

## Albert Camus' Social, Cultural and Political Migrations

Benaouda Lebdai Pr

*Le Mans University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#), [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), [Television Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

## Recommended Citation

Lebdai, Benaouda. "Albert Camus' Social, Cultural and Political Migrations." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 20.5 (2018): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3398>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 101 times as of 11/07/19.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

**CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture**

ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>  
Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

**Volume 20 Issue 5 (December 2018) Article 4**

**Benaouda Lebdai**

**"Albert Camus' Social, Cultural and Political Migrations"**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol20/iss5/4>>

---

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 20.5 (2018)**

Thematic Issue **Voices of Life, Illness and Disabilities in Life Writing and Medical Narratives.**

**Ed. I-Chun Wang, Jonathan Locke Hart, Cindy Chopoidaló, and David Porter**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol20/iss5/4>>

---

**Abstract:** In his article "Albert Camus' social, cultural and political migrations," Benaouda Lebdai analyzes Albert Camus' posthumous autofiction *The First Man*, a fascinating self-representation and self-telling. Found after his deadly car accident, the manuscript adds a tragic dimension to the disguised autobiography. This paper demonstrates Camus' capacity to migrate from one world to another, looks into the reasons behind such attitudes and stresses the significance of an outstanding life account within the on-going debate between France and Algeria about his political stands during colonial Algeria. His vision of the indigenous people, the Algerians, and of the future of colonial Algeria, is addressed in terms of cultural and political memory. *The First Man* is revisited to understand his psychological and social migrations, which reveal a deep trauma. Finally, this analysis focuses on a colonial time and the exclusive relation between Algeria and France, from a cultural and political viewpoint, and it discusses the significance of "life Writing" through "self-representation" with its impact on a meaningful comprehension of History, culture and social memory.

## Benaouda LEBDAI

### "Albert Camus' Social, Cultural and Political Migrations"

On October 10, 1957, Albert Camus received the Nobel Prize for literature, the climax of his career as a writer and philosopher. This paper discusses Camus' autofiction *The First Man* (1994) from an Algerian postcolonial perspective, as an attempt to understand how his cultural migration influenced his political concerns, how his family trauma influenced his political trajectory and stance, and how colonialism affected the lives of French and Arab Algerians. *The First Man* is founded on a historical identity composed of migrations, a traumatic set of experiences for generations of French Algerians. Thus, this paper stresses the significance of life writing and self-representation for a meaningful grasp of history and social and cultural memory. Behind the novelist, the philosopher and the political commentator, the key question asked here is how this posthumous autofiction reveals the true Camus.

Autobiography is based on an author's deliberate decision to write his/her own life from his/her own point of view. The use of the narrative "I" implies the certainty of truth. Autofiction, a term coined by Serge Doubrovsky, conveys an author's perception of a partial or full life story using a fictional form and fictional characters who represent real individuals such as the author him/herself, either as a character or as a narrator, and other people the author has encountered. Autofiction implies exposing oneself with a certain liberty through the use of metaphors and other images that may reveal subjective feelings and thoughts. It can reveal more about the author's life experiences than a traditional autobiography, as his/her emotions and ideas are presented through the subterfuge of fiction. The unconscious is more obviously present in autofiction than in autobiography, because the latter tends to be more realistic and more focused on the positive aspects of one's life, with the temptation of embellishment ever present. *The First Man* is an example of autofiction, in which Camus narrates his past with a blend of memory and imagination and describes his intellectual experiences in his personal style. When his family found and read the manuscript of *The First Man* following his tragic car accident on January 4, 1960, they recognized it as an autofiction and decided not to have it published. The scattered papers found in the car were the unfinished manuscript of Camus' personal project, which he described in his Nobel acceptance speech as "a novel with a traditional form" (qtd. in Todd 969) in two parts, with *The First Man* as the first part of the work. The existence of the manuscript was kept secret, as Camus' close family and many of his close friends mentioned in the manuscript were still alive, and the political situation in Algeria at the time was very sensitive. It is possible that had he been able to continue work on the manuscript, Camus would have changed certain references and scenes. According to Albert Camus' daughter Catherine, "To understand this delay we must evoke the mood of 1960, the year my father died, and my mother, Francine, and his friends decided not to publish his manuscript" (C. Camus v). Following the death of Camus' wife in 1979, his children published the secret manuscript as it had been found, without changing a single word. Catherine Camus chose to retain control over the source material, avoiding risks of falsification, explaining that "we preferred to publish it ourselves so that this autobiographical account would be of exceptional value to those interested in Camus" (vi). In this text, autobiographical in essence, autofiction in form, one can hear Camus' "voice because of its very rawness" (vii).

Camus was reluctant to speak publicly about himself and his family background, and always "protected his people and his private life" (Todd 13; my translation). Thus, his autofiction brings to light many hidden elements of his life, as he revealed intimate details about himself from behind the mask of fiction. According to Olivier Todd in *Albert Camus, une vie*, Camus would split his friends into groups, giving value and being truthful and sincere to each. His tendency to "compartmentalize" (Todd 45; my translation) stemmed from his capacity to migrate from one world, one social group, one literary genre, to another. His posthumous autofiction provides some explanations for such attitudes, stressing the significance of his account of his life within the ongoing debates in France and Algeria. The text underscores his political stance towards the colonial situation, including his conception of the future of Algeria.

Philippe Lejeune defines an autobiography using the "autobiographical pact," the assumption that the name of the narrator is the same as the name of the author. However, the main character of *The First Man* is named Jacques Cormery, not Albert Camus, thus blurring the direct connection between character and author. David Lodge argues that the name of a character is "never neutral" (Lodge 37), and in this case, the name was not chosen at random: Albert Camus' great-grandfather was Mathieu Juste Cormery, and the character's first name shares an initial with Camus' great-grandfather's middle name. In so doing, Camus deconstructs the genealogy of a colonial family. According to Aimé Césaire,

"colonisation=thingification" (21), and Camus' autofiction demonstrates his consciousness of the downsides of a political system that he "[did not] like ... the way militaries or colonialists do" (qtd. in Todd 1000). *The First Man* begins with the dramatic arrival of Cormery/Camus' parents in eastern Algeria, in a scene in which Camus expresses his perception of colonialism and the heavy consequences of human migrations, a recurring theme throughout the story. His description of his birth establishes strong ties to Algeria. His parents are not powerful colonialists arrogantly conquering new lands, but are poor migrants whose only desire was to escape misery by embarking on new lives 'somewhere' in Algeria:

Up above the wagon rolling along a stony road, big thick clouds were hurrying East through the dusk. Three days ago they had filled up over the Atlantic, had waited for a wind from the West, had set out, slowly at first then faster and faster, had flown over the phosphorescent autumn waters, straight to the continent ... After a journey of thousands of kilometres ... above this nameless country than had empires and peoples over the millennia, their momentum was wearing out and some were already melting into occasional large raindrops that were beginning to plop on the canvas cover above the four travellers. (*The First Man* 3)

The opening passage represents the first migrations of poor people fleeing Spain, Malta, Italy and France to settle in Algeria. Camus' migrant ancestors arrived in Algeria in the 1840s and 1870s, while Jacques Cormery's grandmother, settled in the Sahel, is of Mahon origin and married "a slender and delicate man, of Mahon and Alsatian origin, whose brothers were already settled in Algeria by 1848" (*The First Man* 65). Camus introduces his parents' migration with gloomy, fatalistic imagery: "the gathering of the clouds, the rain, in an autumn night of 1913, creating an atmosphere of a bleak migration from Algiers to Bône on "third class benches" (6), in a wagon with "a heap of old trunks and furniture" (4). Their arrival at "a small whitewashed house" (8) in the tiny village of Mondovi (named Dréan after the independence of Algeria) is dramatic, as the anonymity of the four passengers in the wagon illustrates. His father is referred to as the "Frenchman" (4), his mother as the pregnant "woman shabbily dressed" (4), his brother as the "four year old boy" (4) and the driver of the wagon as "the Arab" (*The First Man* 5). The overall feeling is the poverty of the lower classes. The other event that marks that day, November 7, 1913, is the unexpected birth of Jacques Cormery, which establishes his belonging to the new land and provokes the doctor to remark: "This is a strange place to come to have a baby" (11). Camus himself was born with the help of an Algerian Arab woman, the driver's wife, who was called to assist his mother while the father was out to fetch the doctor, but this detail is not mentioned anywhere. In these conditions, his birth must have left some traces in his unconscious of ties to Algeria and a powerful link with his Algerian roots. The relieved father goes out to the courtyard after having seen his newborn and, in a significant moment demonstrating class affinity, sits next to the Arab driver who offers him shelter:

He could feel the shoulder of the old Arab against him, and he smelled the smoke given off by his clothes; he felt the rain falling on the sack over their heads. 'It's a boy,' he said without looking at his companion. 'God be praised,' answered the Arab. 'You are a chief.' (*The Third Man* 15)

This passage stresses the common ground shared by a poor Arab and a poor migrant, experiencing tough conditions such as rain, wind, and poverty. Camus' powerful tie with the Algerian soil takes its strength from the unconscious roots of Mondovi, which enlightens his political position during the war that led to the independence of Algeria, an issue Camus did not envisage.

A year after Cormery/Camus' birth, his father was drafted, resulting in a traumatic return to France for him, and ultimately his death in the battle of La Marne, and to Algiers for his family. Despite such a cultural migration, Albert Camus did not have the appropriate words at his father's grave in Saint Briec, but he thought that his father was lying in "a strange land on the other side of the sea" (*The First Man* 21). This was unbearable and traumatic for Camus: "He had died unknown on this earth where he had fleetingly passed, like a stranger" (22). The notion of being a stranger in a strange land is politically significant as it reinforces the idea of constant migrations; he was a stranger in metropolitan France, as Algeria was his only country. Jacques Cormery also learned that the Arab driver Tamzal of Mondovi "was killed in the war" (143) in France and buried like a stranger. For Cormery/Camus, the visit to the grave of the father confirmed his sense of belonging to Algeria and his strong convictions that his father should have been buried in Algeria. Cormery's visit to the burial place of the father he has never known liberates him psychologically: "Jacques Cormery abandoned his father" (22), recognized hero of the Great War, and in so doing he undergoes a psychological migration that contributes to his self-construction as a man. From the agricultural colonial lands of Mondovi, to the poor suburbs of Belcourt in Algiers, then to the upper reaches of the social ladder thanks to his literary career, Camus never stopped moving, to

the extent that he uses the term "nomads" (*The First Man* 232) to refer to the French *Pied-noirs* who never stopped being migrants, to reach their final destination of France in 1962, a country they did not know at all.

Camus' autofiction is not linear in the typical manner of a Bildungsroman, as he intertwines the present and the past, including memories and thoughts, with actual events and present life experiences. The reader delves into Jacques Cormery's mind and thoughts as an omniscient narrator, Albert Camus, tells the story of Jacques Cormery, who is also Albert Camus. One such example of Camus' mixture of present and past memories occurs as Jacques Cormery returns from France, where he was hailed as a great writer, to Algiers, where he visits his mother who still lives in Belcourt:

He held her in his arms, right at the door, still out of breath from racing up the stairs four at a time, in a single surefooted dash not missing a step, as if his body still remembered the exact height of each stair ... She was there, her hair still abundant but turned white years ago, still erect despite her seventy-two years ... As for his mother, towards whom he was now running, it seemed that nothing could erode her gentle endurance, since decades of exhausting labour had spared the young woman in her that Cormery as a child had admired with all his heart. (*The First Man* 43-44)

Camus produces a kaleidoscopic view of family, friends, and social relations, alongside recurring events such as the Cormery family's arrival in Mondovi and recurring themes such as poverty. After her husband's death in the war, Mrs Cormery and her two boys moved to Algiers to stay at her mother's tiny flat. Jacques lived in poverty with his mother and his authoritarian grandmother, who knew how to handle what little money the family could earn. In order to survive, Jacques Cormery's mother had to work as a maid and a cleaning lady:

She endured the hard days of working in the service of others, washing floors on her knees, living without a man and without solace in the midst of the greasy leavings and dirty linen of other people's lives, the log days of labour adding up one by one to a life. (*The First Man* 46)

Cormery remembers his family situation as a "warm poverty that had enabled him to survive and to overcome everything" (*The First Man* 33) and regards his childhood as "poor and happy" (104). From this, we can assume that the trauma in Albert Camus' life lies elsewhere, in the period in which he migrated from the innocent world of childhood to the world of bourgeois youth. Jacques Cormery was not prepared to mix with children of well-off *Pied-noirs*. The narrator describes his "sense of solitude, uneasy about a strange world where he did not know how he would have to behave" (157). In an Algerian novel, this sort of anxiety might be observed in an Arab student entering a *lycée* with French students, but Cormery is French and is entering a *lycée* whose students are also French. This scene thus illustrates the class differences among the *Pied-noirs* and the colonizers.

According to Edward Said, Albert Camus had "a colonial mentality" and "he was no friend of revolution or of the Arabs" (*Orientalism* 312). As *The First Man* takes place at a time of conflict between Algerian nationalists and the colonial system, this autofiction illuminates a new facet of Camus, which contradicts Said's opinion to a certain extent. Camus creates his own contradictions, as his storytelling discloses the clashes of class and race within the system that Frantz Fanon denounced in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Jacques Cormery suffered under this clash of classes, just as Albert Camus became conscious in his youth that his status as a lower-class *Pied-noir* resembled that of Arab children who were also victims of race discrimination, as demonstrated by Fanon. *The First Man* shows that Jacques suffered from class barriers within the French community itself: "The thought that he was even poorer than his friends left him sick at heart" (125). His family integrated that sense of belonging to the lower class with a kind of fatalism. His grandmother thought that he would have to work after primary school, as they needed money to survive, like the Arab children who had to work very young as shoeshine boys, except for those who were lucky enough to attend a primary school but who still had to drop out before the Final Exam. Jacques Cormery's teacher, M. Bernard, convinced his grandmother that Jacques had the intellectual capacity to enter the *Lycée*: "M. Bernard had at a given moment used all his weight as a man to change the destiny of this child in his charge, and he had in fact changed it" (106). On page 164 of the manuscript, Camus uses the real name of the teacher, M. Germain, rather than the fictional name, M. Bernard, which corroborates that *The First Man* is indeed an autobiography. The teacher plays the role of Cormery's absent father, helping him overcome the trauma of his loss and succeed at the entrance exam thanks to extra hours of work. However, even this change in Cormery's life is marked by anxiety: "instead of the joy of success, a child's immense anguish wrung his heart, as if he knew in advance that this success had just uprooted him from the warm and innocent world of the poor – a world closed in on itself like an island in the society where poverty took the place of family and

community" (137). Camus never forgot M. Germain, paying him visits every time he travelled to mainland France. When he received the Nobel Prize for Literature, his first thoughts were for his illiterate mother and to his schoolteacher, which explains why Catherine Camus included her father's letter to M. Germain in the appendix of *The First Man*. Albert Camus paid homage to the man who took him out of the lower classes and helped him to migrate into another cultural world: "Without you, without the affectionate hand you extended to the small poor child that I was, without your teaching, and your example, none of all this would have happened" (257). Cormery's years at the *lycée* were difficult, due to the mockery he endured from the bourgeois students who criticized his lower-class behaviour. He discovered a side of Algiers that he did not know existed, and was destabilized by his friends' luxury flats and houses in the "beautiful districts." In keeping with Fanon's criticism of the geography of colonial towns, the 'tale of two cities' becomes a reality for Cormery when he crosses the city to go to the "lycée Bugeaud" not far from the sea, behind "the Arab city" (171). On his way back home, he became aware of the differences within the French community, as he lived in the poorest part of Algiers: "the big brightly lit trolleybuses rode with a great racket over the water, then forged a bit inland and passed between poorer and poorer houses to the Belcourt district" (177). He had to cross the lower Casbah, the Arab part of the town, with "rows of shops: wholesale textile dealers ... piles of light-coloured cloth... groceries that smelled of clove and coffee; small shops where Arab tradesmen sold pastries dripping with oil and honey" (167-68) to get to the *lycée*, which was not far from Bab-el-Oued, the poor *Pied-noirs'* district, which despite its poverty is described as lively and warm.

Jacques Cormery was becoming almost schizophrenic, culturally speaking, as his family almost never engaged in conversation; his mother was almost deaf and his uncle was handicapped and always silent. The narrator, Camus, reflects that poor people do not have time for family stories: "poor people's memory is less nourished than that of the rich" (*The First Man* 62). Indeed, there were no books, newspapers, or radio: "Neither the images, nor things written, nor word of mouth, nor the veneer of culture acquired in everyday conversation had reached" (158) the Cormery family, creating a vast cultural gap between him and his bourgeois classmates. Thus, Cormery kept his family background a secret: "At the *lycée* itself, he could not speak of his family; he sensed their peculiarity without being able to articulate it, even if he could have overcome the insuperable reticence that sealed his lips on the subject" (158). He would never invite a single friend to his family flat; his private family life was miles away, materially and culturally, from the new world he was discovering. At the same time, those culturally rich years at the *lycée* widened the gap between himself and his 'uncultured' family: "What Jacques brought home from the *lycée* could not be assimilated" (158). In his childhood he was mixing with rough boys, so that he had to adapt; going to the beach, fighting, and insulting each other were part of his world, in which there was no difference between the *Pied-noirs* and the Arab children. He enjoyed reading, but it was a hobby he had to keep hidden from his mates at Belcourt. At the Lycée Bugeaud, he had to learn to control himself, because he was rough and always ready for a fight, and his best friend Didier thus decided to teach him to change his manners: "The first thing he sought from Jacques... was that he give up dirty words. Jacques had no difficulty giving them up with him. But with others, those words would easily slip back into his conversation ... With Didier, Jacques understood what it was to be a middle-class French family" (162). Every year, when he had to indicate his parents' professions, Jacques was reminded of his class difference, as he was embarrassed to write down "domestic" (159) for his mother's occupation: "Jacques started to write the word, stopped, and all at once he knew shame and all at once the shame of having been ashamed" (159). He also discovered that poor people did not have any holidays, on learning that his classmates would go on holiday to France every summer, but he would not. This triggered questions about his country Algeria, as France "was an abstraction" to him (162) for him. During the holidays, Jacques had to work to help his family: "work in his neighbourhood was not a virtue but a necessity in order to survive" (200). Thanks to the money he brought home at the end of the summer, he was able to be "a man" (214), as his uncle said; this is the explanation for the title *The First Man*. As an adult, Jacques Cormery knew that in colonial Algeria, those who owned lands and huge farms benefitted from the colonial system, which was not the case for the lower classes of the French community.

Camus' political education was not theoretical, but was based on life experience. His philosophical theories of the absurdity of life were inspired by his years in colonial Algeria. In *The First Man*, he explains his awareness that poverty was worse for the Arabs, and admits that the poorest *Pied-noir* was better off than any Arab, as he was part of the colonial system. Colonialism was a more divisive frontier from a racial perspective: "In this country of immigration, of quick fortunes and spectacular collapses, the boundaries between classes were less clear-cut than between races" (158). This reflection is similar to that of Frantz Fanon, but Camus takes a different approach to the problem than Fanon does, as his poverty helped to raise his political consciousness. The narrator's political commentary on the unfairness

of the colonial system for Algerian Arabs is that of the adult Albert Camus at the time he wrote *The First Man*. The narration juxtaposed with scenes of Cormery's childhood form a kind of confrontation between the social, cultural, and political reality of the young Jacques Cormery and the adult political narrator Albert Camus. For example, Cormery's few Arab classmates were referred to as "sons of wealthy notables" (158). The poor French could further their education after primary school, but not the poor Arabs, except for the children of rich Arab traders. The narrator recognizes that if the children were poor Arabs, "their feeling would have been painful and bitter" (158). In *The First Man*, the narrator Albert Camus is very sensitive to the Algerian "Kabyle Sheperd who ... goes back to the wretched hut" (163-64). The English translation of *Le premier homme* uses Frantz Fanon's term "wretched," which stresses the misery of the colonized. Camus' class-consciousness led him to journalism, specifically to the discussion of class and race relations in Algeria. He wrote a report on the miserable living conditions of the wretched of the earth in *Alger Républicain* in 1939, entitled "Misère de la Kabylie," in which he denounces the fact that "at least 50% of the population feeds on grass and roots and wait for administrative charity" (*Essais* 907). *The First Man* alludes to the violence against the Arabs in the nineteenth century when Veillard says to Jacques Cormery: "Let's be fair ... We shut them up in caves with their whole brood, yes indeed, yes indeed, and they cut balls of the first Berber" (149), and further acknowledges that such violence had been going on since 1830, when thousands of poor French were encouraged to migrate to this new colony at the expense of its natives: "They promised everyone a house and two to ten hectares... all of them dreaming of the promised land" (144).

Although the Algerian Arabs had resisted the colonial system from the beginning, the revolt intensified after the Second World War with attacks on farmers followed by retaliations. At the time Camus wrote *The First Man*, the political situation in Algeria was tense, especially since the *Pied-noirs* felt as much at home in Algeria as the Arabs did. Both communities shared a mutual distrust of France, as one of the farmers says to the adult Jacques Cormery: "We were made to understand each other. Fools and brutes like us, but with the same blood of men. We'll kill each other for a little longer, cut off each other's balls and torture each other a bit. And then we'll go back to living as men together. The country wants it that way" (*The First Man* 141). The philosophy of this comment corresponds to Albert Camus' personal position that both communities belong to Algeria, and equality between Arabs and *Pied-noirs* was his goal was the only valid solution to this political tension. Jacques Cormery expresses such feelings when he recalls his mother's perception of France, a place "on the other side of the sea which she too never travelled" and "a place lost in the dim light" (53). For Cormery, the Mediterranean separates two worlds: "one where memories and names are preserved in measured spaces, the other where the wind and sand erase all traces of men on the open ranges" (152-53). If he could escape the cultural desert of his family, it would be as Algerian, not as French, as Germaine Brée comments: "Camus described... the specific character, the philosophy, the behaviour and the language of the Algerians... who were the nearest to him than anyone else" (qtd. in O'Brien 12). In *Combat*, Camus addresses the French *Pied-noirs*, urging them to question themselves after the rebellion of the Algerian Arabs: "We cannot remain indifferent to their suffering, because we have experienced it ourselves. Rather than respond with condemnations, let us try to understand the reasons for their demands and invoke on their behalf the same democratic principles that we claim for ourselves" (qtd. in Carroll 140). During the Algerian war for independence, Camus expressed his position in the magazine *L'Express*: "One has to choose his side, those in favour of hatred yell. Ah! I have chosen it! I have chosen my country. I have chosen the Algeria of justice, where French and Arabs meet freely" (*Chroniques algériennes* 157). In Jacques Cormery's childhood, the Arabs in Belcourt were not outsiders but part of everyday life; he remembers his mother describing them as "poor fellows" (*The First Man* 218) when she observes the police arresting them after a fight. In his district in "Lyon street French, Arab, Spanish, Italian voices commingle" (Todd 36), sounds that have become part of him. In public transport, public places, and on the beaches where Jacques Cormery went, French and Arabs lived together. Such imagery inspired Camus' belief that a peaceful solution was possible for a shared Algeria through equality. Camus joined the Algerian Communist Party because he thought that it was the only way he could defend the poor "indigenous" people. He fought in favor of justice, work, and peace, themes that resonate in *The First Man*. His communication with Algerian intellectuals was genuine, as he maintained links with Kateb Yacine, to whom he wrote in a letter dated 10 October 1948: "You and me are born on the same land. Beyond all the quarrels of the moment, this makes us similar" (qtd. in Todd 717). Camus sought a future for all in Algeria, but he did not foresee the massive departure of the *Pied-noirs* in 1962. Though he dreaded such an outcome, he knew it was inevitable, as his comments at the end of *The First Man* suggest: "he had been born in a land without forefathers and without memory, where the annihilation of those who preceded him was still more final and where old age finds none of the solace in melancholy that it does in civilized lands" (220). The Algerian part of Camus' life is central in his

thoughts, but it has been relatively ignored by most French critics and by many Algerian nationalists who remembered Camus' statement in Stockholm following a question by an Algerian journalist who criticized him for not defending democracy in Algeria. After the bombing of a French district in Algiers, in which his mother lived, Camus condemned terrorism, stating that his mother could be among the victims: "I believe in justice, but I will defend my mother before justice" (qtd. in Todd 965). This statement has been used to discredit Camus and to downplay his commitment to the Algerian population. Both parties ignored his dream of a new Algeria in which Arabs and French alike could live in peace and equality. This underscores Camus' inextricable political position, caught within the contradictions of colonialism, disagreeing with the extremist *Pied-noirs* who wanted the country only for themselves, a French Algeria, and rejecting the FLN, who fought for independence. His Stockholm reaction led him into a dead-end position.

Jean-Paul Sartre, his intellectual counterpart, supported the independence of Algeria, and anti-colonial *Pied-noirs* such as Jean Sénac, Maurice Audin, Anna Greki, Henri Alleg, Denis Martinez, and Fernand Iveton joined the FLN. Camus was isolated within this ongoing debate; as Benjamin Stora comments, he became "an intellectual being prey to uncertainty and dismay" (Stora 186; my translation), which implies problematic political migrations. Given the deadlock in which the novelist was caught, *The First Man* discloses his contradictions and the imbroglio created by the end of Empire, as expressed in his friendship with Saddok, his Algerian Arab alter ego. Saddok supports independence for Algeria by any means, while Jacques opposes terrorism. When the police look for Saddok, Jacques "receives him, the right of asylum being sacred" (*The First Man* 203), which demonstrates the degree of brotherhood between them. The falling-out between the two friends stems from their political viewpoints of the end of Empire. *The First Man* thus illustrates both the open-mindedness and the humanity of Camus, as he was affected by the physical, social, cultural, and political migrations he endured during the French colonial era. In *How Societies Remember*, Paul Connerton states that "the narrative of our life is part of an interconnecting set of narratives; it is embedded in the story of those groups from which individuals derive their identity" (qtd. in Conelissen 2); *The First Man* provides such an example, as Camus explains in the appendix to the work: "In short I wanted to speak of those I loved. And of that only. Intense joy" (250). The unfinished draft text is most significant in Camus' oeuvre: it lifts doubts about the man and justifies his children's decision to publish it. The revelations in the work about his family and social life are not egoistic autobiographical endeavors, but are rooted in the cultural and political atmosphere of the 1960s and the Algerian war. At the peak of his celebrity, he believed he should make his true self public in order to clarify his political positions that were criticized by both pro-French and anti-French Algerians. The text is not written in chronological order, but is guided by the colonial question at its heart. From the unconscious perception of the colony of the young Jacques Cormery to the full consciousness of the colonial system by the articulate, politicized adult, this autofiction helps to clarify the intellectual trajectory of Camus as a man and as a writer. His initial unconscious perception of the nature of colonialism and his lower-class status led him to empathize with the indigenous population and thus seek to dismantle the colonial system and those who benefitted from it. However, his sensitivity to the negative effects of colonialism did blind him to the fact that he could not by himself overthrow the system that brought his family to the place in which he was born and which he loved. *The First Man* traces his path from not questioning the colonial system to actively confronting it. Though aware of injustice, he did not convince the French *Pied-noirs* who ignored his call. His representations of the state of mind of the characters in his autofiction reflect the atmosphere of anxiety over the future of Algeria. His silence after 1957 matches his philosophical thoughts on the question of responsibility towards History: "In the end, man is not entirely guilty – he did not start history. Nor is he wholly innocent – he continues it" (*The Rebel* 6). Camus' life as portrayed in *The First Man* further illustrates Edward Said's final opinion of him as "a moral man in an immoral situation" (*Culture and Imperialism*, 210).

### Works Cited

- Brée, Germaine. *Camus*. Prentice Hall, 1964.  
Camus, Albert. *Essais*. Gallimard, 1965.  
---. *The First Man*. Translated by David Hapgood, Hamilton, 1995.  
---. *The Rebel*. 1951. Vintage, 1991.  
Césaire, Aimé. *Discourse on Colonialism*. Monthly Review Press, 1972.  
Conelissen, Catriona. *Negotiating Cultures: Modes of Memory in Novels by African Women*. Dissertation, U of Toronto, 1997.  
Dobrovsky, Serge. *Fils*. Gallimard, 1977.  
Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press, 2004.

Lodge, David. *The Art of Fiction*. Secker and Warburg, 1992.

O'Brien, Conor Cruise. *Albert Camus*. Viking, 1970.

Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage, 1994.

---. *Orientalism*. Penguin, 1995.

Stora, Benjamin. *Algérie, Histoire contemporaine, 1830-1988*. Casbah Editions, 2004.

Todd, Olivier. *Albert Camus: une vie*. Gallimard, 1996.

**Author's profile:** Benaouda Lebdaï is Professor Emeritus at Le Mans University, France. His research concentrates on colonial and postcolonial African Literatures. He has published more than 50 articles in his field of study and he has published many books. His latest publications are *Autobiography as a Writing Strategy in Postcolonial Literature* with Cambridge Scholars Publishing (2015), *Auto/biographies dans les arts* with Mare et Martin, Paris (2017) and *La représentation de l'Histoire dans les littératures et les arts africains*, with ENAG Editions, Algiers (2017). E-mail: <Benaouda.lebdaï@univ-lemans.fr>