

ENGL1040: Rewriting and Writing Back

Final Essay

Dr Haewon Hwang

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Title of Essay: Ennui as apathy: Harun and Daoud the voices for a postcolonial Algeria?

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Areas of improvement from previous in-class essay:

- Inviting more textual analysis and refraining from unsubstantiated, generalized claims (!!!)
- Using close reading as a tool to further, instead of suspend, my arguments. Have some flow (!!)
- Steer clear of personal pronouns (!)

I declare that this essay represents my own work, except where due acknowledgement is made.

I give permission for my assignment to be submitted for electronic checking for plagiarism.

Signature: x Yusef Bushara

In his novel *The Meursault Investigation*, Kamel Daoud offers a critical response to Albert Camus' *The Stranger*. Through the character of Harun, the brother of the unnamed Arab killed by

Meursault in Camus' novel, Daoud challenges Camus' portrayal of Algeria and its people as mere backdrops to the existential struggles of a French protagonist. In particular, Daoud takes issue with Camus' ennui, which he sees as a privileged, self-absorbed (colonial) attitude that erases the lived experiences of the colonized and intoxicates the reader with falsehoods. This essay examines how Daoud's 'rebuke' of Camus' ennui rather constitutes its 'murder,' prompting a retelling of Musa's interiority. Undone by grief, Harun (and Daoud) commit parallel crimes to feel a semblance of justice, murdering French victims of different natures, hoping that that will satisfy the vacuum of not having Algerian lives told from Algerian perspectives. By foregrounding the inner thoughts and feelings of Musa, Daoud highlights the importance of centering the perspectives of the colonized and amplifying their voices in literature.

Daoud has no appetite for anything French, the taste of ennui lingers bitterly between his lips as he tells the story of Musa as it's never been told. It wouldn't be outlandish to suggest that Daoud's breaking away from ennui represents a certain discontinuity with Camus' beloved tradition, ushering in, as Harold Bloom conceptualizes, a Kenosis. A state that unravels in *The Stranger's* ebbing, which is to say on the coattails of its profound influence.¹ Doing so in a parallel fashion that reflects an uncanny ennui-induced frustration in Harun and Daoud. The reader is left to interpret this mirroring with a fair amount of intuition, but this suggestion of conflating voices, Harun and Daoud's, manifests as irresistible confusion. Both of their voices carry through the novel with rebukes of ennui that are potent yet intertwined. Ennui is established immediately by Camus as apathy, as a sort of existential malaise, and not as its more colloquial counterpart, boredom.² Angered by this realization, Daoud departs from the site of ennui-as-apaty in his retelling, accommodating space for the protagonist's (and his own) bloodlust. Seemingly ready to kill any French thing or person, Harun and Daoud are volatile creatures. Neither of them seem steadfast enough to sustain their grief, and in their fatigue, elect to take up arms against their oppressor in physical and metaphysical form. Camus leaves a strong scent of ennui scattered throughout *The Stranger*, spending no time making Meursault's apathy inconspicuous. It pounces on the reader in a patterned series, captivating from the opening scene with the famous-if-not-unforgettable words, "Maman est morte aujourd'hui" (1). In a classic retort to open *The Meursault Investigation*, Harun delivers "Maman est toujours vivante aujourd'hui," so as to highlight the absurdism of Camus' callus treatment of death (1). This quotation inaugurates Camus' plunge into ennui

¹ Thomas Weiskel, "The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry. Harold Bloom," *The Wordsworth Circle* 4.3 (1973): 179-182, doi: 10.1086/twc24044367.

² McCracken, Tony. *Apathy in Literature: A Discourse on Emotionless Characters and Concepts : A Discourse on Emotionless Characters and Concepts*, Diplomica Verlag, 2013. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/hkuhk/detail.action?docID=1640395>.

and, as evidenced above, incites an inhabitation of grief by Harun and Daoud that leads to murderous intent.

Daoud imbues Harun's retelling with the passion of anti-colonial sentiment because he understands Camus' ennui as a privileged tool of erasure. Ask Camus and perhaps he'd justify his storytelling with absurdist backings, but it is therein Daoud finds issue. Camus and Meursault—whose merging mirrors Harun and Daoud's—treat Harun's life as a composite feature of the Algerian landscape; it could be argued that the sun in *The Stranger* received a greater deal of subjectivity than the "Arab." Upon being asked why he's in jail by fellow prisoners, remorselessly Meursault responds that he'd "killed in Arab," and without a second's more pause continues to disinterest himself in other trivial matters, talking of nightfall and sleeping mats. For Camus and Meursault, Musa's impermanence isn't a testament to the sanctity of his humanity, but an overdue inconvenience unheeded until his time of death, his murder. In empathy's stead, Harun conjures vivid language to recede the waters of his own grief, and to fight back against erasure, almost as if more thoughtful descriptions hold in ink for longer. The notion of fighting back doesn't always embed itself in a rhetoric of positive nostalgia, as seen in Harun's descriptions between Musa and their father. "Only Musa could hear his voice. He'd give Musa commands in his dreams, and Musa would relay them to us." Such an account operates on numerous levels: the indirect characterization of Musa as central family figure renders him visible to the reader in a profound way that Camus neglects; making him an individual, rather than an interchangeable void of one. This example doesn't represent a fatal blow to Camus' apathetic ennui, undone through repetition—death-by-a-thousand-vivid-descriptions—but what shines through, like the light on Meursault's knife, is his persistence to erase.

Qualifying the death of ennui isn't as facile as checking for its pulse. As suggested above, the killing of ennui is a continual repetition of nuance which comes to life through the imaginative and thorough inhabitation of loss by Harun and Daoud.³ Proving this requires no different a process than what's employed by Harun. Ennui is stubborn, to kill it requires a fanaticism that pays no regard to itself. As Meursault's unawareness colors his apathy, Harun's paradoxically leaves little room for any other narrative of his brother's life, other than his own, to be true, which is what makes his grief imaginative. It borrows from the realm of fiction in no attempts to fabricate; it does so out of necessity, because the interiority of his brother's life is confiscated at the time of death, leaving him no choice but to fashion it subsequently out of his grief and, partially, memory. Much of this urge, the reader learns, is hereditary, learned from Mama, this practice of filling in the holes of Musa's life. Retelling becomes the work of compulsive myth-making. Harun recounts Mama's compulsions, "She wouldn't describe a murder and a death, she'd evoke a fantastic transformation, one that turned a simple young man from

³ Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, edited by James Strachey, vol. XIV, Hogarth Press, 1957, pp. 243-258.

the poorer quarters of Algiers into an invincible, long-awaited hero" (16). Here, the killing of ennui unfolds in Mama's repetitive albeit fictional reconstruction of her son's death, done so that he can live multiple lives in replacement for the one that was taken. Assessing the degree to which ennui is "killed" looks at *The Stranger* and *The Meursault Investigation* as works in dialogue, for to kill something you must be in some sort of proximity. Mama puts herself and her grief in proximity to Camus' story of Musa by inhabiting loss and retelling the tragedy of her son's death, ad nauseum. So while ennui cannot be said to have been killed by repetition alone, the patterns of repetition leave Camus' account deeply wounded.

A robust surrealism pervades Harun's maniacal narrative of Musa, however his mania, while grief-induced, demonstrates further as an experience of national mourning. Both Harun and Daoud profess from a postcolonial vantage point, reclaiming surroundings for their own: "I believe more than ten years passed before we finally got our hands on that house and declared it liberated our property!" (30). The language of freedom is rife. Harun speaks, invoking the collective. "Our," used twice in quick succession, especially suggests a cognizance that any act of reclamation matters not only on a familial scale, but a national one. With words like "declared" and "liberate," this excerpt from chapter three epitomizes how Daoud foregrounds the Algerian voice in a postcolonial context, doing so such that these appeals to freedom obscure Camus' use of ennui. However, ennui can exist in a state of obscurity and not be killed. Harun takes his justice and attempts to "balance the cosmic scales," but the type of justice which is brought by the killing of ennui requires a final blow from a perpetrator outside of the text. It is the reader's prerogative to decide "how cruelly colonial values have been crushed," and thus their ultimate choice to kill ennui. The question becomes whether readers are convinced by Musa's interiority. Is his story, as told by Harun, a martyred cause so stirring readers are left with no choice than to betray Camus' apathy, in favor of Algerian voice and perspective. That is the murder, then. Removing *The Stranger* from the canon, or at least prioritizing Daoud's narrative as the one that tells the "truth." Are readers convinced that Musa's interiority stands for the nation, and if they are, does his story amount to any greater duty for readers to change their canonical hierarchy?

Kamel Daoud writes a story that subverts *The Stranger*, giving way to an essential postcolonial perspective that centers the Algerian struggle and challenges the privileged ennui pervading Camus' work. In foregrounding the complexity of Musa, Daoud humanizes him in ways Camus fails to, and demonstrates by contrast how *The Stranger* constitutes the erasure and marginalization of colonized peoples within literature. Through Harun, he illustrates the struggle to accept grief, loss, and shows the desire for justice in a postcolonial context. *The Meursault Investigation* can be seen as an act of "murdering" ennui, as it dismantles the apathy present in Camus' work by offering a vivid, passionate retelling of Musa's life and death. By doing so, Daoud invites readers to reconsider their own engagement with canonical texts and to consider the importance of elevating marginalized voices in literature. Ultimately, the success of this "murder" rests with the reader, who must choose whether to prioritize Daoud's narrative as a more truthful and representative

account or remain entrenched in the colonial values perpetuated by Camus' *The Stranger*. Through this process, *The Meursault Investigation* emphasizes the continual struggle for representation and justice in a postcolonial world and underscores the vital role that literature can play in fostering refined understandings of compassion and empathy

Word count: 1597

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