“Entre Deux Histoires”:
Unearthing Memory, Identity and Time
in Kamel Daoud’s Meursault, contre-enquête

Le monde se défait. Mais je suis le monde.
Aimé Césaire

Kamel Daoud’s novel *Meursault, contre-enquête* is as much a retelling of Camus’s *L’étranger* as it is a story about the narrator’s childhood during the Algerian War of Independence and the ways in which this war has determined the identity of Algerians since independence. The elderly narrator, Haroun, says that he is the brother of *l’Arabe* – whose name, we learn, was Moussa – who was shot and killed by Meursault in the 1942 novel. Yet, as a young child, hardly five years old at the moment of his brother’s death, the now octogenarian narrator’s soliloquy seeks to construct a personal story and a collective history that extends far beyond *L’étranger*. The significance of this simultaneous narration of personal and collective memory is articulated in one scene that takes place during the ceasefire of July 1962, just after independence and the official end of the war, in which Haroun murders a Frenchman whom he refers to as *le Français*. Haroun says, “Personne ne tue une personne précise durant une guerre”¹, highlighting that what would have been a battlefield statistic just days before is now a murder.

Later on, Haroun describes the moment just before he killed *le Français*, “Il était là coincé entre deux histoires et quelques murs, pour seule issue mon histoire à moi qui ne lui laissait aucune chance” (MCE 93-94, emphasis added). *Le Français* is stuck between two *histoires*, in the full ambiguity of the term as both “story” and “history”. He is stuck between two stories, Camus’s novel and Daoud’s novel as a response to it. He is stuck between two histories, French and Algerian history or colonial and post-colonial history. It is in these dichotomies that one can begin to unearth the buried memory of French imperialism and the Algerian War of Independence as well as the subsequent role of this memory in the determination of contemporary French and Algerian identity.

Taking this scene and these dichotomies as my point of departure, I will make three connected attempts at unearthing, starting with the unearthing of memory. I will explore Daoud’s engagement with an often dissimulated past and the narrative techniques he uses to uncover or dig up this buried past. I will then seek to unearth the ways in which identity, as portrayed in the memory of the war, is structurally determined, placing a particular emphasis on the roles of the nation-state, capitalist imperialism and their corresponding temporal regimes in the construction of this identity. Finally, I will consider how this “unearthing” is made possible through the temporal approach of Daoud’s novel which I will qualify as archeological. This temporal approach, I will suggest, illuminates a long-dissimulated past and the representations of a so-called national identity that is in fact the pernicious fruit of imperialist social domination.

Unearthing Memory

The narrator of Daoud’s novel does nothing to hide that the murder of his brother is a fictional invention. This, however, does not make this murder any less significant. Early on in the narrative, he says, “Que voulez-vous que je vous dise, monsieur l’enquêteur,
sur un crime commis dans un livre?” (MCE 19). The fictionality of the original event is crucial because, as the reader discovers, Haroun’s version of his brother’s murder is based entirely on his reading of L’étranger. For him, this novel is hardly more than a philosophical tale about women and idleness, which blends with vague images from his childhood. Personally, he has no specific memories of that day. He says, “J’ai beau fouiller dans ma mémoire, de ce jour-là, du lendemain, je ne garde plus aucun souvenir, sinon celui de l’odeur du couscous” (MCE 34). Already, in this statement, one sees the emergence of archeological language in the word fouiller. Although he finds nothing about the infamous day of the murder itself, this does not mean that he cannot still unearth fragments or clues that lead him toward the source, to the buried object. Haroun thus incites readers into an investigation into the fictional murder, asking that they dig through silence, the substrate that has filled in around the buried event, in order to reveal what lies beneath.

5 Walter Benjamin suggests that “he who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging”. Like the archeologist who digs through layers of soil to reach the artifact, the rememberer digs through layers of his own memory. And this digging necessarily begins at the surface, that is, in the present. The fact that the novel is narrated from the present of its creation – sometime in the early 2010s – foregrounds an approach to the past that relies specifically on the narrator’s memory, in other words the past as it reveals itself in the present. From there, the narrator, like the archeologist, passes through the strata of his past in hopes of revealing fragments from which he might piece together the day of his brother’s death. The archeologist Laurent Olivier elaborates on Benjamin’s notion through a more explicit opposition of archeology and history. He writes, “We need to realize that history […] is not based on the reconstruction of a series of events or archeological facts over time. It is itself a construction of memory”.

6 Haroun’s life is of course marked by the death of his brother, but it is also marked by everything that he has experienced in the roughly 80 years since the death of his brother. This history produced not only his own identity, but also, one could say, the identity of Algeria as a whole. It becomes clear, as one reads, that this novel is not the story of l’Arabe but of an era, of a community or communities during that era. Near the middle of the novel Daoud calls attention to the multiple forms of memory present in the narrator’s story when he says, “Pour une fois que j’ai l’occasion de parler de cette histoire…” (MCE 61). When he says “cette histoire”, the first thing that comes to mind is
the story of *L’étranger*. However, the dual sense of *histoire* as story and history comes to bear here: he is speaking just as much about the history of Algeria since the murder, including many thousands of other murders, as he is about the story of the murder itself. He is pleased to talk about this story because the history of Algeria is one which is hardly ever spoken about, especially in France. A few pages later he remarks, “Cette histoire – je me permets d’être grandiloquent – est celle de tous les gens de cette époque” (*MCE* 71) which is to say not just the story of his brother, Moussa; it is the story of a people and of an era.

Yet Haroun’s story, and the history of his people, remains highly fragmentary. Consequently, he issues the following warning to his reader: “Elle [cette histoire] ressemble à un parchemin, dispersé de par le monde, essoré, rafistolé, désormais méconnaissable, dont le texte aura été ressassé jusqu’à l’infini – et tu es pourtant là, assis à mes côtés, espérant du neuf, de l’inédit. Cette histoire ne sied pas à ta quête de pureté, je te jure” (*MCE* 61). The content of the narrative is a fractured and dispersed multiplicity of heterogeneous memories including the memory of the author, the memory contained within *L’étranger*, the historical memory of Algerians, the historical memory of the French, each of which contains and intersects with a multitude of other individual memories. Yet, it is all so muddled that one must dispel the illusion that anything like a pure linear narrative of this story would be possible. Earlier in the novel, he even admits, “J’ai des images dans la tête, c’est tout ce que je peux t’offrir” (*MCE* 19). It is the reader’s responsibility to assemble the shards of Haroun’s past and of Algeria’s past from these scattered images and memories. The reader is the detective in the investigation that the novel’s title references.

And this detective is, importantly, a part of the same community as this article’s readership: French academia. Haroun occasionally addresses his reader in this way. For example, when he suspects that the reader might want to know more about his brother Moussa, he says, “Je ne sais vraiment plus, Monsieur l’inspecteur universitaire” (*MCE* 30) or, later on, he says of his brother, “C’est lui, le deuxième personnage le plus important, mais il n’a ni nom, ni visage, ni paroles. Tu y comprends quelque chose, toi, l’universitaire ? Cette histoire est absurde !” (*MCE* 63). He openly mocks the academic community that never seems to stop talking about the absurdity of *L’étranger*, and reappropriates this so-called absurdity in order to suggest that the absence of a name for *l’Arabe* is perhaps one of the most absurd aspects of the novel, an aspect that the academic community does not speak about.

In Daoud’s novel, the academic investigator quite literally does not speak about this aspect of Camus’s novel, nor about anything else for that matter. He does not say a word. The narrative is constructed such that the eighty-something-year-old Haroun, seated in a bar in Oran, recounts his life in the form of a monologue, or rather a dialogue with a silent interlocutor. This narrative apparatus is recognizable from Camus, but not from *L’étranger*. It is reminiscent of Clamence’s dialogue with a silent interlocutor in *La chute*. Daoud himself admits, in an interview about his novel, “C’est vrai, j’ai surtout voulu rendre un puissant hommage à *La chute*, tant j’aime ce livre que je considère comme étant le plus beau de Camus”⁵. In Camus’s narrative, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, a French expatriate living in Amsterdam, recounts his life to a silent interlocutor-reader. He frequently highlights this silence, for example, when he says, “Je conviendrai avec vous, malgré votre courtois silence, que cette aventure n’est pas très reluisante”⁶. One finds similar references to silence in Daoud’s novel, adapted to the intentions of his own
narrative, for example when Haroun says, “Silence. Je déteste ce mot, on y entend le vacarme de ses définitions multiples. Un souffle rauque traverse ma mémoire chaque fois que le monde se tait” (MCE 49). The role of silence in Daoud’s narrative is doubtlessly an homage to La chute, but in this new context its meaning is completely transformed.

In each of the two authors’ narratives, the role attributed to silence is determined by the commentary that each narrative offers on current affairs and the conditions of the present of its creation. In La chute, the monologic form is an attempt by Camus to put the reader into the same position in which he found himself in 1956, faced with demands from the public to comment on the war in Algeria. Camus was banished by most of his contemporaries, notably Jean-Paul Sartre, for his refusal to take an engaged position with regard to Algeria and to publicly support a party in the conflict. In the famous quarrel between Sartre and Camus, Sartre had the last word in his open letter published in Les Temps modernes; Camus never responded. It seems to me that La chute seeks to represent Sartre’s criticism in Clamence’s invectives and Camus’s silence in the reticence of the interlocutor-reader. In Daoud’s novel, the use of this same narrative apparatus has a completely different function; the silent investigator-reader does not represent the author’s point of view, but rather the point of view of a community or communities that he is outwardly critiquing for their silence with regard to Algeria, the war, racism and strained Franco-Algerian relations: French academics, French readers, and more broadly the “French people”, if such a collectivity even exists. Ultimately, he deploys Camus’s narrative apparatus in exactly the opposite way. Here, silence is not being valorized, it is being criticized. Readers are here being challenged to break their silence and to confront the buried memory placed before them, to dig up the shards of a broken, but not irretrievable past.

Unearthing Identity

The French identity attributed to the silent reader-investigator-interlocutor opens the door to many important questions about this novel. Foremost among them is perhaps the language in which the novel is written, the reflections on this language that the novel proposes, and the commentary that is offered on the novel itself as a literary form. We can develop this reflection by a closer look at the contrast between Camus and Daoud, the ways in which Daoud takes up and transforms the narrative apparatus from La chute and how this permits him to critique the notion of identity imposed by his presumably French reader.

This can be better understood, in part, by a distinction that Lionel Ruffel makes between silence-literature and brouhaha-literature. Beyond a straightforward contrast between written and oral production, Ruffel’s distinction contrasts the authority and enclosure of the printed novel and its silent, solitary reading with the plurality and openness of hybrid or pluri-media literary forms. He writes, “that the idea of literature imposed during modernity was very strongly linked to silence and, again, very strongly opposed to brouhaha”7. Camus’s novels are doubtlessly inscribed in this modern tradition of silence-literature, as Ruffel goes on to note, “the novel has no need to be read aloud and that this is the reason it has come to dominate other genres” (B 86). Of course, Daoud’s work is still a novel, and it is still published as a book, and thus does not exactly fall into the genre of brouhaha-literature which features the presence of the author, orality, performance – a physical, spatial and sonic presence – however, his decision to write a
novel is effectively a means of criticizing the genre of the novel and its exclusivity. It challenges the notion of purity imposed by the enclosure of the book as a form and, as a consequence, challenges the notion of purity of national identity. In this way, Daoud’s work can be understood as a novelistic formalization of the potential for brouhaha-literature that invites a move outside of the enclosure of the book.  

Haroun never wrote his story nor the story of his brother and he admits that he never wanted to. He prefers to communicate orally. This desire to never write his story comes, at least in part, from his contempt for the celebrity that Meursault achieved for writing. As he puts it, “Ce qui est inexplicable, ce n’est pas uniquement le meurtre, mais aussi la vie de cet homme. C’est un cadavre qui décrit magnifiquement les lumières de ce pays [...]. Sa vie ? S’il n’avait pas tué et écrit, personne ne se serait souvenu de lui” (MCE 73). He is suggesting that Meursault, though he is the first-person narrator, couldn’t possibly have written his own novel since he dies at the end, hence this “cadavre qui décrit magnifiquement”. From this remark one gathers that the novel that we are reading, this narrative that the French-speaking reader holds in his hands, was transcribed by the academic investigator during his visits to the bar in Oran that Haroun frequents. Transcribed, that is, not written: it is an act of archiving, not a speech act. Haroun remains the author of his own story, which the French academic transcribes and packages as a novel, allowing it to see the light of day among a French-speaking public. Moreover, his engagement in conversation with the French academic transcriptionist and, by extension, the French reader, incites these parties to lift their own self-imposed taboos regarding Haroun’s story, regarding their silence about the memory of Algeria. The French academic is thus not appropriating Haroun’s story, but rather entering into a conversation, silent at first, that goes on to include less-silent readers and to fuel a broader dialogue that has been demonstrated by this novel’s highly mediatized reception, its stimulation of interest for overlooked issues in Camus, issues that implicate a significant portion of the French literary community in a multifaceted or multidirectional conversation that one could very well describe as brouhaha.  

This points to Haroun’s insistence on the French language. He explains that he learned French first to read the story of his brother’s death as it was written by Camus, and later to be able to express his side of this same story. He says, “J’en éprouvais, pour longtemps, une honte impossible – plus tard, cela me poussa à apprendre une langue capable de faire barrage entre le délire de ma mère et moi. Oui, la langue. Celle que je lis, celle dans laquelle je m’exprime aujourd’hui qui n’est pas la sienne” (MCE 47) – not the language of his mother, that is, not his mother tongue. Yet the use of the language imposed by imperialist domination – a father tongue, as it were – serves precisely to undercut the silence imposed by this same domination. French makes the story comprehensible to the French academic transcriptionist-investigator-interlocutor, without whom this narrative would have remained an oral artifact, a story told in a bar, and in doing so draws the French public out from its silence. Through the use of the French language, which permits the entry of the literary expression of a subaltern contre-public – the Algerian perspective on Algerian independence – into dialogue with a French academic public, Haroun’s story becomes visible through its transformation into a contre-enquête turned novel, a novel which is inherently performative for its positioning between reality and fiction. It never explicitly mentions Camus’s name and often acts as though Meursault wrote L’étranger about himself. Were it not for Meursault’s written story, Haroun’s spoken story would never have had the chance to be heard. The narrative apparatus of silence from La chute is inverted so that the silence of
the French academic investigator is highlighted in a narrative that appears as the seed of brouhaha-literature transcribed into a novel – a form prescribed by “the French” that mirrors the identity imposed by this same group is here pushed toward a limit between the purity and enclosure of the book and the polyphony of public exchange, of performative brouhaha.

15 These unstable borders, between brouhaha-literature and silence-literature, between Algerian orator and French academic, between the broader identities associated with each of these, brings us to a fundamental question: how does a group of people – for example, “the French” – come to establish itself and come to oppose itself with another group – for example, “the Algerians”? It seems to me that these conceptions of national or community identity are closely linked with shared conceptions of time imposed by shared mediatic forms, among which the purity and enclosure of the novel provides a prime example that is mirrored in the purity and enclosure of national identity. A closer look at these conceptions of time reveals them to be manifestations of the structures of imperialist capitalism which necessarily impose identity as a form of domination. Algeria’s legal incorporation into the metropole is significant in this respect. During the time that France possessed Algeria, Algerians were all legally French; after independence, they were not. The silence surrounding the Algerian War – from the 1950s up to the present – is doubtlessly linked to the difficulties one encounters when thinking about the national identity of an independent Algeria which has irremediably been marked by a form of social domination that appears as “French” influence, and its apparent manifestation in form of the nation-state.

16 Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities considers that the nation is imaginary because it is too vast for its inhabitants to all have any one thing in common, much less to all know each other. They nevertheless form what appears as a community based upon a common conception of belonging. In his text, Anderson considers that the national imaginary hinges upon a common understanding of time – of temporal simultaneity – that permits the members of an imaginary community to think “together” about their nation. Lionel Ruffel, in reading Anderson, considers the temporal implications that these collective constitutions produce:

If Benedict Anderson is correct in thinking that the awareness of a ‘meanwhile’ marks every form of social organization, the imaginary of the nation – which remains the most important phenomenon of modernity – is constructed with or due to one of its potentialities: simultaneity becomes, for a time, the primary translation of contemporaneity. There is thus a powerful link, almost an essential one, between simultaneity and nation, and we must inquire whether that link remains in place today. (B 56. Translation modified³)

17 This simultaneity is produced and reinforced by various media that generate a common understanding of time. These include the novel and music (notably national anthems) as well as radio, television and internet. Essential to Ruffel’s reading of Anderson is that he highlights the nation-state as not a but the major phenomenon of modernity. Its illusion of simultaneity goes together with a linear modern conception of time.

18 Yet this linear modern conception of time, though it is linked with its appearance in the form of the nation-state, is fundamentally a product of a temporal experience imposed by the rise of capitalism. The social obligation for labor, measured by time, drains events of their significance as measures for experience as time is flattened and compressed into a line. Norbert Trenkle describes this connection between the social necessity for labor and a modern conception of time: “In the end, however, abstraction in the realm of
labor also reigns in the form of a highly specific rule of time that is both abstract-linear and homogeneous. What counts is objectively measurable time – in other words, the time that has been separated from the subjective sensations, feelings and experiences of working individuals\textsuperscript{10}. Deprived of an individual experience of time, working individuals’ collective experience of time becomes determined by this objectively measurable, abstract time which at once alienates individuals and unites them into a collectively exploitable entity for which “identity” eventually comes to be the banner. More than a mere effort for territorial expansion, the legal incorporation of the colony into the metropole signifies an expanded workforce, a pool of laborers that permits the metropole to extract ever more value from the dominated people. In this effort, identity creation becomes an instrument of social domination implemented through shared conceptions of time.

The media apparatuses that Ruffel, after Anderson, mentions – book, radio, television, internet, etc. – impose themselves as tools for identity-creation through their capacity to produce the feeling of simultaneity in the service of structural social domination. In other words, identity can be understood as one’s assigned role in a system whose primary function is the extraction and valorization of value. As Étienne Balibar puts it, “the very identity of the actors depends upon the process of formation and maintenance of hegemony”\textsuperscript{11}. Identity is an ideological tool whose forms of appearance transform, but whose function as a form of social domination often does not. Thus l’Arabe, an ethnicity, is hardly different from Algerian, a nationality. Balibar insists that “discourses of race and nation are never very far apart”\textsuperscript{12}. He continues, “No nation, that is, no national state, has an ethnic basis, which means that nationalism cannot be defined as an ethnocentrism except precisely in the sense of the product of a fictive ethnicity”\textsuperscript{13}. During French imperial rule in Algeria, though Algeria was legally a part of the metropole and thus its citizens were French citizens, a fictive race-based distinction was nevertheless made between the “Algerian French” and the “French French” despite the fact that both parties were legally citizens of the same nation-state. The ideological dissymmetry of this distinction after 1962 is fundamentally the same, though its terms have changed. A supposedly autonomous Algerian people is left with the same apparatuses of social domination through labor (for example, the extraction of crude oil and production of hydrocarbons by European and American enterprises despite the nationalization of Algerian industry) expressed in the form of a racial imaginary (for example, the continued racialization of labor relations for “ethnically Algerian” citizens of France) and an ineliminable residue of French cultural influence (for example, Haroun’s use of the French language or his penchant for French wines, a form of cultural domination which he prefers to the subsequent muslimization of Algeria which sought to replace it).

With the myth of homogeneous identity in mind, one can now see its link with the myth of linear homogeneous time and its instrumentality as a form of social domination. The official end of French control of Algeria as a point on a timeline is, of course, illusory since the construction of French identity as dominant continues to exert itself in Algeria. And in unearthing the myth of homogeneous time, one also unearths the myth of homogeneous identity. Bruno Latour’s analysis of this temporal problematic, and more specifically, its relation to revolution, is particularly instructive to this end. He writes:

\begin{quote}
If there is one thing we are incapable of carrying out, we now know, it is a revolution, whether it be in science, technology, politics or philosophy. But we are still modern when we interpret this fact as a disappointment, as if archaism had invaded everything, as if
\end{quote}
there no longer existed any public dump where we could pile up the repressed material behind us.\textsuperscript{14} In the illusory modern framework of linear time, homogeneous identity is viewed as possible and so, therefore, is revolution. Thus after Algerian independence, a political revolution, Algeria once again became entirely Algerian; before independence, however, Algeria was, in official terms, entirely French. We know, nevertheless, that neither of these statements is true. This supposed 180-degree transformation in identity is linked to the deceptive modern temporality of revolutions – an attachment to the idea that time’s passage can be altered by calendars, by dates. Now, I will further explore Haroun’s blurred identity – his feeling that he is neither Algerian, nor Arab, his rejection of this myth of homogeneous identity – and its links to his, and Daoud’s, approach to time.

Unearthing Time

\textsuperscript{21} This brings us back to our point of departure, the murder of \textit{le Français} during the July 1962 ceasefire, just after independence. For it is in this scene of the novel that questions of homogeneous identity – national or ethnic – and questions of homogeneous time – clock time, calendar time – most clearly coincide. The identity-based and temporal dichotomies are numerous – \textit{le Français} and \textit{l’Arabe}, domination and independence, colonial and post-colonial, war and post-war, and so on – yet none of them is satisfactory; they are all revealed in one way or another to be fictions. First of all, Daoud breaks down the myth of homogeneous national identity by giving a name and a story, not only to \textit{l’Arabe} whom he names Moussa but also to \textit{le Français} whom he names Joseph. And of the official end of the war, Haroun says, “À l’époque, on tuait beaucoup, je te l’ai dit, c’étaient les premiers jours de l’Indépendance. Durant cette période étrange, on pouvait tuer sans inquiétude ; la guerre était finie mais la mort se travestissait en accidents et en histoires de vengeance” (\textit{MCE} 89). Though the end of the war should signal the end of violence, it reveals itself to be another artificial delimitation, a myth of homogeneous time much like the supposedly homogeneous identities of \textit{le Français} and \textit{l’Arabe}. The problems of a homogeneous and singular temporality are fundamental when it comes to memory of something like the Algerian War of Independence. When one attempts to represent this memory according to a temporal imaginary of purity, one naturally falls victim to its concomitant myths of purity including national identity. All of these contribute to a silencing and dissimulation that can only be overcome by a temporal approach taking into account the multitude of possible temporal experiences that historical actors might have had and the even greater variety of temporal experiences that inheritors of this memory have had and will have.

\textsuperscript{22} This temporal problematic is particularly evident in the prefix “post-” that one finds in the terms “post-colonial” and “post-war” which does not signify a break, but rather a continuation paired with a reconfiguration. After all, any term that uses this prefix necessarily contains the word from which it is supposedly departing. The logic of the “post-” depends upon a modern homogeneous conception of time. Lionel Ruffel writes, “thinking with the post is thinking like a modern, that is, thinking of time as a succession with befores and afters, with sequences, with ruptures and borderlines. To be postmodern is only to be a modern who is tired of calling himself that” (\textit{B} 113). Before Ruffel, Bruno Latour offered the following characterization of a postmodern temporality: “we are still postmodern when we attempt to rise above this
disappointment”, the disappointment in our incapacity for revolution, “by juxtaposing in a collage elements from all times – elements that are equally outdated and outmoded”15. Meursault, contre-enquête surpasses these problematic temporalities since, rather than positioning itself in the unity and simultaneity of a national identity and a modern temporality or in the collage of identities and temporal reconfiguration of the postmodern, Daoud’s narrator fully accepts his ambiguous position in a globalized world. Daoud’s solution is a temporal approach that accounts for a multitude of temporal experiences which are superimposed and that reject the purity and simultaneity of modern time and, by extension, the purity of national identity.

Language itself is inextricably wrapped up in this multiplicity of temporalities and heterogeneity of identities. Haroun admits his respect for Camus and his language when he says:

J'ai brièvement connu le génie de ton héros : déchirer la langue commune de tous les jours pour émerger dans l'envers du royaume, là où une langue plus bouleversante attend de raconter le monde autrement. C'est cela ! Si ton héros raconte si bien l’assassinat de mon frère, c’est qu’il avait atteint le territoire d’une langue inconnue, plus puissante dans son étreinte, sans merci pour tailler la pierre des mots, nue comme la géométrie euclidienne. (MCE 110)

Through his innovations in language, Camus transformed the French of les belles-lettres into a new, stripped-down language that seeks to match the cruelty and inexplicability of its world. One finds echoes of this language in Daoud’s prose. We can understand that “l'envers du Royaume” – a reference to Camus’s collection of stories L'exil et le royaume16 – is to feel exiled in one’s own home, which is the case for Daoud and for his narrator Haroun, both of whom choose to communicate in French, a language that is foreign in their country, Algeria. Raconter son monde in a foreign language also means raconter le monde autrement.

Benedict Anderson considers that “there is a special kind of contemporaneous community which language alone suggests – above all in the form of poetry and songs. [...] The image: unisonance. Singing the Marseillaise [...] provides occasions for unisonality, for the echoic physical realization of the imagined community”17. The form of contemporaneity that Anderson is talking about is national simultaneity. Even though Daoud’s novel is written in French, it borrows words from Arabic underscoring its departure from national simultaneity and homogeneity. At one point he cites the words of a popular Algerian song by Khaled: “Malou khoya, malou majache. El b’har eddah âliya rah ou ma wellache” (MCE 65) whose refrain, translated into French, is “Où il est, mon frère pourquoi n’est-il pas revenu ? La mer me l’a pris, il n’est jamais revenu” (MCE 155). The unisonance and simultaneity of the national anthem are here replaced by a popular song by a popular Algerian singer and songwriter who is known worldwide and whose lyrics in Arabic recount, perhaps by accident, the story of L'étranger as the brother of l’Arabe lived it. This polyphony of voices and references demonstrates the extent of Daoud’s departure from a simultaneous nation-state model.

This is just one example of Daoud’s narrative’s ability to understand its hypermediatized, globalized world. Lionel Ruffel suggests that there exist three forms of contemporaneity, three temporalities, associated with three forms of collective identity: “the simultaneity of the nation; the synchronization of supranational forms founded on homogeneity (imaginary, of course), and notably the ethnoscapes that become visible through reading and diffusion; and the polychronicity of globalization in a
hypermediatized world that makes all forms of temporality coexist” (B 59. Translation modified18). Daoud’s narrative is clearly in this third mode of collective identity, the polychronicity of globalization. Haroun feels at home nowhere and he identifies with no collectivity in particular. He disparages Algeria and Algerians just as much as he disparages France and the French and just as much as these two entities look down on him in return. He says, “Arabe, je ne me suis jamais senti arabe, tu sais. C’est comme la négritude qui n’existe que par le regard du Blanc” (MCE 70). He is neither Muslim, nor Christian, he feels neither Algerian nor French. His identity is blurred and entirely unique.

27 This heterogenous identity goes together with the temporality of his narrative. He hates clocks specifically because Meursault killed his brother at 2:00 p.m. on the dot, as if the event would have been different at any other time. He goes beyond this mere aversion to suggest that his vision of time would function better if time travel were possible: “Je devais m’emparer de l’horloge de toutes mes heures vécues, en remonter le mécanisme vers les chiffres du cadran maudit et les faire coïncider avec l’heure exacte de l’assassinat de Moussa : quatorze heures-zoudj” (MCE 89). Later the relationship between memory and time travel is made more explicit: “Ce que je veux, c’est me souvenir, je le veux tellement et avec une si grande force que je pourrais remonter le temps peut-être, arriver à cette journée d’été 1942, et interdire l’accès à la plage, durant deux heures, à tous les Arabes possibles de ce pays” (MCE 99). He says that he wants to remember, and he describes this action of remembering through a dream of time travel. Ultimately, he realizes something close to this dream for time travel through the powerful reconfiguration of time that his narrative offers.

28 What I am here calling time travel is indicative of a growing trend, away from linear homogenous time, toward a horizontal and heterogenous polytemporality that Ruffel calls contemporanéisme and that is far more archeological than historicist in its approach. That is to say that, through studying the traces that objects have carried from the past to the present, this approach can access all times, even those that were thought lost or that have been silenced, by looking at them from the perspective of the present. “The contemporary era [is] distinguished by an overvaluation of the present, to the detriment of the past and the future” (B 149). It is a means of extricating oneself from a linear model of history, of time. It replaces this method, aptly described as historicist, with another approach to time that is archeological. Unlike history – that is, the historicism of the historical discipline – Ruffel writes, “far from being a science of the past, archeology is a study of the present – or rather, more precisely : archeology, within the materiality of the present, lets us discover the of memory of the past” (B 160). It is multidirectional, not unilinear. It is the study of memory, not of the past.

29 By reopening the Meursault investigation, Daoud allows the story of l’Arabe and a piece of the memory of the Algerian War of Independence to emerge from decades of dissimulation and silencing. Since l’Arabe, Haroun’s brother Moussa, is only a fictional character, the simple act of creating a memory of this character who didn’t have one before permits readers to travel back through time and to reintegrate Moussa into literary history, and at the same time, to reintegrate the Algerian War of Independence into collective memory. He travels back in time to create anew, from the currentness of the present, a lost past, to make its traces visible. And in taking apart the myth of homogeneous historicist time, Daoud also succeeds in taking apart the myth of homogeneous identity that comes along with this temporality. Just as homogeneous abstract time is an instrument of capitalist social domination tied to the compulsion to
work, so-called national or ethnic identity, French, Algerian, Arab or otherwise, is unearthed as a necessary instrument of imperialist social domination.

Jackson B. Smith
Princeton University

NOTES

1 Kamel Daoud, Meursault, contre-enquête, Arles, Actes Sud, 2014, p. 87; henceforth MCE.
3 Laurent Olivier, The Dark Abyss of Time : Archaeology and Memory, trans. Arthur Greenspan, Lanham, AltaMira Press, 2011, p. 186. Translation modified. The translator interprets “elle [l’histoire] est elle-même une construction de la mémoire” as “history is memory creation”. I have chose to more literally translate this phrase as, “it is itself a construction of memory” in order to maintain Olivier’s emphasis on the constructedness of history.
4 Ibid., p. 184. Translation modified. In the translator’s version, “l’à-présent” becomes “nowness”, which points to Benjamin’s original term Jetztzeit. I translate this term as “the at-present” so as to not elide the presence of the word “present”.
6 Albert Camus, La chute, Paris, Gallimard, <Folio>, 1956, p. 70.
7 Lionel Ruffel, Brouhaha : Worlds of the Contemporary, trans. Raymond N. Mackenzie, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2018, p. 86; henceforth B.
8 It seems relevant to note that Haroun and Moussa are the arabic equivalents of the biblical names Aaron and Moses. In Exodus, Aaron speaks for his brother Moses who cannot speak well. Moussa is voiceless, not only because he is dead, but also because he could not speak French.
9 The translator, here, translates the French “pendant ce temps” – which is Ruffel’s translation of Anderson’s term “meanwhile” – as “during this time”. I have chosen to restitute Anderson’s initial term for accuracy’s sake.
12 Étienne Balibar, “Racism and Nationalism”, in Race, Nation, Class, op. cit., p. 37.
13 Ibid., p. 49.
15 Ibid., p. 69.
16 Albert Camus, L’exil et le royaume, Paris, Gallimard, <Folio>, 1957. One story from this collection, “L’hôte”, features a character Daru who is from Algeria. At the beginning of the story Camus writes, “Daru y était né. Partout ailleurs, il se sentait exilé” (83). But by the end of the story, he even feels exiled in his own country: “Dans ce vaste pays qu’il avait tant aimé, il était seul” (99).
18 The translator interprets “le simultanéisme de la nation” as “simultaneity and nation”. I prefer to preserve the genitive of the French statement.