

*When One Novel Talks with Another: The Dialogue Between Camus' The Stranger
and Kamel Daoud's the Meursault Investigation*

Kenneth DiMaggio, Capital Community College, United States

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Abstract

One of the 20th century's major works of fiction is Camus' *The Stranger*, a novel where a French Algerian kills an Arab and is executed for it. Is his condemnation based more on his disinterest in the recent passing of his mother? For many years, Meursault, the protagonist of this novel, beguiled readers with his absurd-like act of murder. But neither Meursault nor his Western-reading audience ever took much notice of his victim. Recently, Algerian author Kamel Daoud wrote about this victim in his novel *The Meursault Investigation*. Daoud's novel becomes a dialogue with the text that gave birth to his story. If Camus' *The Stranger* is the French father, then Daoud's *The Meursault Investigation* is the Algerian stepson. But father and stepson are also texts that share the same story, landscape, and even destiny. In so doing, Meursault's murder may seem less absurd now that we know about the victim—a fully developed character in Daoud's novel. If the nameless Arab victim in Camus' text represents the overlooked colonized subject, he becomes the independent character rewriting a narrative he previously had no voice in.

Keywords: *The Stranger*, *The Meursault Investigation*, Camus, Kamel Daoud, Meursault, Absurdity

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Introduction

Mention the word *absurd* in connection with literature, and Albert Camus' 20th century novel *The Stranger* will for many readers immediately come to mind. The novel's protagonist and anti-hero Meursault quickly becomes socially disengaged after the death of his mother. "Varnished, glossy, and oblong, it reminded me of a pencil box" is how he describes the hearse that will take his mother's coffin to the cemetery (Camus 1988 14). Any human sensitivity repels him, unless he is able to view it as a detached observer. He is content to remain outside of nature, and when nature reins him back in, it ironically helps propel him to kill an Arab he has been observing on a hot beach in Algiers. "It was this burning that I couldn't stand anymore, that made me move forward" (Camus 1988 52). His unmotivated killing of this unidentified Arab soon became tagged with the term that many readers associate this novel with today. "It [*The Stranger*] is a novel about the human condition, which is deemed to be absurd" (Mahon 2015 247). And so this great classic would get catalogued as until an Algerian writer would challenge that assumption in a novel that treats Camus' book as a real event, and is thus able to respond to it from the perspective of the Arab who has gotten killed. In Kamel Daoud's 2014 novel *The Meursault Investigation*, the brother of the slain Arab that Meursault has killed reclaims the narrative of this event, and in so doing, challenges the assumption of the murder being an absurd act. "*The Meursault Investigation* is a brilliant political rewriting of *The Stranger*. Harun, [the narrator and brother of the murdered Arab] as he puts it on the first page of novel, speaks in the place of Camus' murdered man" (Christ 2015 516). At last it seems Camus' text that deeply looked at the existential nature of the human condition, but not the issues of colonialism that Meursault was privileged to live as a Frenchman in colonial Algeria seems to have its literary comeuppance. "The murderer got famous, and his story's too well written for me to get any ideas about imitating him" writes Daoud about the fictional brother of the Arab that Meursault killed (Daoud 2015 1-2). Yet to view his book in that manner also reduces it as rhetorical didactic response. Carol T. Christ's praise of his novel still places Daoud's work in a subservient position to *The Stranger*. "*The Meursault Investigation* is also homage to *The Stranger*" (Christ 2015 516). What gets overlooked in such praise (that also subordinates Daoud's work) is the way his novel engages in a Bakhtinian "dialogic" with Camus' *The Stranger*. Bakhtin's study of the novel in *The Dialogic Imagination* looks at how the novel tends to be a work comprised of several different languages vying for narrative supremacy. The battle between these various languages, however, is what gives the novel a dynamic presence that is often absent from a more monological form such as a poem. "The language of a novel is a *system* of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate with each other" (Bakhtin 1981 47). With Daoud's *The Meursault Investigation*, the system of languages within a single novel have now become a dialogue between two novels. In some ways, Camus' French speaking anti-hero seems to anticipate such a dialogue. As Meursault awaits his execution, he reflects: "Throughout the whole absurd life I lived, a dark wind had been rising toward me from somewhere deep in my future, across years that were still to come" (Camus 1988 121). And even if Daoud's Harun does his best to respond to Meursault (and give identity to his brother, Musa) he also is aware of how his story along with Camus' are now beyond their authors as these two texts can now create the possibility

for an inter-textual dialogue between novels. “This story takes place somewhere in someone’s head, in mine and in yours and in the heads of people like you. In a sort of beyond” (Daoud 2015 57).

Yet the “beyond” that Harun alludes to has a connection that relates to Bakhtin’s hetero-linguistic nature of the novel. “Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker’s intentions; it is populated – overpopulated—with the intentions of others” (Bakhtin 1981 294). Many of the initial critical reviews of *The Meursault Investigation* already postulate how Camus’ French-speaking anti-hero would become a more complex character with Daoud’s Algerian narrator, whose text at times seems to liberate Meursault from the critical context it has been locked into since its publication, that being, “the absurd.” Writes Mahon at the end of his critical review of Daoud’s novel: “If *The Stranger* is to be read as a study of non-conformity and the consequences of non-conformity for the non-conformist, then Daoud’s *The Meursault Investigation* constitutes a memorable contribution to that genre” (Mahon 2015 251). “*The Meursault Investigation* is a brilliant political rewriting of *The Stranger*” writes Carol T. Christ in her article “Baggy Monsters and Tangled Tales” (Christ 2015 516). “Daoud fills in, explicates, and rewrites what Camus elided” concludes Terry Hong in her review “The Meursault Investigation Cleverly Builds on ‘The Stranger’ by Albert Camus” (Hong 2015 2). Yet Camus wrote *The Stranger* as a singular work. He had no idea that many years after his death, an Algerian writer would respond to his text. In so doing, however, Daoud also has to speak for Camus in his novel, thus creating an inter-novel dialogue between the two works. Daoud’s hero Harun soon becomes an anti-hero when he kills a French Algerian a few days after independence has been declared. The country is in a state of transition as the former colonial masters will depart for France; an uneasy truce is in effect. Harun’s murder of a French farmer is not sanctified by the ruling FLN party that is already establishing control of Algeria. Harun’s murder makes him an outsider similar to Meursault, however much he might try to claim otherwise. “I began to imagine his death as a disintegration of elements. The monstrosity of my crime would vanish with them somehow. It was not a murder by a *restitution*” is how Harun reviews and then pardons his killing that he initially feels is revenge for the murder of his brother by Meursault several years ago (Daoud 2015 75). The act of his crime, however, echoes but also expands upon Meursault’s slaying of his brother. “I squeezed the trigger and fired twice. Two bullets. One in the belly, and the other in the neck” Harun explains (Daoud 2015 75). Meursault’s murder of an Arab that will finally get a name in *The Meursault Investigation* creates a template that Daoud will expand upon. “I squeezed my hand around the revolver. The trigger gave...Then I fired four more times at the motionless body” (Camus 1988 59). The way Harun’s murder parallels and builds upon Meursault’s murder is also an example of how the two novels begin to have a dialogue with each other. The murder scenes in both novels have a close resemblance; understandably, Daoud’s novel will soon appear to leave the world of *The Stranger* as he ages as an eccentric, non-conformist in an increasingly growing Islamic fundamentalist Algeria. Nevertheless, his descent into an isolated state in an ever growing conformist society puts him into the role of the *outsider* or *other* that Meursault began *The Stranger* with as he describes the death of his mother: “Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe...” (Camus 1988 3). After establishing his sense of isolation in present day Algeria (he speaks to a stranger in a

bar) he then recounts his life, which is lived in the shadow of his brother Musa, whom Meursault will eventually kill. In doing so, Harun will come into his own as an independent young man; such independence, however, will bring him to a socially isolated or disengaged state that Meursault is already in at the beginning of his story. Harun is another voice to Camus' story, just as Meursault adds his voice to Harun's story. Although written by two separate authors (and with a large separation of time between them) the two novels begin to create a third narrative due to the way they engage in a dialogue with each other. Bakhtin already observed such a process within a singular fictional text. "language is something historically real, a process of heteroglot development, a process teeming with future and former languages, with prim but moribund aristocrat-languages, with parvenu languages and with countless pretenders to the status of language" (Bakhtin 1981 356-357). The linguistic jousting and battling for narrative supremacy that Bakhtin describes now begins to take place between two texts: *The Stranger* and *The Meursault Investigation*. Although a minor functionary, Meursault is a member of a colonial regime whose decline he is not aware of. "It occurred to me that anyway one more Sunday was over, that Maman was buried now, that I was going back to work, and that, really, nothing had changed" (Camus 1988 24). Yet his world will greatly change in Daoud's novel, where the day of rest and worship transfers from the Christian Sunday to the Moslem Friday. But if Daoud speaks in the future language, it is still in French, and it is still as a man whose astute observations make him an outsider to his world. Just as Meursault clinically (and impotently) observes a neighbor who sadly abuses his dog, Harun makes a similar observation of his neighbor who abuses his wife. For Meursault, the abusive neighbor he observes is a man named Salamano and with his dog, "they both stand on there on the sidewalk and stare at each other, the dog in terror, the man in hatred" (Camus 1988 27). For Harun, his clinical observation is "a fireman with a bad limp who regularly beats his wife and who stands on the landing of their apartment at dawn—because she always ends up throwing him out—and begs her forgiveness" (Daoud 2015 72). If Camus' colonial Algeria has been dead for more than fifty years, it surreptitiously and fleetingly lives in the observations made by an eccentric old Algerian man from his balcony. As Bakhtin wrote, a novel is a creation of various languages fighting for narrative supremacy. Such a fight is also what makes the novel a rich, multi-layered genre that is not duplicated in other forms such as the poem. "The language of the poet is *his* language, he is utterly immersed in it, he makes each use of each form, each word, each expression" (Bakhtin 1988 285). The language that Daoud writes in is French. And the language that his anti-hero Harun often tries to grasp his absurd-like presence in contemporary Algeria is Meursault's. "I beg you to forgive this old man I've become. Which is itself a great mystery, by the way" Harun notes towards the end of his story (Daoud 2015 137). Ironically, we will get a sense of Meursault's origins in the dislocation that Harun undergoes in a country where he should find freedom and citizenship in. Meursault seems to anticipate such a narrator and comrade in limbo. "Throughout the whole absurd life I'd lived, a dark wind had been rising toward me from somewhere deep in my future, across years that were still to come, and as it passed, this wind leveled whatever was offered to me at that time" (Camus 1988 121). Twenty years after Camus wrote *The Stranger* the Algeria he lived in and wrote about would be no more. A dark wind for this former French department would come in the FLN and the independence it would achieve from France. Meursault's executioner, judges, and crowd that condemned him at the end of

the novel would follow him into oblivion. That same independence, however, would make freedom an unobtainable, absurd goal for many Algerians forced to live in a world that evolved away from the democratic ideals of its revolution. Because Meursault and Harun are both strangers in their world is also why they need each other. Yet neither can surrender to the other: to do so would relinquish their own unique narrative. Instead, they are now engaged in a battle where one of them hopes to claim their final say of a murder that happened long ago, just as they hope to lay claim to an Algeria both then and now. Ironically, both characters know they can never write the coda to an absurd murder or find citizenship in a country that at different times, would exclude one of the characters from doing so. "Your Meursault doesn't describe a world in his book," Harun says to the unnamed foreign stranger in the bar. "he describes the end of a world. A world where property is useless, marriage practically unnecessary, and weddings halfhearted, where it's as though people are already sitting on their luggage, empty, superficial, holding on to their sick and fetid dogs" (Daoud 2015 53-54). Sadly, this is also Harun's world, the Algeria he lives in as an old man. The Algeria or France that Meursault might have lived in had he not killed an Arab on a beach and lived another twenty more years in a country that would soon declare him to be a stranger in; a state he would most likely find himself after repatriation to France after Algeria's independence. For Harun, there is no repatriation except for a dialogue with another novel. "When the murderer leaves prison, he writes a book that becomes famous, in which he recounts how he stood up to God, a priest, and the absurd" (Daoud 2015 53). Much as Harun rails against this book (*The Stranger*), it is the only world he can find a place in.

Independent yet co-existent is one way to describe the relation between *The Stranger* and *The Meursault Investigation*, and taken together, the two novels create a dialogue with each other. Because of the time and place that these two texts share, there is a rhetorical interloper, that being the Algerian war for Independence, and specifically the way it was advocated and written about by social critic and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon in his 1961 book *The Wretched of the Earth*. "In Algeria since the beginning of the war of national liberation, everything has changed" Fanon writes towards the end of his text (Fanon 1977 308). Such change is what Meursault fails to see or anticipate in *The Stranger*. In *The Meursault Investigation*, such change is what the protagonist Harun is trying to escape in present day Algeria, a country that has long ago liberated itself as a "department" or province of France. *The Stranger* and *The Meursault Investigation* will inevitably, subliminally, textualize the presence of Fanon, an observation that Jeffrey C. Issac makes in his review "Camus on Trial." Fanon's presence, he notes, is strongly felt in the second half of Daoud's novel, where "He is present at the moment when Harun kills the European" (Issac 2016 148). One can also argue that *The Stranger* anticipates the outbreak of anti-colonial violence depicted in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Meursault's murder of the nameless Arab in *The Stranger* has its origins in his friend Raymond, whose former mistress was an Arab, and whose brother is now seeking revenge. "He'd been followed all day by a group of Arabs, one of whom was the brother of his former mistress" (Camus 1988 40). Raymond's violation of the Arab woman can be seen as the French violation of Algeria. Fanon has a presence in both novels then, particularly in *The Meursault Investigation*. "Fanon is a kind of interlocutor in the novel" (Issac 2016 149). Fanon may have such presence, but he is not part of the dialogue that the two novels share with each other.

As Bakhtin observes in his studies of authors from different centuries and cultures, ranging from Rabelais to Dostoevsky, the hetero-linguistic nature or dialogic of a novel transcends its historical time. As Bakhtin observes about Dostoevsky in his critical study, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, the Russian author of books such as *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov* was not writing works specifically designed to solve a present day cultural or national problems (even if some of the characters in his books pose such questions or interests). Rather than solve the major ideological problems of his day, Dostoevsky, Bakhtin claims, “created a new form of artistic visualization, the polyphonic novel—and it will retain its artistic significance when the epoch, with all its contradiction, has faded into the past” (Bakhtin 1984 38). Fanon then should be viewed in a similar manner in regards to the two texts discussed in this paper. Yes, he has a presence in both novels, particularly in Daoud’s novel. Yet Fanon’s political analysis of Algeria at the period of its war for independence has long since receded to a religious, fundamentalist position prevalent in Algeria today. The dialogic nature of a work of fiction transcends the epoch it was written in. The very nature of how several languages compete within a work of fiction is a good example of how fiction is also transcendent of any political platform or conflict that may seem to shape a particular novel. “The novel is the expression of a Galilean perception of language,” Bakhtin writes, “one that denies the absolutism of a single and unitary language—that is, that refuses to acknowledge its own language as the sole verbal and semantic center of the ideological world” (Bakhtin 1981 366). The nature of such heterogenic language is to work against one authoritarian voice. In like manner then, such language will also work against the domination of one political or critical idea. Such multi-vocal perspective within a narration creates its own world in a manner where it is impossible for one voice to dominate the text for a long period. On a more radical and perhaps serendipitous note, such language refuses to even recognize any dominant political ideology, (as Bakhtin notes above) and has the power to do so, due the way the novel is a dialogic as opposed to a monologic form, such as a poem or essay. Fanon then may deserve a presence in the critical discussion of the relationship between *The Stranger* and *The Meursault Investigation*. His absence, however, will not deny the important dialogue that takes place between the two novels. They stand independent from the world they were written in and even against it. For Meursault, he will always be the “odd man out, a kind of intruder” (Camus 1988 84). His double and redeemer will be the character who seems to have been written specifically to vanquish him: Harun. The Algerian who kills a European, a death that initially seems to have no meaning. “Besides, a Frenchman who disappeared in the village? Nobody spoke of that. At least in the beginning” (Daoud 2015 79). Eventually though, Harun will become a stranger in the country he thought he once killed for. In so doing, Harun transcends the political nature of his story to rise to an ongoing, restless dialogue on the nature of the outsider. “I’ve interpreted all those roles in turn” Harun muses late in his narrative. “Sometimes Musa, sometimes the judge, sometimes the man with the sick dog, the treacherous Raymond” (Daoud 2014 88). In quickly considering how the various characters of Meursault’s story might be his own, Harun becomes Meursault, and in turn, Meursault becomes Harun or more specifically, an Algerian who can no longer be a citizen of his independent country, just like Meursault could never be a citizen of French Colonial Algeria. Meursault told the first story but Harun tells the second and in doing so, the language of two literary texts creates a unique literary dialogue. “Languages throw light on

each other” Bakhtin writes. “one language can, after all, see itself only in the light of another language” (Bakhtin 1998 12). *The Stranger* then, now has another Algerian sun illuminating its pages, just as *The Meursault Investigation* continues to be illuminated from an Algeria that is past. Rather than see how the two protagonists are in opposition to each other, it might be better to see how they are compounded with each other. Rather than Meursault and Harun, it is Meursault-Harun: both of them vying for an impossible linguistic supremacy, and because of it, both of their narratives become more rich and complex.

Conclusion

One of the most famous (and recognizable) opening lines in a classic piece of literature comes from Camus’ *The Stranger*: “Maman died today” (Camus 1988 3). More than half a century after Camus wrote that sentence, another writer—Kamel Daoud—would seem to parody it in his novel, *The Meursault Investigation*: “Mama’s still alive today” (Daoud 2014 1). Daoud’s novel, however, is more than just a parody, reaction, or homage to Camus’ *The Stranger*. Yes, his protagonist Harun at times seems to accuse, praise, and react against Camus’ protagonist, Meursault. But the very unsettled nature Harun seems to have with his antagonist is also responsible for his complexity as a character. Furthermore, his perspective on Camus’ text (and how it re-shapes his perspective on his own contemporary Algerian landscape) begins to create a textual dialogue with that text. In turn, the readers of *The Meursault Investigation* will inevitably “re-read” Camus’ text from Daoud’s perspective. Will Harun have the final word over Meursault’s killing of his brother, Musa? Or will Meursault still prevail by showing how Harun as an old man in an independent but fundamentalist Algeria is essentially, a stranger in his own country? Such questions are the beginning of a dialogue between two texts; a dialogue that is unique to the nature of fiction, which according to 20th century literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, is the foundation of the novel. “The language of the novel is a *system* of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other” (Bakhtin 1998 47). That inter-animation gets wider scope when it becomes a dialogue between two inter-related texts, *The Stranger* and *The Meursault Investigation*. So perhaps the question then is not whether Mama died today or is still alive, but that between them, we their readers have an even richer and more complex narrative to explore.

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