

ALBERT CAMUS AND (POST)COLONIAL AMNESIA

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158 Albert Camus is one of the most controversial twentieth-century literary figures, whose works have been the subject of heated debates for decades. His position towards French imperialism, in particular, has been at the heart of these controversies, eliciting both admiration and bitter criticism from scholars in France and elsewhere. Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, who both supported the Algerian War of Independence (1954-62), were among the first French intellectuals to criticize Camus for his ambivalence toward French colonialism in Algeria. Both authors saw Camus's outright condemnation of the Algerian War as an unequivocal endorsement of the French imperialist government. Sartre was particularly astringent with Camus: as he inveighed against his fellow existentialist writer's complicity in French colonial politics, he also vigorously attacked colonialism and urged French intellectuals to support the Algerians' struggle to destroy the colonial system in order to establish new relations between "a Free France and a liberated Algeria" (47).

Since the 1950s, several scholars have followed in Sartre's and de Beauvoir's footsteps and further indicted Camus's collusion with French colonialism, highlighting the limits of his universalist ethics within Algeria's conflicted colonial context. In his influential monograph *Camus*, published in 1970, Conor Cruise O'Brien was among the earliest scholars to point to Camus's Eurocentrism and to see him as an apologist for French colonialism. Later, postcolonial scholars such as Edward Said, Nicholas Harrison, and myself have elaborated on Camus's ethnocentric tendencies and complicity with French colonial politics to question the still-widespread view of Camus as a radical anti-colonialist figure. Many other scholars, including David Carroll and Ena Vulor, have instead emphasized Camus's humanist outlook, arguing that his opposition to colonial oppression and injustice in Algeria is sufficient proof of his anti-colonialism. Camus's writings contain enough of both colonialist and anti-

colonialist statements to fuel each side of this critical divide. This demonstrates the difficulty of defining Camus in binary terms, as neither of these labels, colonialist or anti-colonialist, can fully account for his elusive approach to French colonialism and Algerian colonial identities.

My argument is that Camus is more fittingly defined as a para-colonialist writer, much in the tradition of western humanist and neo-humanist writers such as François Rabelais, Bartolomé de las Casas, Joseph Conrad, E.M. Forster, and André Gide, who criticized colonial atrocities in the European colonies without contesting the legitimacy of colonization itself, which paved the way for these atrocities. This article examines Camus's relation to French colonialism in his final, uncompleted novel, *Le Premier Homme* (*The First Man*, 1994) and *Noces* (*Nuptials*, 1938) and shows how his para-colonialist outlook is articulated, in large part, through the prism of amnesia, a key colonial trope that is often overlooked in postcolonial discussions of Camus's writing. In both works, Camus uses the trope of amnesia as a dramatic device to tackle the vexed issues of identity, colonial guilt and trauma, and cultural and class divisions, in ways that reveal the intricate connections between amnesia and imperial ideology, identity and nationhood, and ethics and aesthetics.

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Amnesia refers to the deterioration of memory caused by a traumatic accident, old age, or an illness such as dementia. Few of Camus's characters suffer directly from these physical, clearly identifiable amnesiac symptoms, whereas almost all his European settler characters in *Le Premier Homme* and *Noces* display signs of cultural and historical amnesia that alienates them from their surroundings. Catherine Cormery in *Le Premier Homme* is certainly the character who most distinctly illustrates Camus's profound engagement in his fiction with memory and amnesia. Modelled on Camus's own mother,¹ Mrs. Cormery suffers from a permanent memory disorder, combined with a speech impediment and impaired hearing caused by typhoid she contracted in her youth. Although it is not explicitly stated whether typhoid is the main source of Cormery's amnesia, this disease may have, nevertheless, led to further deterioration of her physical and mental faculties. The narrator declares with compassionate sarcasm:

[Jacques's] mother, who had no idea what history and geography might be, who knew only that she lived on land near the sea, that France was on the other side of that sea which she too had never travelled, France in any case being an obscure place lost in a dim night which one reached through a port named Marseilles, which she pictured like the port of Algiers, where there was a shining city that they said was beautiful and which was called Paris, where there was also a region named Alsace that her husband's family came from—it was a long time ago, they were fleeing enemies called Germans to settle in Algeria. (53)

Catherine Cormery is presented here as being ignorant of colonial history and politics, and her memory impairment, combined with intellectual indigence, may partly account for her geographical and cultural alienation. Because of her "clouded memory," Mrs. Cormery has only a vague notion of what France is like, and does

not have the faintest idea of what history and geography might mean. This cognitive and existential inadequacy makes her appear to the reader as a helpless historical castaway, washed away on a foggy, blurred shore (93). Mrs. Cormery's estrangement from France is further reinforced through images of darkness and words such as "obscure," "dim," and "night," which come as a veil over this woman's natural ignorance. For Catherine Cormery, Algeria is a world apart, with no real connection to France, whereas France is a remote, shadowy setting from which her physical and mental infirmities have shut her out forever.

This description vividly recalls Camus's own mother, as mentioned above. However, since *Le Premier Homme* is not an autobiographical document but a work of fiction, this discussion examines Mrs. Cormery mostly from a fictional and metaphorical perspective. In this novel, Camus is trying to recollect his social and cultural background, and how he arrived at the situation in which he is presently, in an effort to assert his Algerian identity and thus overcome the marginalization and official
 160 amnesia in which imperial France casts the *pied-noir* community. At the same time, throughout the novel, Camus also indulges in erasure and forgetting to better consolidate his sense of memory and *pied-noir* identity. Mrs. Cormery serves in this case as an eloquent metaphor of colonial amnesia in its broader sense. Deprived of the most elemental human sensory and mental faculties, of hearing and memory, this dislocated character functions as a metonymy for the *pied-noir* community as a whole. Consciously or not, in enhancing Cormery's lack of historical and geographical memory, Camus seeks to relieve her from the burden of colonial historical consciousness that he castigates in his writing. By stressing her diminished sensory and cognitive abilities, he also skillfully casts her in the state of childlike simplicity or innocence, two expedient properties via which Camus conveniently tends to detach the settlers from French colonization and its questionable civilizing mission. As the narrator eloquently states in *Le Premier Homme*:

Whole mobs had been coming here for more than a century, had ploughed, dug furrows, deeper and deeper in some places, shakier and shakier in others, until the dusty earth covered them over and the place went back to its wild vegetation; and they had procreated, then disappeared. And so it was with their sons. And the sons and grandsons of these found themselves on this land as he [Jacques] himself had, with no past, without ethics, without guidance, without religion. (150)

Here, Camus stresses the settlers' Algerian roots, which, he states, stretch over a century. He also insists on their having no past, history, or religion to lead them through their obscure colonial condition. Interestingly, as Camus reminds the reader of the settlers' close ties to Algeria, he carefully severs these settlers from all affiliation with metropolitan France. He then assigns Algeria a completely different historical status, by presenting it as a distinct, de-colonial territory hosting a unique and ahistorical community: the *pieds-noirs*. Algeria, Camus implies, is no longer merely an extension of metropolitan France as proclaimed in the official French colonial discourse. It is instead a distinct, discontinuous historical and geographical site in which an

alternative, *pied-noir* para-colonial identity is shaping itself, outside the imperial dominant historical narratives of culture and ethnicity, and outside the Arabs and Berbers' stories of identification.

As in *Le Premier Homme*, in *Noces* Camus also profoundly questions the dominant narratives of history and memory, alongside the violence these narratives involve in colonial contexts, to increasingly dissociate himself and the settlers from the French imperial discourse of identity and nationhood.² In so doing, however, he ironically tends to flatten out the semantic specificities of the notions of memory, past, and history by fusing them into one single, uniform negative determination before dismissing each concept as equally suspect and blameable. Such a representation is problematic for at least two reasons: first, we do not know what type of history, memory, or past Camus refers to in his categorical, monolithic discourse, since the three concepts are generically used and disconnected from all specific context. Second, while the past, history, and memory are connected, to varying degrees, and feed on one another, each also possesses its own meanings and specificities that Camus generally overlooks.³

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In *Noces* Camus vehemently rejects history, in its abstract, broadest sense, going as far as to associate it with a dungeon and "a barren land where [even] heather couldn't grow" (122). He also decries the colonial myths of development and progress, capitalism, bourgeois culture, and dominant narratives of history, arguing that he does not "believe sufficiently in reason to subscribe to progress, nor to any philosophy of history" (112). Camus further censures this colonial ideology of progress and universal enlightenment by establishing a sharp opposition between the bourgeois imperialist culture of self-confidence, permanence, and faith in progress on the one side, and, on the other side, the popular culture of a settler working class who, as Camus emphatically remarks, show a proverbial "contempt for stability" and lives ceaselessly in the present, free of past and memory (*Noces* 46). Camus's disparagement of high culture and imperial discourses of universal human development is equally prominent in *Le Premier Homme*, particularly in the scene in which a metropolitan professor delivers to a working-class audience a plodding speech replete with pedantic, inaccessible intellectual references.

Rationalism and progress are essential tenets of the spirit of the Enlightenment that nineteenth-century European imperial powers incorporated into their discourse to justify colonizing non-European countries. Camus's contempt for progress implies, in this context, an unambiguous rejection of the colonial ethos. In both *Noces* and *Le Premier Homme*, he strongly inveighs against colonial history, memory, and ethics of progress. He also dramatizes the *pieds-noirs'* poverty in order to reinforce the separation of this poor community of "petty" colonists from the greedy French imperial capitalists who were sucking Algeria's natural resources dry. These dexterous rhetorical manoeuvres are intended to persuade the reader that the *pieds-noirs* are merely victims of unfortunate colonial material conditions, rather than ruthless colonial exploiters of Algerian riches and indigenous populations.⁴ This may be why, soon

after evoking these settlers' material indigence, Camus readily naturalizes them as Algerians *par excellence*. He emphatically presents these settlers as the indigenes of this country, and does so in terms that echo his own perception of the *pieds-noirs*' identity and relation to Algeria in his non-fictional works.⁵ Ironically, however, in this specific case, too, it is the dubious colonial trope of amnesia, a prominent figure of denegation and dispossession of colonized people, to which Camus resorts in order to confirm the *pied-noir* community's essential Algerian-ness.

The concept of colonial amnesia implies the colonizers deliberately erasing the history of the colonized people in order to justify taking over these territories. Camus painstakingly reiterates these imperial amnesiac practices, describing Algerians as a people "without a past or tradition" (*Noces* 35), without history or memory, while simultaneously referring to Algeria as merely a vacuum or a land devoid of history and memory. To further consolidate what he constructs as the *pied-noir* community's indigenous essence, Camus stresses this community's indigent memory, particularly in *Le Premier Homme*, to substantiate their organic links with Algeria:

To begin with, poor people's memory is less nourished than that of the rich; it has fewer landmarks in space because they seldom leave the place where they live, and fewer reference points in time throughout lives that are grey and featureless [...] Remembrance of things past is just for the rich. For the poor it only marks the faint traces on the path to death. And besides, in order to bear up well one must not remember too much, but rather stick to the passing day, hour by hour, as his mother did. (62-63)

In this passage, Camus aligns memory with history, wealth, and power. In the process, he sharply contrasts the memory of the poor, embodied by Jacques and his family, with the memory of the wealthy, exemplified by Marcel and his parents. Marcel lives in an affluent bourgeois universe of material comfort and abundant memory. By contrast, Jacques's proletarian family is stuck in a sullen, poverty-stricken world, powerless and crippled by a meagre sense of remembrance. Through this consistent emphasis on the Cormerys' shallow memory, Camus seeks to consolidate the settlers' indigenous condition, but in so doing he restricts their faculty of recollection to their immediate present. Memory is, by definition, dynamic and fluid, connected productively to the past on which it feeds, as well as to the future into which the flow of time and imagination propels it. Curiously, however, memory soon becomes static and close-ended when it is associated with the *pied-noir* community. Camus confines the members of this community in an everlasting present. He depicts them as dim fragments of an obscure existence that endlessly repeats itself, free from the burden of yesterday and the uncertainties of tomorrow.

Camus's blending of memory with economic and class politics in his works is highly significant from a political perspective, and the image of nourishment readily acquires an important symbolic and ideological value. As a process in continuous flow and evolution, memory needs constant nourishment from childhood formative experiences, family stories of self and identity, collective myths and truths, legends and folklore, and other such stimuli in order to grow and deepen, just as the body

requires food to develop and remain healthy. As a greedy capitalistic enterprise, colonialism needs the colony's resources and manpower in order to maintain its hegemony and permanence. By opposing these two types of memory in this novel according to strict class distinctions, Camus tends to closely connect memory and colonization in order to reveal the dubious character of memory as a narrative of imperial control and oppression. Memory is power, and colonization requires and uses the power of memory—embodied in narratives of a glorious past, stories of heroic ancestral accomplishments, and myths of racial superiority stored in the collective consciousness—to maintain its control over the conquered populations. Camus unequivocally rejects this suspicious alliance between memory and colonialism for class, political, and ideological reasons: to distinguish the *pied-noir* community, whom Camus describes as deprived of both economic power and the power of memory, from the dominant bourgeois colonists who use and abuse the power of memory. Because of their well-nourished, abundant memory, which stretches back for generations well beyond Algeria's space and time, Marcel's family enjoys the privilege of class and power that the novel vigorously arraigns. In fact, what Camus seems to be telling the reader through this Marxist class rhetoric is that since the bourgeois capitalists are in Algeria mostly to rule and exploit the settler proletariat such as Jacques's family, they must be the object of blame, not the settlers who are simply victims of colonialism, as are Algeria's indigenous populations themselves.⁶

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We may easily understand that a writer with leftist and socialist leanings such as Camus should condemn imperial capitalism and seek to exempt the *pied-noir* working class from imperial horrors and guilt.⁷ Nevertheless, his Marxist conception of colonialism seems both historically inadequate and ideologically one-sided. For centuries, imperial capitalism has indiscriminately exploited the colonial masses regardless of faith or complexion, although indigenous populations generally endured more exploitation and dehumanization than did the white settler working class. In *Le Premier Homme*, Camus dramatizes this class bias to fully ascribe the imperial system's violence to the French bourgeois colonists, by pointing out that Jacques's family is in Algeria simply to scrape a living. Moreover, Jacques's family does not lay claim to any glorious past or grand colonial project as do Marcel's family and, by extension, the bourgeois colonists in charge of the "white man's burden" with its trail of atrocities and guilt. Camus's inclination to exonerate the *pieds-noirs* from imperial culpability is expressively conveyed in his description of the Cormerys' social and economic background. Camus insists that the Cormery family were of modest Spanish extraction and settled in Algeria not for any imperial pursuits, but by sheer fate or unfortunate circumstances, after one of Mrs. Cormery's ancestors was mistakenly murdered in "a crime of passion."

Pierre Nora noted that "deep down the *pieds-noirs* felt so guilty about their [colonial] adventure that they dared neither to acknowledge it nor write about it" (*Les Français* 107; my translation). This lingering guilt seeps through Camus's writing. The narrator's invocation in *Le Premier Homme* of chance or destiny to explain the

European settlers' presence in Algeria offers, in this case, additional evidence of Camus's sustained effort to absolve the *pieds-noirs* of imperial horrors. Edward J. Hughes remarks on Camus's ethics of victimization that "this painstaking construction of a picture of victimisation forms part of the rhetoric of persuasion used by Camus in *Le Premier Homme* in his celebration of the French Algerian tradition" (22). In fact, in this novel Camus does more than just commemorate the French Algerian or *pied-noir* tradition. As he scrapes the past and colonial memory from the collective *pied-noir* consciousness, he shapes an "imagined community" fuelled by myths of innocence and victimization. Both myths are wedded to the figure of amnesia. Camus's insistent portrayal of the *pied-noir* community's poverty, innocence, and victimization is an understandable defensive strategy intended to distance the *pieds-noirs* from the abuses perpetuated by French colonialism. At the same time, however, this defensive scheme inopportunely leads him to historical myopia. He tends to erase all traces of imperial consciousness from the settler community's mental and cultural cartographies, as though these settlers were merely abstract entities, living outside and beyond Algeria's conflicted imperial context.

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This willful historical blindness, which prevents Camus from seeing colonial Algeria in its true multilayered cultural and historical density, may provide a convenient means to escape the dirty game of colonial politics and the atrocities of the Algerian War. He intends to achieve this by systematically refuting imperial historical memory, by nostalgically returning to a space outside history and memory, violence, and social injustice, as does Jacques in *Le Premier Homme*, and by dramatically simplifying the colonial context, if not the colonial fact itself. Most importantly, as he dissociates the settlers from historical memory and France's imperialist and nationalist consciousness, Camus also invokes the therapeutic virtue of forgetting, by diligently drawing the reader's attention to the settlers' remarkable faculty to forget. This faculty is precious on many counts, not least because it opens up the possibility for the settlers to start afresh and write their own stories on their own terms. One main reason Camus insists on the *pieds-noirs*' paltry memory and aptitude for oblivion may lie in his eagerness to definitively sever these settlers from the metropole. Furthermore, he strives to make these settlers literally forget that they are members of the oppressive French imperial government. He later reiterates the settlers' chronic amnesiac condition and goes as far as to consider *l'oubli*, or oblivion, as their sole possible fatherland:

That immense oblivion that was the ultimate homeland of the men of his people, the final destination of a life that began without roots [...] And he who had wanted to escape from the country without name, but in whom something had gone on craving darkness and anonymity—he too was a member of the tribe [...], wandering through the night of the years in the land of oblivion where each one is *Le Premier Homme*. (151-52)

In his fiction, Camus generally resorts to amnesia to convey the *pieds-noirs*' estrangement from the specific historical and geographical core of imperial metropolitan France. He usually does so by giving prevalence to history and memory over geogra-

phy. In the passage quoted above, however, he clearly links amnesia to space rather than to time, as suggested by the recurrence of words such as “homeland,” “land,” and “country.” This narrative shift is of the utmost significance, since the spatial focus it involves confers a degree of concreteness upon this abstract notion of amnesia or oblivion, which, in this specific case, becomes the *pied-noir* community’s homeland and final destination. Camus continues to fundamentally make amnesia the *pieds-noirs*’ existential condition, while also arguing that the very colony hosting these amnesiac historical outcasts is similarly an existential void or a “land of oblivion.”

Interestingly, within this (re)definition of Algerian culture and history, in which the settlers are the sole worthy characters the reader is expected to remember, Algeria is likened to a nameless, blank territory bereft of past and history. It is a land in which every European settler is literally the first man; a sort of original Creator with the power to name and shape this allegedly virgin land in his own image. Consciously or not, Camus here dubiously reenacts the traditional figure of the colonist as the first man who brings into existence the colonized land and its peoples. He strongly suggests that as a “member of the tribe,” Jacques has the inalienable right to reclaim this land of forgetting as his own homeland. This legitimacy is conveyed in the word “tribe,” commonly used by colonizers, often with contempt, to designate the indigenous populations, and which Camus here appropriates to reinforce his protagonist’s ties to Algeria. Camus’s message is clear: the *pieds-noirs* are Algerians, like the Arabs and Berbers, and their country is and will always be Algeria. He further suggests that the *pieds-noirs*, who share essential features, not least amnesia, with this land are not just Algeria’s legitimate sons and daughters, but are organically Algeria itself.⁸ This is a vocal ideological stance and, given the context of the Algerian War in which *Le Premier Homme* is set, the narrator’s statement readily acquires the force of a political declaration. It becomes a pledge to keep Algeria French, in keeping with Camus’s siding with the French colonial government and military against the FLN, the leaders of the Algerian rebellion, with whom Camus ruled out all negotiation.⁹

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One may easily understand that Europeans born in Algeria should consider Algeria their homeland as do Camus and the *pieds-noirs* in general. The problem, though, is that the *pieds-noirs*’ very presence in Algeria was made possible only because this country was a French colony and the *pieds-noirs*, whatever their social class, were usually seen by the indigenous Berber and Arab populations as colonists or full members of the French empire. This indigenous perception of the *pieds-noirs* was further intensified by the Algerian War, which pitted the two Algerian communities against each other. The other major problem lies in Camus’s consistent identification of Algeria as a blank space or land of forgetting. This representation is prominent within colonial discourses, as mentioned earlier. It is, therefore, ironic that such a fervent critic of colonial injustice and myths of grandeur as Camus should enthusiastically incorporate this shady imperial trope into his writing. His use of this trope to further similar imperialist aims is more unsettling, as his questionable ideological perspective deeply reinforces his complicity with the imperial system he condemns.

It also leads to a historical fallacy, since, through this representation, Camus tends to erase Algeria's abundant colonial and precolonial pasts or histories, in a desperate effort to legitimize the *pieds-noirs*' presence in this henceforth dehistoricized territory.

Amnesia clearly plays a significant role in this dehistoricizing process, and Camus's use of it to describe both Algeria and the *pied-noir* community throughout *Le Premier Homme* highlights this trope's multilayered nature and productive elasticity. However, both in this novel and in *Noces*, amnesia is not only related to ideology and politics, as we have seen, but also enmeshed with philosophy and aesthetics. Specifically, with regard to aesthetics, amnesia constitutes a fundamental existentialist trope around which Camus's ethics of being and meaning is articulated. Existentialism is a prominent topic in Camus's writing and, in keeping with its ethics, Camus privileges existence over essence, immanence over permanence, the here and now over the then and thereafter. In *Noces*, in particular, Camus accords
 166 this existential ethics pride of place by describing the *pieds-noirs* as insouciant, blissful "barbarians," "living fully in the present without myths, without consolation," and indifferent to both the past and future (35). They are emblems of immanence through which Camus contests the colonialist ideology of progress and permanence alongside the capitalist ethos sustaining the French imperial system.

As discussed above, amnesia fits well with Camus's aesthetic and philosophical project, since, as a figure that is essentially cut off from linearity, past, or future, it tends to align naturally with existence and immanence rather than with essence and permanence. Meanwhile, whereas in both works amnesia seems to be mostly a static symbol of immanence, in practice the trope is also undercut by a fluid, dynamic impulse that is equally essential to Camus's idea of the *pied-noir* collective memory. This dynamic, somewhat chaotic, impulse of amnesia is what ultimately allows an opening into a potential future in which the *pied-noir* history and narratives of collective identity may finally be rewritten in accordance with Camus's broader political aspirations. Hence, from its initial status as a figure of lack, anomaly, or deficiency when it was initially applied to Catherine Cormery, amnesia in this novel gradually morphs into a symbol of power and a productive tool for creating a future communal *pied-noir* memory that Camus projects as autonomous and pure.

In both *Noces* and *Le Premier Homme*, the various versions of amnesia carry these creative, fecund qualities that Camus harnesses both to his narrative of identity and his settler characters. In *Noces*, in particular, in which cultural and historical amnesia is presented as a precondition for creativity in a broader sense, Camus does not merely portray the *pied-noir* community's essence and life philosophy as poles apart from the imperial ideology of progress and intransience, but also casts these settlers as "a creative people" who are constantly reinventing their universe and creating "a culture where human grandeur will finally find its fullest expression" (46). The *pieds-noirs*, Camus suggests, are artistic geniuses carving out of emptiness and oblivion an ideal civilization. Interestingly, this very creative potential that Camus instills into

his settler community seems finally to echo his own aspiration to a distinct, original *pied-noir* collective literary consciousness inspired by the Algerianists movement, initiated in 1921 by the French colonial writer Robert Randau. Camus's enthusiasm for this literary project is reflected in his collaborations with Gabriel Audisio and other Algerianists for the literary journal *Rivages*, issued twice in 1938 and 1939 before going out of print. The journal's editors induced writers and artists to create a distinct Algerian literary tradition, with a strong Latin (Spanish and Italian) resonance, in keeping with the Algerianists' Latin myth.¹⁰

Although it appears anti-hegemonic, this Algerianist vision of an Algerian literature is, nonetheless, problematic on two chief counts, at least. First, the Algerianists did not seek to completely emancipate the Algerian artistic scene from the dominant metropolitan literary tradition, but mostly to establish a distinct *pied-noir* literary production that would grow "both within and alongside French literature" (Graebner 101). Second, even as the new literary tradition envisioned by this movement aspired to capture the essence and flavour of its natural context, it, paradoxically, kept Arab and Berber literatures out of the scene, in complete disregard for Camus's myth of a hybrid Mediterranean culture in which East and West mix and cross-fertilize.¹¹ In fact, an ambition to found a unique literary and cultural *pied-noir* identity that is part of the French colonial culture while retaining its local colour is implicit in this Algerianist project. The Algerianists' aesthetic and ideological ambivalence seems to be present in Camus's own attitude towards French metropolitan culture, and particularly towards the Arabs and Berbers. In both *Le Premier Homme* and *Noces*, Camus fiercely contests colonial narratives of national identity, while simultaneously fostering an alternative collective settler identity itself, which is ironically fuelled by hegemonic and exclusionary practices. This is particularly manifest in *Le Premier Homme* which, as Hughes observes, "reflects repeatedly on the nature and functions of cultural and national identity" (19). The irony, though, is that the new form of cultural identity that Camus promotes asserts itself through deliberate amnesia of other narratives of identity, namely the French colonial identity and the Arab and Berber collective identities. This hegemonic tendency not only questions Camus's anti-colonialist stance, but also makes the very figure of amnesia itself appear as both an aesthetic fraud and a hegemonic mode of representation. Rather than simply a void that is waiting to be filled, within Camus's alternative cultural configuration amnesia becomes a gulf that devours all the colony's other stories of identity and culture.

An amnesiac person is known to forget or erase memories as much as he/she creates new ones, an erratic process that keeps the person's memory in a continuous creative dynamics. In *Le Premier Homme* and *Noces*, Camus fully mobilizes these two impulses of amnesia in his description of Algeria and the settlers, and in his overall redefinition of the French imperial enterprise and colonial identities. Furthermore, Camus himself appears as an amnesiac figure, for he, too, engages in a narrative process that constantly oscillates between erasure and rewriting, between the will to forget and the necessity to remember differently and build a new, national collective

memory, with the *pieds-noirs* as its centre of consciousness. Most of his descriptive efforts in these specific situations tend to harness amnesia to this para-colonialist project through which the memory of a whole community, the *pieds-noirs*, is redirected toward shaping its own collective stories of territory and identity that are both distinct from and opposed to the French imperial narratives of identification, as well as to those of the indigenous Algerians. Camus's process of redefinition consists mostly of retelling the story of imperialism from the *pieds-noirs*' marginal perspective, without censure or mediation from the metropolitan centre. However, this *pied-noir* minor tale of empire that Camus nurtures in both works seems flawed. It strongly echoes, in fact, the same imperial dominant narratives of culture and identity he steadily contests in his writing.

As Camus constructs a collective memory for the *pied-noir* community, he reinforces this community's indigeneity both by drawing attention to their longevity in Algeria and by recouping most of the stereotypes commonly used to define colonized peoples, such as laziness, barbarism, or indifference to the future. He proudly applies these colonial clichés to his settler characters, in what sounds like an elaborate “strategy of indigenization” (Acheraiou, *Rethinking Postcolonialism* 199). Furthermore, even as he appropriates these various colonial stereotypes, Camus also ennobles and then uses them as a bulwark against the dominant French imperial ideology, and, more specifically, against the traditional figure, recurrent in French colonial propaganda, of the colonist as a hard worker, pioneer, and civilizer of the “barbarians.” In the same breath, then, Camus legitimizes the European settlers as autochthonous in a presumably amnesiac Algeria and safely keeps at bay metropolitan France, which he now relegates to a remote, “exotic” setting that is completely foreign to the settlers, particularly to their offspring:

And these children, who knew only the sirocco, the dust, the short torrential cloudbursts, the sand of the beaches, and the sea in flames would assiduously read —accenting the commas and periods—stories that to them were mythical, where children in hoods and mufflers, their feet in wooden shoes, would come home dragging bundles of sticks along snowy paths until they saw the snow-covered roof of the house where the smoking chimney told them the pea soup was cooking in the hearth. (112-13)

In this statement, Camus revisits the notion of willful amnesia, not just to keep metropolitan France at a heightened remove, but, most importantly, to turn this cumbersome metropolitan centre into an obscure memory and a land of oblivion, with no tangible existence for these Algerian schoolchildren or for the settler community as a whole. In addition to the motif of amnesia, Camus consistently reiterates the narrative of poverty, thus providing the reader with materialist explanations of colonization, both to exonerate the *pied-noir* community from imperial horrors and responsibility, and to elicit the reader's empathy for this community. As history has shown, most of the early settlers from Spain, Malta, Alsace, Italy, and elsewhere swarmed into Algeria to escape from social and economic hardships, as Camus acknowledges in *Le Premier Homme*. From the novel's early chapters, the reader is

informed that these European settlers are not purveyors of science and enlightenment, as French colonialist ideology maintains, but poor bread-seekers and “a nest of illiterates who multiplied, far from any school, harnessed to a life of exhausting labour under a ferocious sun” (65).

Although Camus is right in stating that most of these settlers were driven into the colony by unfortunate economic circumstances, in the process he tends to overlook that these same settlers were, in the first place, allowed, often encouraged, into the colony by the imperial system itself. By their mere presence in this conquered territory, therefore, these helpless bread-seekers, willingly or not, became members of the French imperial nation into which they had been incorporated. In both works Camus strives to distinguish the *pied-noir* community from the French bourgeois colonists, arguing that these settlers have neither a past or a memory to which they can return, nor do they wish to tie their destiny to the French colonial past. They thus aimlessly drift in an obscure vacuum or a kingdom of oblivion, with nature as their sole ancestor and guide. However, as though he has suddenly realized that no community can realistically be severed from its ancestral legacy, Camus expediently unearths from this colonial vacuum of the Mediterranean a prestigious past for his rootless, orphaned settlers: that of ancient Greece. He thus makes these settlers the ancient Greeks’ heirs while associating the French bourgeois colonizers with the Romans, whom he describes in *Noces* as tyrants and ruthless destroyers:

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We favoured power which aped grandeur; first, Alexander, then the Roman conquerors that the authors of our curricula, by an immeasurable spiritual hollowness, teach us to admire. We conquered in turn, removed borders, and mastered sky and earth. Our reason created a vacuum. Alone, at last, we accomplish our empire in a desert. (135)

In this passage, Camus indicts modern European war horrors by associating them with Macedonian and Roman imperialisms, while he fervently acclaims the ancient Greeks’ grandeur and unmatched sense of balance and moderation: “Greek thinking had always rested on the notion of limit. It pushed nothing to a breaking point, neither the sacred nor the cerebral. It had mediated between opposites, balancing shadow and light” (133). However, in his unqualified praise for the Hellenic civilization, Camus keeps silent about the Greeks’ racial prejudices toward non-Greeks or “barbarians” and their exploitation of colonized peoples. This significant omission again makes Camus’s historical perspective misleading and suspect. There is, of course, no evidence in either text as to whether this silence was premediated or not. Knowing, yet, how much Camus was versed in ancient Greek literature and history, this oversight may not be simply accidental, but the result of a deliberate will to forget. Through this affiliation and analogy, Camus aims to preserve, in both his own eyes and in the eyes of the *pied-noir* “imagined community” he anticipates in his writing, the idealized image of the ancient Greeks with whom he identifies this community. By associating the settlers with the Greeks instead of the Romans, Camus tends to justify these settlers’ right to take over Algeria from what he considers dull,

cruel Roman heirs: the French bourgeois imperialists ruling over the colony from the remote, indifferent metropolis. This genealogical affiliation, which constitutes a key component of Camus's overall strategy of legitimization in these two works, serves two interconnected goals: it reinforces the settlers' political and territorial claims over Algeria; it also allows the ancient Greek past, which functions as a prop for Camus's para-colonialist ethics of legitimization, to form an inestimable repository of myths and values that would fuel the *pieds-noirs'* collective memory.

170 Camus's association of the *pieds-noirs* with his idealized image of ancient imperial Greece, his consistent attempt to exonerate the European working class from imperial culpability, and his insistence on the settlers' historical, cultural, and geographical amnesia all articulate a potent counter-hegemonic agency intended to shape a coherent *pied-noir* narrative of belonging and collective memory. This ideological and political project is as highly ambitious as it is fraught with insoluble paradoxes. In particular, Camus's handling of both the past and the notion of amnesia itself in these works is caught in a dialectics of lack and excess, of void and plenitude, of the desire to forget and the need to remember differently. This may be why, after a steady insistence on the settlers' lack of past and memory, Camus finally wraps up this drifting, amnesiac community in a prestigious past. In doing so, he not only distances the *pieds-noirs* from the horrors of French colonialism, but also symbolically releases them from the presumed orphanhood and existential precariousness seen throughout these two novels. After providing the *pied-noir* community with a valuable lineage, Camus carefully reminds this community of the virtues of forgetting. The narrator's injunction in *Le Premier Homme* to "stick to the present" and "not to remember too much" sounds, in this case, like a solemn pact of oblivion that provides the precondition for the establishment of the *pied-noir* communal memory projected in both works. This vital memory would, in turn, constitute the cornerstone to the edification of the Algerian "nation" advocated by most *pieds-noirs* and reflected in Camus's deft handling of amnesia (62-63).

Nation building, as Ernest Renan famously declared, depends both on the need for people to share collective memories or remember together, and on the necessity of forgetting: "The essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things" (11). In *Le Premier Homme* and *Noces*, Camus seems to be rehearsing Renan's notion of national belonging by urging his settler characters to forget together or remember only sparingly in order to shape the new collective destiny that would fuel the *pied-noir* nation. To highlight the feasibility of this vital communal venture, Camus consistently stresses the values shared by this social and cultural group: determination, hospitality, fraternity, solidarity, generosity, *joie de vivre*, beauty, and creativity. Aware that these settlers are *de facto* not a homogeneous set, he also cautiously urges them to be selective in their remembering, or more precisely, to avoid too much indulgence in recollection, so as not to spark off existing cultural and social differences or rivalries within this settler community.

“Selective forgetting,” as Paul Ricoeur reminds us, is a necessary condition for memory. Camus, specifically, exhorts his European characters to forget selectively in order to construct a settler collective memory. This discriminating oblivion forms a fundamental step in the achievement of the would-be *pied-noir* nation that haunts Camus’s works. However, judging from Camus’s overall para-colonialist project in *Le Premier Homme* and *Noces*, in the end amnesia appears more fundamentally linked to the future than it is to the past or the present, since it is mostly geared to shaping a new historical destiny for Algeria with the *pieds-noirs* as its rightful, natural leaders. Camus’s double-edged, elusive overall approach to amnesia in these two works also proves both oxymoronic and profoundly deceptive, all the more so as Camus resorts to amnesia or discriminate forgetting to buttress the alternative para-colonial narrative of memory he promotes in his writing. In so doing, he also produces new categories of amnesia that repeat, with slight variations, the colonialist dominant narratives of history and memory he apparently contests. These proto-colonialist tendencies are predominantly reflected in Camus’s attitude toward Arab and Berber characters. In Camus’s works, Arabs and Berbers are often either not mentioned at all, as in *The Plague* (1947), for example, or left at the margins of the text, as in *The Outsider* (1942). *Le Premier Homme* and *Noces* show similar exclusionary patterns: the narrative of *pied-noir* poverty and exploitation by bourgeois imperial capitalism is steadily enhanced, whereas the story of the Arabs’ and Berbers’ cultural, economic, and political alienation is widely marginalized, either lightly treated or skillfully sucked up and diluted into the dominant narrative of the European settlers’ suffering and indigence.¹²

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These various examples illustrate that, although it appears anti-imperialist, Camus’s counter-hegemonic perspective on the past, history, and memory is, in practice, underpinned by dominant impulses akin to those he condemns in the French imperial ideology. Colonialist discourse rests on grand stories of national history and an idealized collective memory in order to gain both symbolic and real ascendancy over the colonized. In *Le Premier Homme* and *Noces*, Camus relies instead on amnesia or discriminate oblivion to carve out a para-colonialist narrative of belonging, a *pied-noir* collective identity and sense of memory, shaped both in parallel and in opposition to the French imperial narrative of nationhood and to the Arab and Berber stories of identification.

In the end, what emerges from Camus’s approach to history and memory is a tendency to contest both the narratives of history and memory by resorting to “counter-memory” (162-63), a process that Foucault defines in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” as a means to disrupt traditional conceptions of history and the historical process itself by returning to the past to weave homogeneous narratives of identity. Camus does not, however, revisit the settlers’ past to knit a homogeneous narrative of identity for them, because, as Jean-Jacques Jordi remarks, “in order for the *pied-noir* community to exist, it needs a historical reference, but this reference cannot be the history of France” (14; my translation). Camus instead journeys back to the remote

idealized Greek past, as we have seen, to spin a homogeneous tale of a *pied-noir* collective memory, as an antidote to both colonial guilt and existential precariousness. Throughout *Le Premier Homme* and *Noces*, Camus consistently questions and displaces available narratives of memory and history such as French colonial history or Arab and Berber stories of belonging, only to erect in their place a *pied-noir* dominant narrative of being and meaning. Significantly, this ethics of displacement shows that Camus's recourse to "counter-memory" in both works is less a complete break-away from the past or memory than a proto-nationalist attempt to build an idealized community of remembering that would enjoy the privilege of imperial dominance without having to shoulder the burden or the culpability of the French "civilizing mission."¹³ In short, far from seeking to collapse imperial ideology through this process of discriminate oblivion, Camus mostly intends to reform the imperial system and write a new history of the French colony from the *pied-noir* (peripheral) perspective.¹⁴ He thus seems to engage in a revisionist historical manoeuvre that legitimizes

172 the colonial fact in new guises, while anticipating the foundations of a unified *pied-noir* community of ethnic solidarity and fraternity in a completely remapped Algeria. It is true that, unlike in most of his other fictional works, in *Le Premier Homme* Camus extends solidarity to the Berbers and Arabs by inviting the *pieds-noirs* and these indigenous populations to peacefully share the land and forget their differences. This ethical impulse is praiseworthy, but may seem superfluous at best in the violent context of the Algerian War that the novel depicts and the repatriation of the *pieds-noirs* looming in the horizon.¹⁵

Camus's ambivalence toward the past, history, and memory is a recurring ideological pattern in his writing, and many scholars have addressed these issues of ambiguity and mediation to explain the author's perception of history and memory. Nancy Wood, for example, argues that Camus constructs a "historical memory" which takes into consideration "ambivalences, but moderates the extremes" (185). Debra Kelly also discusses this notion of "mediation" and describes *Le Premier Homme* as a text of "mediation [...] haunted by the silences of the past" (192) and permeated with a sense of "mourning" and "loss" (198). Kelly further asserts that in this novel Camus shapes a "subjective remembrance" that is, as she implies, best assessed in the light of colonial Algeria's "multiple collective memories": "Camus's remembrance is subjective certainly—it is socially constructed as is history. Yet a multiplicity of memories must be held side by side, as must a multiplicity of histories, if we are to make sense of the postcolonial world" (196).

In *Le Premier Homme* Camus presents French colonial Algeria as a site of "multiple histories" and "collective memories." However, rather than setting these various histories and memories "side by side," the Algerian War that grimly looms over the text casts these memories within violent, hierarchical power relationships in which each distinct collective memory is struggling for legitimacy and supremacy. Even before the war, these diverse Algerian populations were not as fraternal or harmonious as Camus may imply in these novels, but had their respective memories profoundly

closed off from each other. As Pierre Nora remarks: “By shutting themselves from one another these memories create a landscape of several Algerias which are superimposed but seem to not know each other” (*Les Français* 76; my translation). Given the context of the Algerian War to which *Le Premier Homme* responds, therefore, it is fitting that this novel should reflect the anxieties endured by the various collective memories enmeshed in this conflict.¹⁶ On the other hand, knowing Camus’s opposition to this war and call for mediation and peace, his efforts to reconcile the different war antagonists come as no surprise.¹⁷ Camus’s plea for moderation is noble and ethically worthwhile, even though his overall ethics of mediation, especially regarding history and memory, is underpinned by a totalizing impulse, not different from the one he condemns in the imperialist discourse. Furthermore, Camus does not only project a *pied-noir* collective memory that claims to be “part of Algeria’s collective heritage,” as Wood observes (185), but, through his insistence on *pied-noir* indigeneity and Algerian blankness, he also tends to establish this community’s identity as Algeria’s primary memory, by erecting these settlers into the emblems of Algeria’s cultural and historical essence. The choice of the city of Tipaza as the setting of *Noces*, with its three churches and Roman vestiges that predate the Arab colonization of Algeria, further consolidates his propensity to erase the history of non-European Algerians.

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Camus’s depiction of Algeria and its peoples in these two works is dense and convoluted, as well as flawed and questionable. It surreptitiously tends to subject Algeria’s multiple, competing layers of memory to one single, overpowering site of collective identification: the *pied-noir* para-colonialist narrative of memory. Amnesia proves a convenient connective tissue within this overall para-colonialist discourse.¹⁸ Through a deft manipulation of this trope, Camus mostly weaves a marginal, and yet hegemonic, narrative of history and remembering that leaves little room for Algeria’s other stories of identity. For this reason, his general handling of amnesia in both works appears more as a neo-colonial affirmation of power and supremacy than as a sign of deprivation or powerlessness. Thus, rather than being merely a symptom of the settlers’ precarious colonial condition or alienation from French imperial culture, as Camus wants us to believe, amnesia functions above all as a means of para-colonial empowerment. In both texts, amnesia fundamentally stands out as an overwhelming aesthetic and ideological scheme that blurs the frontiers between colonialist and para-colonialist narratives of domination, literature and politics, projective memory and selective forgetting.

NOTES

1. Like Catherine Cormery, Camus’s mother was poor, illiterate, partially deaf, and afflicted with a speech impediment. She worked in an ammunition factory and as a charwoman to support her family.

2. *Pied-noir* nationalist aspirations feature prominently in Camus's fiction. Referring to this settler nationalism, Todd Shepard argues that "among immigrants from Europe, and their descendants, anti-indigenous politics helped consolidate a new 'Algerian' identity (while there were some calls to establish a state separate from France, most 'European'; Algerians embraced their relationship to the metropole)" (37).
3. In "Between Memory and History," Pierre Nora distinguishes memory from history in the following terms: "Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting [...] History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past" (8-9).
4. There is, of course, an autobiographical dimension to Camus's insistence on the *pied-noir* characters' poverty in both *Noces* and *Le Premier Homme*, starting with his own family. However, rather than being merely descriptive, as demonstrated throughout this article, Camus's narrative of poverty has far more complex ideological and political implications within the imperial context he describes.
5. For details, see Camus's *Essais*.
6. Camus was a member of the Communist Party between 1935 and 1937, and, as I have noted elsewhere, this may have widely influenced his perception of French colonial politics and economics in Algeria: "The fact that Camus came from a modest background, that he had been for some time a member of the Algerian Communist Party may have led him to valorise popular culture and support the workers of European, Arab, and Berber descent. His sympathy for the working classes may have accordingly urged him to condemn capitalism's squeezing of the colonies 'white' and 'brown' proletariat" (*Rethinking Postcolonialism* 202).
7. Christine Margerrison, Mark Orme, and Lissa Lincoln have said of the issue of guilt in *Le Premier Homme*: "As the quest for release from the burden of this historical legacy, *The First Man* promotes a *devoir d'oubli* where selective forgetting subverts the violence of (de)colonization, and the notion of working class 'innocence' is introduced to bypass the reality of colonial guilt. A revised view of the past, then, is used as a means by which to legitimize the future in colonial Algeria" (15). On Camus's relation to imperial guilt, see Hughes; also see *Rethinking Postcolonialism*.
8. It is important to note that Camus's notion of homeland is not as inclusive as he wants us to believe. In *Camus*, O'Brien refers to Camus's vision of the Mediterranean Man arguing that Camus invokes images of Greek temples and culture, but nowhere in his essays did Camus mention mosques or any other accomplishments of Berber and Arab cultures; an erasure that O'Brien sees as Camus's attempt to legitimise French colonialism. In *Rethinking Postcolonialism*, I elaborate on this idea, arguing that "like most *pieds-noirs*, Camus defines Algeria's political and cultural identity through denegation and erasure of otherness. The rhetoric of rupture he deploys dissociates the settlers from the hegemonic imperial politics of incorporation, as much as it separates them from the indigenous multitude threatening to overwhelm the Europeans with their number" (201).
9. In *Essais*, Camus dismissed the Algerian struggle for independence as the work of a "passionate," "romantic" group of young insurgents with no sense of political realities (1012).
10. From its beginning, archaeologists and architects were part and parcel of Algeria's military conquest. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in particular, France embarked on an important archaeological enterprise aimed at excavating the Roman past of this French Mediterranean colony. French colonial writers such as Robert Landau and Louis Bertrand enthusiastically endorsed these archaeological forays into Algeria's Roman legacy to justify the legitimacy of France's colonization. See *Rethinking Postcolonialism*; also see Ageron, Dunwoodie, and Monego.
11. In his 1937 lecture at La Maison de la Culture, Camus declared: "North Africa is one of the few countries where East and West meet, and in this confluence there is no difference between the manner of the Spaniard or an Italian of the quays of Algiers and the Arabs who are around him" (4). He further stressed the "Mediterranean genius" and "linguistic unity" (4), by which he meant mainly

Romance languages, which *ipso facto* excludes Arabic and Berber from this Mediterranean linguistic community.

12. It is worth mentioning that in his essays, particularly in "Misère de la Kabylie," Camus fervently protested the indigenous populations' living conditions and called for reforms. However, he did not go so far as to call for an end to colonization, which made this misery possible in the first place (905-38).
13. The *pied-noir* nationalism was reflected in their appropriation of the term "Algerian" itself. In fact, as early as 1895, the *pieds-noirs* referred to themselves as autochthonous Algerians. Camus repeatedly used the word "Algerians" for European settlers, and often did so to reinforce the *pieds-noirs*' widespread conviction that they were more Algerian than the indigenous Arabs and Berbers.
14. Camus supported the Blum-Violette project, which aimed to improve the social and economic conditions of the indigenous populations, and reiterated his social engagement for social reforms in the articles he wrote for *Alger Républicain* between 1938 and 1958.
15. On the situation of the *pieds-noirs* after Algeria's independence, see Hubbell.
16. For a detailed study of the Algerian War, see Shepard.
17. Hughes offers an interesting insight into the issue of reconciliation in *Le Premier Homme*: "In that sense, those present at the birth scene can be likened to other well-known figures of reconciliation in Camus's fiction such as Janine, Daru, and Arrast in *L'Exil et le royaume*. In a more speculative way, we might say that the fantasy scenario of a racial harmony secured by the birth of Cormery *fil*s belongs to a process of self-dramatization, in which Cormery longs to stand out as a conciliator capable of collapsing ethnic difference and so initiating, as 'premier homme,' a new beginning" (8).
18. I first used the concept of para-colonialist discourse in *Rethinking Postcolonialism* with reference to British modernist writers, including Joseph Conrad, E.M. Forster, and Graham Greene. Camus displays a similar para-colonialist attitude to colonialism, and, like these writers, he too challenges imperialism, but at the same time proves tacitly collusive with the colonial ideology and culture he criticises. In *Rethinking Postcolonialism*, I defined para-colonialism as "a fractured enunciation split between covert endorsement of the imperial major narrative of progress and an open support for a minor rhetoric of (anti-colonial) resistance" (117). In plain terms, this concept refers to Camus's simultaneous contestation of the French imperial abuses in Algeria and his support of a reformed, or at least less inhumane, form of imperialism. Although this humanist approach is ethically noteworthy, it tends to overlook that imperialism, driven mostly by thirst for riches and power, has essentially no ethical foundation; as such, its *raison d'être* cannot be justified on ethical grounds.

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