
Say His Name: Reading *L'Étranger* and *Meursault, contre-enquête* in the Age of Black Lives

Matter

Abstract:

This paper uses Albert Camus' *L'Étranger* and its reimagining in Kamel Daoud's *Meursault, contre-enquête* as a lens for examining racially-motivated police brutality in the US and the Black Lives Matter movement's outcry against it. The parallels between the unnamed Arab's death at the hands of Meursault in *L'Étranger* and George Floyd's death at the hands of the police shed light on to the continued reality of systemic racism in the US. *Meursault, contre-enquête* offers up a cross-examination of *L'Étranger* which aims to flip the narrative and deanonymize the victim of the crime, in a similar fashion to Black Lives Matter's #SayTheirNames campaign. In the first half of my argument, I critique the traditional reading of *L'Étranger* as a parable of the absurd human condition by considering ways that the white supremacy ingrained in the French colonial system enabled the particularly absurd outcome of Meursault's trial. I then analyze the ways in which white supremacy and anti-Black racism in the US have similarly shaped popular discourse surrounding George Floyd's death. I observe how this discourse attempts to rationalize the event rather than seriously consider the role systemic racism played in it. In the second half, I examine an alternative worldview presented in *Meursault, contre-enquête*, where individual experience illuminates universal injustices. I use this text as a tool for understanding how Black Lives Matter and its call for defunding police departments can lead the way towards a more empathetic notion of justice in the US.

“On ne tue pas un homme facilement quand il a un prénom.”

“It’s not easy to kill a man when he has a first name.”

-Kamel Daoud, *Meursault, contre-enquête*

1. Introduction

When George Floyd’s needless death at the hands of police officers ignited a wave of demonstrations and sent the nation into mourning, it was difficult to think about anything else. Memorials for Floyd drew millions of people across the country and the globe, and his story dominated news cycles and social media feeds for weeks. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has been nationally recognized since 2014, when grassroots activists first took to streets to demand justice for Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and many other Black individuals murdered by law enforcement officers who were never punished. However, the movement has never seen solidarity as widespread and sustained as it has since George Floyd was killed. Memorials for Floyd’s death in May 2020 quickly evolved into Black Lives Matter protests against police brutality and systemic racism, whose principal call to action is now to “defund the police.” In some US cities like Portland, these protests are still going strong as of September 2020, more than 100 days after Floyd’s death (Moshtaghian and Levenson).

This incident came at an unprecedented time in US history when nearly all Americans other than essential workers were stuck at home due to the COVID-19 quarantine. In May 2020, unemployment was near its pandemic peak at 15%, and people were spending more time than ever online consuming news and using social media (US Bureau of Labor Statistics). Floyd’s

murder was captured by a bystander in a chilling video that circulated throughout social media. In the video, Floyd begs for his life and says that he can't breathe as Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin kneels on his neck for nearly nine minutes straight. The video clearly shows that Floyd was not resisting and that the officer was consciously choosing to kill him through use of a dangerous chokehold (MacFarquhar). Floyd's alleged crime—trying to make a purchase with a counterfeit \$20 bill at a gas station—was moreover petty and quite possibly unintentional. Though Black people in America have always been the victims of police brutality at shockingly high rates, the atrocity of this video and the sustained attention it received have led more people than ever to seriously consider the pervasive nature of anti-Black racism in contemporary America.

Reading Albert Camus' 1942 novel *L'Étranger* (*The Stranger*) in 2020, it is impossible not to see deep parallels between George Floyd's murder and the murder which occurs in this novel, where Meursault, a white man of French descent living in colonial Algeria, murders an unnamed Arab man on a beach and faces trial in French colonial court. There are important relationships between the murders themselves, as well as the way in which they have been interpreted by white-centered voices in scholarship and the media. *Meursault, contre-enquête* (*The Meursault Investigation*), a novel by Algerian writer Kamel Daoud, is a direct response to the story of *L'Étranger*, reconstructed from the native Algerian perspective. The book first appeared in Algeria in 2013, the same year that #BlackLivesMatter started gaining momentum online, and it was reissued in France in 2014, when the first BLM-affiliated protests took place in the US. This novel and the Black Lives Matter movement have much in common, in that they seek to de-anonymize the victim of brutal violence and elevate their story, in order to illuminate

the divide in thinking which exists between the oppressed and their oppressor, as well as demand justice for the victim's family and community. This paper will examine the recent high-profile murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement's response to it, through the lens of the murder committed by Meursault in *L'Étranger* and its cross-examination from the point of view of the victims's family in *Meursault, contre-enquête*. The goal of this line of inquiry is to use these texts as a tool for better understanding how police brutality against Black people in the US illustrates the systemic racism that continues to underpin our policing, legal, and prison systems. Moreover, this comparative analysis will reveal important insights about why we should move away from our failed attempts at corrective justice and towards a notion of justice that is truly empathetic to all Americans, beginning with the victim.

2. Character Evidence

A classic of French existentialist literature, *L'Étranger* has been frequently read as a universal parable of the absurd human condition, dislodged from any significant historical context. Its narrator Meursault is a *pied-noir*, a settler of European descent born and raised in colonial Algeria, who is arrested for murdering an unnamed Arab man on an Algerian beach. Meursault is arrested and ultimately condemned to death, yet for reasons that remarkably have nothing to do with the homicide he committed. Richard Posner, a former US Circuit Court Chief Judge and legal scholar, examines Meursault's trial from a modern American legal perspective in his 2009 book *Law and Literature*, which seeks to uncover what these two fields of study can reveal about each other. Posner correctly observes that the French colonial court which tried Meursault likely wouldn't dream of giving capital punishment to a white colonist who had murdered a mere native—white supremacy was explicitly built into the French colonial

enterprise and its legal system in Algeria (64). Instead, Meursault is condemned for his rejection of bourgeois morality, sentimentality, and religion, which makes him a menace to *pied-noir* society. While the murder he committed goes largely undiscussed during his trial, the fact that he didn't cry at his mother's recent funeral, forgot her age, and took on a new lover the very next day are discussed at length and given immense weight. The prosecutor accuses Meursault of having "tuait moralement sa mère,"¹ and it can be argued that this metaphorical killing of his white mother carries a weight with the jury which the killing of an Arab does not (Camus 152). Meursault is essentialized as someone prone to crime and senseless violence because of his disregard for bourgeois society's moral conventions, so in order to prevent him from doing worse in the future, he is condemned to death proactively. If left alive, the victim of his next random act of violence could be someone whose death matters to the *pieds-noirs*—another white person.

Posner makes the hasty supposition that this same case would unfold very differently in the US today, where he claims that the perceived moral character of the defendant cannot be used as evidence of their crime:

A reader, however, may find in [*L'Étranger*] a reason...for preferring the Anglo-American system of criminal justice: it avoids demeaning and largely irrelevant inquiries into character and thus better approximates corrective justice, which bases legal liability on the defendant's conduct rather than on his character, status, or deserts... [Still]

Meursault would probably not have been acquitted, or even convicted of a lesser offense, had the character evidence been excluded from his trial (64).

¹ Morally killed his mother (All translations provided are done by the author of this paper.)

Posner goes on to claim that Meursault would've most likely been convicted of second-degree murder in the US.

Posner's comparative analysis of Meursault's case rests on several assumptions about the American legal system: that it cares only about the objective facts of a crime, rather than the identities of the people involved, and that this leads to "corrective justice," which seeks simply to correct the wrongdoings of individuals. Under this framework of corrective justice, punishing the perpetrator and compensating the victim of a crime are two sides of the same coin, accomplished by the same act. Posner is correct in saying that this French Algerian court in *L'Étranger* is largely unconcerned with corrective justice. It seems that their decision to put Meursault to death is not concerned with "righting" the wrong done against the Arab, but rather proactively preventing Meursault from doing wrong against the white bourgeoisie and misrepresenting their values. Posner acknowledges that colonial France explicitly valued white European colonists' lives over native Muslims' lives, and that this played a major role in their decision-making. Yet his considerations of the effects of a colonial racial hierarchy on the legal system mistakenly disappear when he hypothetically transplants this case to the US in the 21st century.

In the US today, the police force's unjustified and brutal killings particularly of Black men strike us as a category of crime with many parallels to the crime committed by Meursault. First, it's extremely difficult in the US for police to be brought to justice when they commit a crime because they are protected by qualified immunity,² just as it was difficult for a white

² Qualified immunity protects law enforcement officers, enabling them to violate people's constitutional rights with virtual impunity. Originally created by the Supreme Court in 1967 to protect officers who acted in "good faith" and believed that their conduct was legal, it has since been expanded to make it

colonist to be convicted of a crime against a native Muslim in Algeria due to the colonial racial hierarchy. In the US, police forces are consistently whiter than the populations they police (Keating and Uhrmacher), and Black individuals are more than twice as likely to be killed by police force than people of other races, even across cases when there are no obvious factors making the use of force reasonable (Fagan and Campbell). If we couple these facts with the qualified immunity of police officers, it becomes clear that these particular killings can be seen as paradigmatic of the historical enslavement and continued systemic oppression of Black people in America, just as Meursault's murder of the unnamed Arab can be read as a metaphor for the exploitative French colonial endeavor in Algeria.

However, even before we consider the role that systemic racism continues to play in the US justice system, it must be noted that Posner's claim that the US legal system "avoids demeaning and largely irrelevant inquiries into character" when considering a crime is suspect, even from a legal standpoint.³ Posner is referring to Rule 404 of Federal Rules of Evidence, which states, "Evidence of a person's character or character trait is not admissible to prove that on a particular occasion the person acted in accordance with the character or trait." However, this rule in no way makes inquiries into character universally irrelevant, but only irrelevant in proving action on a particular occasion. Evidence of a defendant or a witness' "pertinent" character traits can still be utilized in criminal court cases for a plethora of purposes—"proving motive, opportunity, intent, preparation, plan, knowledge, identity, absence of mistake, or lack of accident." Rule 405 of the Federal Rules of Evidence is about "Methods of Proving Character,"

almost impossible for officers to receive punishment even for malicious conduct, unless the victim can prove their right was "clearly established." (Ali and Clark)

³ See Rule 404, Federal Rules of Evidence

so it's simply misleading to claim that by Rule 404, inquiries into character are irrelevant in the American legal system.

Posner's claim reflects a larger misunderstanding of the role that character evidence is playing in Meursault's trial. It's a convoluted role due to the court's unwillingness to punish him for the murder he committed, coupled with their desire to get rid of him nonetheless. In Meursault's trial, character evidence is not being used to prove that he acted in a particular way on the beach where he committed murder, because this is not of much interest to the jury. It's instead being used to suggest more broadly that Meursault is a societal menace, so abhorrent in his conduct that he "morally" kills. There are many cases in the US where character evidence has been used to similarly prove that the defendant is a supposed threat to American society, from McCarthyism in the 1950s targeting alleged communist sympathizers, to the wave of arrests of Black Panther Party members in the 1960s and 70s (Davis). Thus, Posner's assertion that Meursault's trial would necessarily go differently in the US due to the status of character evidence in our legal system misses the mark. He both misinterprets how character evidence functions in Meursault's trial and overlooks the historical uses of character evidence in the US.

Regardless of what is valid in a court of law, Posner's claim about character evidence furthermore does not play out in reality, which is well-illustrated by recent discourse concerning police brutality against the Black community. This popular rhetoric, primarily expressed through social media by both political commentators and President Trump himself, is critical because it will ultimately drive the political conversation towards or away from police reform. We can draw many parallels between Meursault's negative characterization of the unnamed Arab throughout *L'Étranger*, which is meant to lessen the injustice of his death, and criminalization of

George Floyd by American conservative commentators such as Candace Owens. This discourse surrounding victims of police violence puts on display the mental gymnastics that many conservatives and moderates are willing to do in order to cling to the notion that good, well-behaved people do not have problems with the police. Even more insidiously, it is an attempt to gaslight Black Lives Matter activists and cast doubt on the very existence of racially-motivated police violence. By examining this discourse, we can clearly see that Americans do use “demeaning and irrelevant inquiries” into the character of a victim of a police violence, in order to somehow lessen the injustice of their murder. Because America’s right wing is so concerned with these character inquiries in cases of police brutality, it becomes even more clear that Posner’s assertion is simply untrue today. Instead, the US functions more like the Algerian colonial state than he would like to believe, in that there is an underlying agenda of white supremacy echoing from our nation’s racist origins which influences our justice systems and is perpetuated by this kind of character discourse. This will become clear as we examine the interconnections between Meursault’s characterization of the unnamed Arab and popular discourse characterizing George Floyd.

3. Criminalizing the Victim

Beginning with the descriptions of the Arab in *L’Étranger*, it’s notable that Meursault never names any of the characters who are identified as “Arab.” This act helps him treat Arabs as a monolith and essentialize them, rather than attending to the particularities of individual Arabs. The word “Arab” is mentioned 25 times throughout the short novel, and yet in not a single instance is an Arab character given a name, whereas the multitude of characters who are named are all part of Meursault’s inner circle of *pied-noir* bourgeois elite. At the peak of French

colonial rule in the early 20th century, still 90% of Algeria's population was composed of native Muslims, and even in the large cities to which Europeans flocked, like Algiers and Oran, colonists were around half of the population at most (Cook 674). Nonetheless, Meursault backgrounds these Arab characters wherever he goes, setting them up as "eux" (them) in contrast to "nous" (us) the white *pieds-noirs*. When Meursault sees a group of Arabs, including the one he murders later in the book, he remarks, "Ils nous regardaient en silence, mais à leur manière, ni plus ni moins que si nous étions des pierres ou des arbres morts"⁴ (79). "À leur manière"⁵ is inherently essentializing language, implying that there are certain characteristics which all Arabs share. Ironically, he is claiming here that their "Arab gaze" is dangerously objectifying, even though the entirety of *L'Étranger* engages in the objectification of Arabs, denying them basic humanity by robbing them of both names and voices. Meursault seems to be trying to get the reader to see the Arabs, like he does, as the problematic outsider group, even though Arabs lived in Algeria for over a millennium before the French colonized the country, and still comprised the vast majority of its population throughout the colonial years (Deeb 107).

It's clear that Meursault possesses a negative racial stereotype of native Algerians, and to further reinforce this stereotype upon the unnamed Arab who will become his victim, he gives the reader only very specific details about the man. Meursault presents a one-dimensional, shallow, and potentially false portrayal of the Arab that makes him out to be a criminal, and this functions to diminish the outrage the reader feels at this death. On the other hand, we have a deep connection with Meursault, simply because he is the narrator who controls what we know and

⁴ "They watched us silently, but in their manner, as through we were no more or less than stones or dead trees."

⁵ "In their manner"

whose thoughts we can access. The unnamed Arab first appears in a story told by Meursault's friend Raymond, who claims that the Arab harassed him without provocation on a bus, referring to him literally as "l'autre," meaning "the other." "Vous comprenez, monsieur Meursault, m'a-t-il dit, c'est pas que je suis méchant, mais je suis vif. L'autre, il m'a dit : « Descends du tram si tu es un homme. » Je lui ai dit : « Allez, reste tranquille. » Il m'a dit que je n'étais pas un homme"⁶ (48). Raymond justifies attacking by accusing the Arab of verbally dehumanizing him, which suggests that his comfort as a white man is more important to protect than the Arab man's bodily safety. Raymond then tells Meursault about his unfaithful Arab mistress whom he claims is the sister of this man who attacked him. Thus, the first pieces of information the reader learns about this Arab suggest that he is aggressive, violent, and the brother of a prostitute, all of which cast suspicion on him. Later in the book, when Raymond, Meursault, and Masson pass this unnamed Arab and his friends on a path by the beach, the Arabs taunt Raymond. Nonetheless, it's again Raymond who throws the first punch and turns the encounter violent. By characterizing the unnamed Arab as an indistinct member of a shady gang who allegedly stalk and intimidate white people they don't like, Meursault further lessens the reader's sympathy for the unnamed Arab, all while creating a sense of fungibility and dispensability of these Arab men.

This portrayal of the unnamed Arab allows the book to gloss over the murder, which in its grand scheme merely functions as a believable cause for Meursault's arrest, making room for what has been interpreted as the "true" conflict of the book—Meursault's existential rejection of bourgeois morality and religion, and the death sentence that choice absurdly brings him. In this

⁶ Understand, Mr. Meursault, he said, it's not that I'm mean, but that I'm alive. The other guy, he said to me, "Get off this bus if you're a man." I told him, "Chill out, go away." He told me I wasn't a man.

way, the book has frequently been read as a parable of the absurd human condition, which seemingly transcends its historical and colonial context. But in our analysis thus far, it has become clear that events of *L'Étranger* are inextricably linked to French colonial discourse on and attitudes towards native Arabs in Algeria. Colonialism directly plays into the absurdity of Meursault's trial, because it is only through colonial attitudes towards natives that the Arab's murder was so easily disregarded, in favor of much more absurd motivations for condemning Meursault.

During national protests against police brutality which erupted in May 2020 in response to the killing of George Floyd, famous conservative talk-heads as well as popular internet discourse used this same strategy of criminalizing the victim which we see in *L'Étranger*. This rhetoric is used mainly by people trying to rid themselves or their police force of any sense of accountability for Floyd's death, claim that the protests are unjustified, and ultimately dismiss racially-motivated police brutality as a myth. Almost every time a Black man, or even a mere child like Trayvon Martin, is killed by police in the US, the conservative response is to seek out indications of criminality in the Black victim's past. Then, the assumption that this alleged criminal character would have propelled the Black victim to continue to commit crimes if they had lived actually makes people feel their death was justified, or at least no cause for outrage, even if the actual events that led to their death were obviously unjust. We see this toxic reasoning at work in a popular Youtube video of conservative commentator Candace Owens explaining why she doesn't "support" George Floyd. Owens runs through his criminal record, which includes armed robberies and multiple stints in prison between 1998 and 2007, to suggest that George Floyd would've just committed more crimes if he had not died and to assert that the

Black community shouldn't martyr a "career criminal." Owens' video is full of misleading or blatantly incorrect information—she expresses doubt that Floyd was turning his life around even though he hadn't been arrested since 2007 and had been out of jail since 2013. The worst crime she cites is Floyd holding a gun to a pregnant woman's stomach in an armed robbery, and yet the claim that the woman was pregnant is not supported by any of the court documents (Lee).

Yet even more disturbing than this misinformation are the toxic assumptions on which Owens' video relies—that "criminal" is a category of person, that criminals cannot change, and that criminals deserve to be locked up or dead. Owens claims she's not saying that George Floyd deserved to die or that Derek Chauvin isn't a bad person, and yet that's essentially what she is saying, for the following reasons. She claims that racially motivated police brutality is a myth, and justifies this claim with the statistic that Black people commit 50% of violent crime. But these statistics don't mean what Owens thinks they mean—that the Black community needs to somehow bootstrap itself. They show instead the massive, systemic economic disparities between Blacks and other races in the US, for it's statistically proven that violent crime is linked to poverty far more than it is to race or any other factors (Ellis et al.). So, if we consider the fact that Black communities are far more impoverished than white communities in this country and by consequence, commit a disproportionate amount of crimes, by devaluing George Floyd's life as a result of his past criminality, Owens is effectively claiming that Black lives do not matter as much as white lives. By concerning themselves so deeply with inquiries into the perceived criminality of the victims of police killings, many Americans like Owens already hold inherently anti-Black sentiments, even if they do not recognize them as such.

Owens' misunderstanding of George Floyd and more broadly of the reality of racially motivated police brutality stems from an urge to privilege universal, generalizing statements over individual lived experiences. She takes this statistic about Black people and violent crime, interprets it to mean certain things about the Black community, and then characterizes individuals like George Floyd in a particular light so as to reinforce her worldview as reflected in this statistic. According to her, since Black people commit a disproportionately large amount of violent crime, it's no wonder that they have violent confrontations with the police at such high rates, and George Floyd was just another example. We can imagine that Meursault felt similarly about the Arab—while he wouldn't go as far as to suggest that the Arab deserved to die in that moment, Meursault clearly doesn't respect the Arab as an individual human being who deserves the same freedom and happiness as he does. There's little indication in the book that the Arab even crosses Meursault's mind after the moment of the crime. He is just one of the nameless, faceless Arabs, who exist “à leur manière” like objects, not with the subjectivity and the radical freedom that the white colonist has.

4. Individual experience and universal injustice

In this later half of this paper, we will explore how *Meursault, contre-enquête* interrogates Meursault's narrative of the Arab's murder, and trace the ways in which it articulates a similar worldview to that of Black Lives Matter. Through analyzing this book, we will arrive at a fundamentally different viewpoint on the dialectical relationship between the individual and the universal than what we've seen expressed so far by mainstream conservatism. As literary texts, *L'Étranger* and *Meursault, contre-enquête*, which each dive deep into the psyches of their respective narrators, have the power to illuminate the critical divide in thinking

which can exist between the white oppressor and the oppressed. This divide is much harder to concretely grasp and make comprehensible in the real-world case of systemic racism in the US, which is why these texts are such important tools. Through the ideas laid out by *Meursault, contre-enquête*, we can begin to better understand how systemic racism functions in the US today, why its reality is still so difficult for many white Americans to grasp, and how a drastic reinvention of our policing and legal systems will be necessary to uproot it entirely.

Told in the voice of Haroun, the younger brother of Moussa who was murdered by Meursault, *Meursault, contre-enquête* gives a name and a complex story to Meursault's victim, tracing the effects his death and *L'Étranger's* fame had on his family, and situating his death in the larger context of colonial Algeria. *Meursault, contre-enquête* does for *L'Étranger* what the Black Lives Matter movement does for police killings of Black people—it amplifies the voices of the victims who can no longer speak for themselves, an act which recontextualizes the dominant white narrative of the crimes committed. The use of #SayTheirNames on social media encapsulates BLM's belief in the power of naming, and in not allowing victims of systemic violence to fall into anonymity. *Meursault, contre-enquête* is a literary expression of this same fundamental belief, that “...on ne tue pas un homme facilement quand il a un prénom”⁷ (62). Haroun thus cogently expresses the necessity of providing an alternative narrative which names his brother and traces out the distinct human being he was, beyond just “the Arab.”

As we learn about different aspects of Moussa's life through Haroun's narration in *Meursault, contre-enquête*, each one gives him a richness and a complexity that was unknown to Meursault, making it much more difficult for us to withhold our sympathy from him. Shortly

⁷ It's not easy to kill a man when he has a first name.

before his death, he had taken on the role of the man of the house, after Moussa and Haroun's father abandoned the two boys and their mother (18). Contrary to what is suggested in *L'Étranger*, Raymond's Arab mistress was not Moussa's prostitute sister, but rather his lover. In fact, Moussa's name means Moses in Arabic, and thus brings with it connotations of courage and righteousness. Haroun emphasizes the incongruence between Moussa's obscure death and the strength he displayed in his life (30). "...Le jour où on a appris sa mort et les circonstances de celle-ci, je n'ai ressenti ni douleur ni colère, mais d'abord la déception, et l'offense, comme si on m'avait insulté. Mon frère Moussa était capable d'ouvrir la mer en deux et il est mort dans l'insignifiance..."⁸ (20).

Simultaneously, Haroun deconstructs many of the claims about the events surrounding Moussa's death which make Meursault's account coherent. For example, Moussa's body was never actually found, despite the fact that Haroun and his mother devoted years of their lives to searching for it, so he never received a proper burial (43). *L'Étranger* manages to leave this gap without it feeling significant for readers, who are so much more devoted to Meursault than the Arab—part one ends with the Moussa being shot, and part two picks up after Meursault has already been arrested. It's only through Haroun's point of view which we can begin to understand the immense weight that this omission holds for him and his mother. Moreover, Haroun and his mother, in all their time spent questioning people in European neighborhoods, were never able to actually find Meursault's mother's grave or anyone who had ever known her, which further brings into question the entire alleged reason for Meursault's tragic condemnation

⁸ "...the day we learned of Moussa's death and its circumstances, what I first felt wasn't anger or sadness, but deception and offense, like someone had insulted me. My brother Moussa was capable of parting the sea in two, and he died in obscurity..."

(41). Haroun thus casts doubt on Meursault's reliability as a narrator, and highlights the anguish and difficulty which his narrative's gaps, whether careless omissions or blatant lies, have caused his family.

Yet it's the simple omission of a name that Haroun keeps returning to, highlighting the real-world consequences that this seemingly small act had for him and his mother. After Moussa's death, Haroun and his mother lived to see Algerian Independence, but because there was no way for them to claim Moussa as a martyr, they could not receive the pension they desperately needed from the state. Even though the story of Moussa's martyrdom was one of the most widely read books in the world, there was no way to prove that the Moussa they had lost was the unnamed Arab in *L'Étranger* (62). Moreover, symbolically, leaving out Moussa's name indicates that Meursault viewed Arabs as fungible. This is infuriating for Haroun, because it means there was truly no meaning to his brother's death—it could've been anyone. In *L'Étranger*, Meursault sees a world of *pieds-noirs* with names and Arabs with no names—in turn, Haroun comes to see a world where every Arab man is named Moussa, symbolizing their potential to meet Moussa's same fate. As Haroun sits in a bar recounting Moussa's story to his interlocutor, he pauses to say, “On va juste regarder tous les autres Moussa de ce bouge, un par un, et imaginer, comme je le fais souvent, comment ils auraient survécu à une balle tirée sous le soleil ou, enfin, comment ils on fait pour ne pas être encore morts”⁹ (35). Even beyond the practical implications, Meursault's act of not naming Moussa made his death more traumatic for

⁹ Let's just watch all the other Moussas in this dive bar, one by one, and imagine, as I often do, how they would've survived a bullet fired under the sun, or at least, how they have managed to not die yet.”

Haroun, because there's seemingly no way for him or for any Arab man to avoid this fate which robbed him of all agency and identity.

This same despair at the arbitrary nature of a murder seems to be a large part of what fueled the intense outrage at George Floyd's death. It highlighted the complete failure of any notion that Black people can protect themselves from police brutality by behaving in a certain way. On the American talk show *Conan* on TBS, one week after Floyd's death, news commentator and legal activist Van Jones said of George Floyd's death, "[Black parents] had this one little hope, this tiny thread, that we could tell our children that there was something they could do to keep them safe from even the worst officers...In this situation, there's nothing that we could have told our kids" (Team CoCo, 00:00:50 - 00:01:25). Floyd's murder was a dark reminder to America of the Black community's vulnerability and lack of agency in these violent police encounters. In the case of Floyd and countless others, the BLM movement seeks to recuperate this lost agency by amplifying the victim's story to give their death meaning, using their individual experience as an impetus for addressing universal injustices in the institution of policing.

Similarly, through Haroun's narration, Daoud seeks to recuperate Moussa's lost identity and use his story to break down the "Arab" monolith constructed by Meursault. As he does this, we arrive at a deep and nuanced understanding of the identities of Moussa, his mother, and Haroun himself. If an act as simple as naming can profoundly improve the lives of the victim's family, and if sharing Moussa's story allows us to understand and identify with him in a way that changes our outlook on the events in *L'Étranger*, we might ask why Haroun is speaking out for the first time decades after Meursault has spoken. The answer to this lies in the fact that the

question of *whose* language one is speaking appears nowhere in *L'Étranger*, but is a central problem of *Meursault, contre-enquête*.

Meursault the character and his creator Camus, as a white *pieds-noirs*, grew up speaking French with their families, and then received an education in their native language in schools which were well-funded and sufficiently staffed. Because of the French colonial system's goal of assimilating the Algerian population into their language and values, all Algerian schools were taught in French at this time, even the ones for Muslim children who did not speak French at home. There is no denying that this education system was explicitly white supremacist, with the goal of depriving the entire Algerian Muslim population of a proper voice. By 1954, it's estimated that only one in five Muslim boys and one in sixteen Muslim girls in Algeria received any formal schooling; the French illiteracy rate was 94% for boys and 98% for girls. For the few Muslim children that did get an education, their schools were systematically underfunded and overcrowded—in 1945, there were 200,000 white school children attending 1,400 primary schools, and a staggering 1.25 million Muslim school children attending only half that many primary schools (Horne 61). Moreover, schools for Muslim children largely denied them opportunities to study Arabic formally. Arabic was only offered in some schools for an hour a week, in others as a mere afterschool elective, and there were never enough instructors to meet student demand (Heggoy 190). Thus, the French colonial education system did everything it could to keep people like Haroun and Moussa from being able to express themselves well in either their native tongue Arabic or the colonial language French.

The fact that Meursault never even mentions this blatant inequality goes to show how the privileged status given to whiteness and Frenchness in colonial Algeria was simply taken for

granted by those who benefited from it. For Haroun, it wasn't a simple matter of just responding to Meursault's narrative to give the other side of the story—Haroun had to literally learn an entire language over decades in order to understand what Meursault had said about his brother, and to have his own voice heard by the audience that Meursault was speaking to. “La langue française me fascinait comme une énigme au-delà de laquelle résidait la solution aux dissonances de mon monde... Je n'ai pas appris à lire pour pouvoir parler comme les autres, mais pour retrouver un assassin, sans me l'avouer au départ...”¹⁰ (129). Haroun believed Meursault's literary eloquence enabled him to genuinely transcend his crimes and win over the hearts of those who read his book, who remember him and not his victim.

“Les gens en parlent encore, mais n'évoquent qu'un seul mort—sans honte vois-tu, alors qu'il en avait deux. Oui, deux. La raison de cette omission? Le premier savait raconter, au point qu'il a réussi à faire oublier son crime, alors que le second était un pauvre illettré que Dieu a créé uniquement, semble t-il, pour qu'il reçoive une balle et retourne à la poussière, un anonyme qui n'a même pas eu le temps d'avoir un prénom”¹¹ (11).

For Haroun, Moussa's lack of voice is precisely what made him so easy for Meursault to essentialize and anonymize, transforming him from a man into a mere tool in Meursault's own narrative. The fact that this language barrier plays such a huge role in Haroun and Moussa's

¹⁰ The French language fascinated me like an enigma beyond which resided the solution to all the dissonances in my world...I didn't learn to read to be able to speak like the others, but to retrieve an assassin, without admitting it to myself at the start...

¹¹ People still talk about it, but they only evoke one dead man—shamelessly, you see, even though there were two. Yes, two. The reason for this omission? The first man knew how to recount his story, to the point that he succeeded in making people forget his crime, while the second was a poor illiterate who God created uniquely, it seemed, in order for him to take a bullet and return to the dust, an anon who didn't even get the time to have a first name.

world casts a deeper irony on the fact that, as we can recall, Raymond uses the words that Moussa spoke as his excuse to escalate their first encounter to violence. The fact that Moussa had to speak Raymond's language of French in order to be understood, which was likely a very blunt tool for him as a Muslim being educated in Algeria, is absent from *L'Étranger*, yet potentially had massive implications in the encounters which ultimately brought about his death.

Haroun's emphasis on the issue of language and Meursault's complete neglect of it remind us that the systems designed to protect and privilege certain individuals in a society often go unconsidered by those very individuals, who can only see these structures as neutral and necessary. It was a privilege for Camus' character Meursault to not have to think about language at all—Meursault could simply use his own language in the official courtroom of the colonial government, and in turn, Camus could use his native language to reach an international audience with his book. Like many privileges, this easily becomes something Meursault takes for granted, no longer recognizing it as a privilege, but just as an immutable facet of reality.

This consideration can help us better understand why so many Americans bristle at the idea of abolishing the police. Systemic problems and injustices can easily become invisible to those who the system is designed to protect and benefit, and although the US is diversifying with each year, the population is still 73% white as of 2017 (US Census Bureau). For that majority of citizens who make up the racially privileged white class, systemic racism can easily appear to be merely the fault of individuals—they fail to make the connection between the individual experiences of the oppressed and universal power structures. US conservatives like President Trump himself use rhetoric which is blind to privilege and which implicitly holds “whiteness” as the norm, allowing them to cling steadfastly to the idea that police brutality is merely the fault of

a “few bad apples,” despite the historical patterns. Racially-motivated police killings have been happening as long as this country has existed—the American police system first arose to capture runaway slaves and “protect” white settlers from Native Americans as they occupied their land (Kappeler). When Trump finally acknowledged the wave of protests in response to George Floyd’s death weeks after they had begun, he said in a speech, “You always have a bad apple, no matter where you go... there aren't too many of them in the police department... We have to work together to confront bigotry and prejudice wherever they appear, but we will make no progress and heal no wounds by falsely labeling tens of millions of decent Americans as racist or bigots.” (Agence France-Presse). Trump, who is known for an incredible lack of nuance in his political rhetoric, does not fail his reputation with his view on police brutality. He unsurprisingly takes protestors’ slogan “ACAB,” all cops are bastards, at face value. What this provocative phrase actually aims at is the idea that policing as an institution in this country is racist, both at its origins and in its continued societal effects of keeping minority populations in poverty and in jail. Trump, however, is equating the slogan with the obviously absurd claim that every cop is individually a racist or a bigot, and moreover making the divisive implication that BLM hates all individual police officers and wants to get rid of all law and order in society.

Candance Owens made a similar “bad apples” defense of police in her video about George Floyd, claiming that “there will always be some cops who suck because they’re human beings...society is not perfectible.” It’s an ironic double standard that the mistakes of cops are a reflection of an inherently imperfect human nature, whereas George Floyd's mistakes make him a “career criminal” unworthy of being mourned. But furthermore, Owens’ claim that “society is not perfectible,” and the implication that we thus shouldn’t try to get rid of brutality in the police

force, is clearly a strawman argument. No one is asking society to be perfect, but we have no reason to believe it can't be improved. We cannot let the impossibility of perfection prevent us from building better systems, which actually create the conditions necessary for Black communities to thrive in this country. Trump and Owens both completely misconstrue the claims of activists seeking police abolition, by making the conversation all about the goodness or the evil of individual cops and their victims, while turning a blind eye to the contours of the systems which produce these events of brutality.

These conditions of privilege-blindness which amongst the bourgeois elite, whether in colonial Algeria or the modern US, create a particular kind of absurdity in the lives of the oppressed. This absurdity can only be combated with radical re-invention of the given order, rather than assimilation within it. The failure of assimilation to bring justice is captured aptly in what happens to Haroun as he learns French, embracing the colonizer's language in hopes that it will give him the answers he seeks. At first, Haroun obsessively pours over a few paragraphs in a newspaper clipping his mother cut out of the local paper on the day Moussa was shot, describing the death of an Arab. Of course, there was almost no information contained in this scrap of paper, but for the sake of his mother and all her desperate questions, Haroun poured over these paragraphs again and again, inventing and embellishing everything he could. "M'ma, régulièrement, me les tendait: 'Lis donc voir à nouveau, regard s'ils ne disent pas autre chose qu tu n'aies pas compris'"¹² (130). This absurd exercise is all the more heartbreaking because Haroun's mother surely understood that little information could be held in these two clippings,

¹² Mama, regularly, held the scraps out to me: "Read it again and see if they wrote something else you didn't understand before."

but she played along anyway, out of desperation. Haroun and his mother both engage in what he describes as “[mentir] non par volonté de tromper, mais pour corriger le réel et atténuer l’absurde qui frappait son monde et le mien...”¹³ (47). As previously mentioned, the most important questions for Haroun about what happened to his brother are not answered by *L’Étranger*—“Tu comprends pourquoi j’ai ri la première fois que j’ai lu le livre de ton héros? Moi qui m’attendais à retrouver dans cette histoire les derniers mots de mon frère, la description de son souffle, ses répliques face à l’assassin, ses traces et son visage, je n’y ai lu que deux lignes sur un Arabe”¹⁴ (130). Haroun can’t bear to disappoint his mother, for whom he learned this language as though his life depended on it, in order to find her the answers she sought. So he invents a story for her, his *contre-enquête*, a story that the colonial reality of their lives could not provide them. “Je donnais à ma mère ce qu’elle avait cherché vainement dans les cimetières et les quartiers européens d’Alger. Cette histoire du livre imaginaire pour une vieille femme sans mots a duré longtemps...”¹⁵ (130)

Haroun’s choice to invent, rather than to accept a bleak reality which did not have the answers to the questions he posed, is his rejection of a system that has failed him. Haroun and Daoud, the author who created him, are both seeking justice through creative invention—for Haroun, personal justice in the context of the story, and for Daoud, broader societal and

¹³ [Lying,] not out of a willingness to fool people, but to correct the real and to mitigate the absurdity which struck her world and mine...

¹⁴ You understand why I laughed the first time I read your hero’s book, don’t you? I, who had waited to find in this story my brother’s last words, his last breaths, his reactions as he faced the assassin, his characteristics, his face, I read nothing but two lines about an Arab.

¹⁵ I gave my mother what she had vainly searched for in the cemeteries and in the European neighborhoods of Algiers. This story of an imaginary book for an old woman with no words left lasted a long time...

historical justice for the colonial past. As Haroun boasts to his interlocutor, “Tu devines donc tout le génie qu’il a fallu pour transformer un fait diverse de deux paragraphes en une tragédie décrivant la scène et la fameuse plage, grain par grain”¹⁶ (129). The world has long been enamoured with Meursault’s literary genius, but Haroun’s genius is only now seeing the light of day. Rather than describing something he lived through, Haroun had nothing but two paragraphs to base his story on—the rest had to be invented. Meursault may have twisted a heinous crime into a beautiful book that fooled generations of literature students, but Haroun created his story out of what the world left him with: nothing. Meursault shows us how the system cast him out, while Haroun shows us how he has managed to live and find meaning in spite of a system that never intended to embrace him in the first place.

5. Radical empathy

It may seem from the discussion thus far that Haroun has set himself up in opposition to his oppressor Meursault and triumphed over him, in strength, character, and invention. But in fact, *Meursault, contre-enquête* goes to great lengths to emphasize the connections between Haroun and Meursault. Most obviously, Haroun recounts how he himself murdered a Frenchman whom he did not know shortly after the Algerian War of Independence. Although wartime legal chaos allowed Haroun to avoid repercussions, he nonetheless achieves the same category of being that Meursault occupies in *L’Étranger*—a murderer not yet punished for his crime. Haroun’s murder strikes us as fundamentally different than Meursault’s, centered around evening the score, a part of the larger effort of driving the colonizers out of Algeria. Haroun’s ultimate

¹⁶ So you realize the genius it took to transform a miscellaneous news item in two paragraphs into a tragedy describing the scene and the famous beach, grain by grain?

assessment of Meursault's character and motives still could have been a scathing condemnation despite this parallel, but instead, Haroun strikes a balance between being critical and sympathetic. He manages this by differentiating between the real intentions of Meursault the man, and the ways in which the colonial system have inevitably shaped his thinking. For example, this is Haroun's explanation of why Meursault fabricated a story about Moussa being the brother of a prostitute, which surprisingly, Haroun does not judge as pure slander:

“Je crois davantage à la volonté d'un esprit tordu qui a campé des rôles abstraits. La terre de ce pays sous la forme de deux femmes imaginaires: la fameuse Marie, élevée dans la serre d'une innocence impossible, et la prétendue soeur de Moussa, lointaine figure de nos terres labourées par les clients et les passants, réduite à être entretenue par un proxénète immoral et violent.”¹⁷ (72)

So the issue is not that Meursault just wanted to defame the man he murdered and absolve himself—it's that he's actually learned to see people in this warped binary, encouraged at its base by the colonial division between “us” the colonizers and “them” the colonized. Though this sounds like a harsh indictment, it's a more sympathetic assessment of events than we might expect—certainly more sympathetic than the verdict of Meursault's trial, which cast him out as a “bad apple.” Instead of condemning Meursault as an individually depraved man, Haroun sees him as a normal white man driven by the forces of colonialism into a distorted perception of

¹⁷ I believe more in the will of a warped mind which sees only in abstract roles. The land of this country under the form of two imaginary women: the famous Mary, brought up in the glasshouse of impossible innocence, and Moussa's so-called sister, distant figure of our lands, labored by clients and passerbys, reduced to being maintained by an immoral and violent proximity.

reality. Haroun makes the choice to condemn their society and the absurdity of life within it, instead of focusing on condemning the individual.

Rather than invalidating the absurdity of Meursault's world and superseding it with the absurdity of his own, Haroun chooses to link Meursault's notion of the absurd with his own, to suggest that they share more than what divides them. Meursault, *contre-enquête* opening line, which parallels that of *L'Étranger*—"Aujourd'hui, M'ma est encore vivante"¹⁸—may strike us as an irreverent parody at first glance. But by the time we reach the end of the book, which also mimics the ending of *L'Étranger*, the parallels function to fundamentally unite Haroun and Meursault. Haroun and Meursault alike denounce religion to the very end—Meursault in his final days before his execution, and Haroun even as he's nearing his death. For the two of them, the question of collective religious faith in life is a ridiculous one, and musings on this subject bring out the most poetic and emotive side of both men. From *Meursault, contre-enquête*, "Je ne sais pas pourquoi à chaque fois que quelqu'un pose une question sur l'existence de Dieu, il se tourne vers l'homme pour attendre la réponse. Posez-lui la question à lui, directement!"¹⁹ (152) This is an expression of Haroun's frustration at the continued efforts people make to turn him religious as he grows older. From their point of view, they want him to be saved before he dies, but from his view, it makes no sense to become religious now, when he is so close to the time where he will meet his maker, if such a maker even exists, and be able to ask him all his questions rather than rely on fellow men. Meursault lashes out similarly against a priest who relentlessly tries to get him to proclaim his faith in God as he is awaiting his execution.

¹⁸ Today, Mama is still alive.

¹⁹ I don't know why each time someone asks a question about the existence of God, they turn to men and await a response. Pose the question to God directly!

“Que m'importaient la mort des autres, l'amour d'une mère, que m'importaient son Dieu, les vies qu'on choisit, les destins qu'on élit, puisqu'un seul destin devait m'élire moi-même et avec moi des milliards de privilégiés qui, comme lui, se disaient mes frères. Comprendait-il, comprenait-il donc?...Les autres aussi, on les condamnerait un jour. Lui aussi, on le condamnerait”²⁰ (Camus 183).

Thus Haroun and Meursault, despite their vastly different milieus, have this same staunch self-reliance and rejection of what is established, resigned to their fate. Their parallel sense of being outsiders amongst fellow men who are religious, who follow the rules of society, is actually the focal point of the final chapter of Daoud's book, not the great injustice of Moussa's murder or the plight of the oppressed and the colonized. “...Tu ne peux pas comprendre ce qu'endure un vieillard qui ne croit pas en Dieu, qui ne vas pas à la mosquée, qui n'attend pas le paradis, qui n'a ni femme ni fils et qui promène sa liberté comme une provocation.”²¹ (151) Haroun ruminates over this knowledge which he and Meursault uniquely share, rather than all that divides them, in the book's final pages.

Haroun's choice to unite the absurdity of his own world with the absurdity of Meursault's rather than condemn him illustrates *Meursault, contre-enquête*'s fundamental approach to negotiating the individual and the universal. Haroun finds a way to attend to the individuality of all parties involved, his brother as well as his brother's murderer, all while staunchly

²⁰ What does it matter to me, the deaths of others, the love of a mother, what does your God matter to me, the lives that we choose, the destinies we elect, when only one destiny will choose me, and with me the thousands of others privileged men who, like him, call themselves my brothers... Does he get it, huh? Does he understand? The others too, they'll be condemned one day. Him too, he'll be condemned.

²¹ You can't understand what us old men endure, we who don't believe in God, who don't go to mosque, who aren't waiting to go to heaven, who have no wife and no kids and who flaunt their freedom like a provocation.

condemning the oppressive colonial system which created the conditions for the heinous crime to occur. As Haroun deconstructs Meursault's story in order to reconstruct that of himself and his brother, the reader wants to condemn Meursault as an evil man. But instead, Daoud takes careful care to make the absurd colonial system out as the enemy, rather than any individual person involved in it. When the reader reaches the end of *Meursault, contre-enquête*, they have the sensation that not only Moussa and Haroun but also Meursault have become more human for them. It's the careful reframing of the relationship between Haroun, Moussa, and Meursault on the part of Daoud which creates this effect. In essence, Haroun's response of invention and creation in the face of an absurd reality is exactly what BLM is seeking to do with policing, judicial, and prison systems which have failed to meet the needs of the Black community. Moreover, Haroun's empathy for Meursault, his ultimate connection to him, suggests that BML's radical approach is not seeking to destroy the lives of policemen or disenfranchise white people—it is actually an approach with more empathy for everyone.

6. Conclusion

Recall that Posner asserted that the “objectivity” of American courts, which deem character inquiries irrelevant, leads to an approximation of corrective justice, which seeks to right the wrong of a particular incident of crime regardless of the individuals involved. We already refuted Posner's claim that character inquiries are irrelevant both in US courts and in public attitudes towards crimes and criminality. This implies that American courts do not succeed in accomplishing their vision of corrective, impartial justice. Now, through examining *Meursault, contre-enquête* and Black Lives Matter in tandem, we have gone a step further and questioned the very idea that corrective justice can and should be sought after. Instead, this

analysis suggests that the individual identities of those involved in a crime should be considered, because it's precisely these individual stories which are able to illuminate universal problems ingrained in our systems. It's already clear that the American public does care about the identities of those involved in a crime, and *Meursault, contre-enquête* and BLM suggest a way in which we can repurpose that impulse for society's benefit. Once we can see how systemic problems shape experiences at the individual level, we will no longer find ourselves casting out cops as "bad apples", nor rationalizing the murders of innocent Black people. Rather, we can reinvent our policing systems and create a notion of justice based on human empathy rather than correction. This will protect the lives not only of Black people but of all people in the US regardless of class, race, gender, or ability.

A final reminder to white America—*Meursault, contre-enquête* makes it clear that in contexts where we are part of a group that is privileged by an institution, because the institution was designed with us in mind, we should always check our own assumptions about the unbiased and necessary nature of that institution. Whether we are or are not part of a group that sees the effects of systemic racism firsthand, the absurdity it creates in our country today can be felt and understood by the exploited masses everywhere. Yet, this absurdity can only be exposed if we insist on saying the names and telling the stories of the victims, of the ones we have lost to injustice, the ones whose individual stories have the power to make personal and immediate what otherwise can seem abstract and intangible. In this way, the country at large can come to understand Black Lives Matter not as anti-white project, but as a radically empathetic project which seeks to mitigate the absurdity touching all of our lives, when we, like Haroun, seek out justice and are unable to find it.

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