London : Macmillan, 1977.
- Jacqueton, Gilbert, and Gsell, Stéphane, *Algérie et Tunisie*. Paris: Hachette 1911.
- Kaplan, Alice, *Looking for "The Stranger": The making of an existential masterpiece*.  
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.
- Lenzini, José, *L'Algérie de Camus*. Aix-en-Provence : Edisud, 1987.
- Lespès, René, *Alger, esquisse de géographie urbaine*. Algiers: Carbonel, 1925.
- Lorcin, Patricia, 'Rome and France in Africa: Recovering Roman Algeria's Latin Past',  
*French Historical Studies*, XXV 2 (Jan. 2002).
- Margerrison, Christine, Orme, Mark, and Lincoln, Lisa (eds.), *Albert Camus in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008.
- Massey, Doreen, *Space, Place and Gender*. London: Polity Press, 1994.
- Miège, Jean-Louis, *Expansion européenne et décolonisation : de 1870 à nos jours*. Paris : PUF, 1993.
- Monte, Michèle, 'Sobriété et profusion : une rhétorique du paysage dans *Noces* et *L'été d'Albert Camus*', *Babel. Littératures plurielles*, vii (2003).
- Naess, Arne, Ecology, *Community and Lifestyle. Outline of an Ecosophy*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Noiriel, Gérard, *Le Creuset français. Histoire de l'immigration, XIXe-XXe siècles*. Paris : Seuil, 1988.
- Nouschi, André, 'Croissance urbaine et vie politique en Algérie (1926-35)', *Etudes Maghrébines. Mélanges Charles-André Julien*. Paris : PUF, 1964.
- Ross, Robert and Telkamp, Gerard J. (eds.), *Colonial Cities*. Dordrecht : Springer, 1985.
- Saïd, Edward, *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.
- Sale, Kirkpatrick, *Dwellers in the Land. The Bioregional Vision*. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2000.
- Sherman, Daniel. J., *The Construction of Memory in Interwar France*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Smets, Paul-F., 'Albert Camus. Sa vraie Méditerranée', in *L'Europe et la Méditerranée* (2001).
- Smith, Anthony D., *National Identity*. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991.
- Spielman, Victor, *En Algérie. Le Centenaire au point de vue indigène*. Algiers: Editions du Trait-d'Union, 1930.
- Timms, Edward and Kelley, David (eds.), *Unreal City. Urban Experience in Modern European Literature and Art*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1985.

Tindall, Gillian, *Countries of the Mind. The Meaning of Place to Writers*. London : Faber and Faber, 2011.

Vanney, Philippe (ed.), 'L'Algérie de Camus', *Revue des Lettres Modernes*, 23 (2014).

Villacrose, A., *Vingt ans en Algérie, ou les Tribulations d'un colon racontées par lui-même*. Paris : Challamel, 1875.

Weil, Patrick, *Qu'est-ce qu'un Français ?* Paris : Grasset, 2002.

Winter, Jay, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Yédes, Ali, *Camus l'Algérien*. Paris : L'Harmattan, 2003.

.

