In and Out of Place: Geographies of Revolt in Camus's *La Peste*

Erin Tremblay Ponnou-Delaffon
Illinois State University

At the start of Albert Camus's postwar novel *La Peste* (1947) (*The Plague* [1948]), the narrator contends that the 'curious events' which unfold in Oran "n'y étaient pas à leur place" (*Œuvres* 2: 35) 'were out of place there.'[1] Then, after briefly presenting the coastal Algerian city, the plot begins in earnest with a disconcerting realization expressed in the very same terms. Exiting his office one morning, our protagonist Dr. Rieux pauses to note that a dead rat "n'était pas à sa place" (2: 38) 'was out of place' on the landing outside his door.[2] Thus, from the start, the novel insistently connects plot, spatial setting, and notions of normativity and transgression. Indeed, like the concierge's indignation before the "scandal" of the rat in his building (2: 38), these opening remarks reveal how place exceeds the merely spatial. As human geographer Tim Cresswell reminds us, labeling something "out of place" or "misplaced" connotes impropriety and breached expectations. Such a judgment exemplifies how place "combines the spatial with the social" (Cresswell 3).[3] Neither inherently neutral nor solely material, the concept is always invested with meaning, as early humanistic geographers like Edward Relph and Yi-Fu Tuan have shown.

Like geography, the field of literary studies recognizes the mediating effects of subjectivity and language. In the fictional world of *La Peste*, multiple perspectives shape place socially and textually: those of an author and his culture (Camus himself), a diegetic chronicler (none other than Dr. Rieux, as we later learn), and an occasional metadiegetic diarist (Tarrou, whose writings are incorporated into Rieux's narration after his death). Moreover, from the first page, the novel's epigraph from Daniel Defoe directs the audience to read symbolically, if not exclusively so: "*Il est aussi raisonnable de représenter une espèce d'emprisonnement par une autre que de représenter n'importe quelle chose qui existe réellement par quelque chose qui n'existe pas*" (2: 33) '*'Tis as reasonable to represent one kind of Imprisonment by another, as it is to represent any Thing that really exists, by that which exists not*' (Defoe n.pag.). Similarly, language's multiplicity of meanings allows Camus to counter Roland Barthes's famous critique that *La Peste* naturalizes a specific human evil, namely the German Occupation and Nazism, or *peste brune* 'the brown plague.'[4] In a 1955 letter to Barthes, the author responds, "beaucoup de vos observations sont éclairées par le fait tout simple que je ne crois pas au réalisme en art" (2: 286) 'many of your remarks are clarified by the quite simple fact that I do not believe in realism in art.' Rejecting strict realist literary conventions, Camus invites us to read on many levels. In the mode of allegorical fable, places are all the more invested with

meaning. With these considerations in mind, I situate my reading of *La Peste* within recent theoretical explorations of the relationships between text, place, and subjectivity.[5] By examining how *La Peste* presents Oran and perceives exile, this article uncovers how the novel frames its crisis as one of place. Beginning with interpretations of the rat episode, understandings of what is acceptable and of who belongs in a particular place inform *La Peste*'s universalized ethics of revolt.[6]

Places, Both Specific and Mythic

The novel's preamble locates the events as taking place "in Oran" (2: 35). It sets the stage by calling to mind Camus's 1939 essay, "Le Minotaure ou la halte d'Oran" 'The Minotaur, or Stopping in Oran,' eventually published in *L'Été* (1954; published in English as *Summer* in 1967). As has been noted, *La Peste* defines the Algerian city by what it lacks: beauty, appeal, nature, and access to the sea.[7] The narrator laments that the coastal city was built "en tournant le dos à cette baie" (2: 37) 'turning its back to the bay.' As a result, "il [est] impossible d'apercevoir la mer qu'il faut toujours aller chercher" (2: 37) 'it is impossible to catch a glimpse of the sea, which one must always seek.' Oran is "une ville sans pigeons, sans arbres et sans jardins" (2: 35) 'a town without pigeons, without trees, and without gardens.' The unequivocal anaphora continues slightly later, as we learn that Oran is "sans pittoresque, sans végétation et sans âme" (2: 37) 'without charm, without plants, and without soul.'[8] This final damning soullessness seemingly results from an accumulation of all the preceding lacks. Along with the narrator's assertion that inhabitants live "sans soupçons" (2: 36) 'without inklings' of anything else beyond the reality they know, such a description negatively and metonymically associates Oran and the Oranais. Even prior to the plague, residents are particularly uncomfortable dying in this place, our narrator notes (2: 36). This detail is not surprising given the city's attempts to exclude nature from its borders, for what could be more natural than disease, decay, and death, as even Tarrou and Rieux eventually acknowledge (2: 209, 248)? Yet, despite these opening details that distinguish Oran, descriptors such as 'ordinary,' 'neutral,' 'insignificant,' and 'banal' invite readers to confuse the town with any other (2: 35, 36, 37). The thoroughly 'modern' city could indeed be our own, as intimated by the recurrent use of the first person plural and by lines such as "On dira sans doute que cela n'est pas particulier à notre ville et qu'en somme tous nos contemporains sont ainsi" (2: 36) 'It will no doubt be said that these habits are not unique to our town and that, in short, all our contemporaries are like this.' In this way, Oran becomes "the perfect 'anywhere' for the historically unthinkable to happen" (Graebner 221).

While a precise setting for a specific epidemic, Oran thus becomes an archetypal, "mythic" place confronting a generalized evil (Lévi-Valensi 63). The

tension between the particular and the general becomes evident when Rieux reacts to the first implicit suggestion and explicit mention of the word "plague." As the doctor pauses before admitting the suspected diagnosis to a colleague, the text calls our attention to his position looking out his office window. The passage insistently repeats Rieux's place as he processes the news (2: 58-62). Gazing out, the doctor confuses the city before his eyes ("sa ville qui n'avait pas changé" [2: 59] 'his city which had not changed') with those historical plague-ravaged ones imagined in his mind's eye (Constantinople, Athens, Marseille, Jaffa, Milan...).[9] At the end of this passage's transposition, Rieux opens his window, as if to break the barrier separating, on one side, the phantasmatic 'images' 'contain[ed]' in the word 'plague' from, on the other, the concrete reality of this particular spring day in Oran (2: 60). Noise 'shakes' Rieux from his mental geographic wanderings: "Là était la certitude, dans le travail de tous les jours" (2: 62) 'There lay certitude, in everyday work,' the passage concludes, the word "là" 'there, therein' grounding him in his concrete place—both social (his work) and physical (his city).

This passage accentuates the dual specificity and generality of Oran, just as it introduces the novel's link between rootedness in place and social action. Indeed, such a conception of the city shapes the novel's ethics—which underscore the present task of fighting the outbreak while also universalizing necessary revolt. That is to say, if the plague-infested rats and events are out of place in a city confused with so many others, then the allegorized evil can never be *in its place*. Rieux's categorical 'revolt' before 'death and evil,' most acutely expressed after the death of Judge Othon's son, echoes the author's own position (2: 184, 185). In a conference before the Dominicans of Latour-Maubourg entitled "L'Incroyant et les chrétiens" (1946) ('The Unbeliever and Christians' [1960]), Camus maintains, "Nous ne pouvons pas empêcher peut-être que cette création soit celle où des enfants sont torturés. Mais nous pouvons diminuer le nombre des enfants torturés" (2: 473) 'We cannot prevent perhaps this creation from being a world in which children are tortured. But we can reduce the number of children tortured.' In this view, there is no acceptable, proper place for evil and the suffering to which it gives rise, whether understood as natural (disease, death) or moral (torture, extermination). If we pursue the ramifications of Rieux and Camus's logic, traditional theodicy like Gottfried Leibniz's "meilleur des mondes possibles" 'best of all possible worlds' appears both fundamentally flawed (the only tolerable number of victims is zero, the only acceptable world other than this one) and tragically accurate (the just hero must therefore strive for the impossible).

Geographies of Exile

The novel's understanding of Oran and the world thus exposes a crisis of

relationship to place characterized by Camus as exile. Just as Oran functions as a particular site and a microcosm, its evil both specific and generalized, so too the confinement it imposes lays bare both physical and metaphysical exile. The city's aforementioned spatial orientation and culture indicate exile long before the plague. Inhabitants live (however unknowingly) separated outwardly from the surrounding sea and desert and inwardly from "the sensitivity, complexity, and interiority that constitute what for Camus it means to be human" (Carroll, "The Colonial City" 99). The plague only exaggerates Oran's hermetically closed, "snail"-like structure.[10] Even before authorities reinforce the city's external limits, internal borders demarcate space: the sick are secluded, survivors quarantined, and residents isolated behind closed shutters in prisons of fear and pain. After the gates are closed, countless lexical choices associate Oran with incarceration, much like Cadix (Cádiz), the coastal Spanish setting for the allegorical Plague's totalitarian rule in Camus's play *L'État de siège* (1948) (*State of Siege* [1958]). This isolation proves to be as social as it is spatial, as the suspension of mail service incites a solipsistic "monologue" of repeatedly copied, unsendable letters (2: 80).

Exile as the experience of displacement points to how a plague construed as transgressive alters normal experiences of private and public spaces. People's homes and town become paradoxical prisons: "Mais si c'était l'exil, dans la majorité des cas c'était l'exil chez soi" (2: 83) 'But if exile, in most cases it was exile at home.' Traditional places of rest like houses and bedrooms become, from a Foucauldian perspective, "heterotopias of deviation" (25). As in Oran, "individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed" in such "simultaneously mythic and real" places (Foucault 25, 24). Important public spaces like trains and train stations—a complex network of movement, encounter, departure, and return—remain still and empty, signaling only separation. Such associations explain, of course, the station's literal and metaphorical pull on Rambert. Far from home, with no sure way to flee Oran, the journalist lingers "de longs moments" (2: 108) 'long periods of time' in the station's waiting room. With cruel irony, authorities annex a school playground, evocative of the carefree innocence of youth, for the dying. Here, rather than playing and learning, Judge Othon's young son writhes in pain "dans une ancienne salle de classe" (2: 180) 'in a former classroom' with equations still visible on the blackboard.

On the other hand, cultural places associated with entertainment seem, at first glance, marked by continuity. With spring's arrival just prior to the gates' closing, the narrator remarks, "Apparemment, rien n'était changé" (2: 77) 'Apparently, nothing was changed.' Even these places, though, are not immune. The Oranais excessively frequent cafés, theaters, and cinemas, seeking respite and creating "l'impression trompeuse d'une cité en fête" (2: 87) 'the deceiving

impression of a festive city.' With irony, Dr. Rieux speculates that the cinema, one of the townspeople's 'simple joys,' might effectively communicate a staggering abstract death toll (2: 36): "Voilà ce qu'il faudrait faire. On rassemble les gens à la sortie de cinq cinémas, on les conduit sur une place de la ville et on les fait mourir en tas pour y voir un peu clair" (2: 60) 'That's what you would have to do. You gather people coming out of five movie theaters, lead them to a town square, and have them die in a heap to see it a bit more clearly.' The literal eruption of the plague—the real—onto the fictional space of the opera stage offers another particularly powerful inversion. The highly symbolic production of Orpheus and Eurydice, performed by a troupe unable to leave the city, continues to draw crowds. At the precise moment when Orpheus loses his beloved, he collapses 'grotesquely,' victim to the epidemic (2: 171). As such transformations stress, places too bear the mark of the plague gripping the city and are subject to changing perception and negotiation.

Few natural spaces figure prominently in the novel, but representations of the sky, among the most symbolically charged, uncover the novel's understanding of metaphysical exile. Remote yet oppressive, the sky poses a hermeneutic problem just as it offers a tool: the Oranais can 'read' the sky, for only there does one detect seasonal change in this lifeless city (2: 35). So too, readers can track seasonal, diurnal, and meteorological patterns pointing to a dynamic relationship between time and place. The feverish plague rises with the summer sky's oppressive heat, before retreating with autumn and disappearing (however temporarily) with winter. On the morning of the dramatic first death that Dr. Rieux witnesses, a "brise déjà tiède" (2: 48) 'already warm breeze' blows outside, hinting of flowers and joyous noise in the air during the morning remission typically experienced by plague sufferers. Then, "d'un seul coup" (2: 48) 'all of a sudden,' a midday external and internal spike of temperature undermines any apparent progress. With the sun and fever's final blow (the literal meaning of the French *coup*), the promise of "renouveau" (2: 48) 'renewal' gives way to despair. Camus's aforementioned rejection of 'creation' as it exists becomes apparent in the characterization of the weather/heat and disease/fever, two seemingly collaborationist, almost indistinguishable natural forces (2: 473). This dynamic further reinforces the novel's sense of a general ontological out-of-placeness in a hostile world.

The narration often stresses the parallels between the development of weather above the city and the events on the ground. Consider the storms that beat down on the congregations gathered to hear Father Paneloux. The opening words of the Jesuit's first plague sermon 'pound' his audience: "il attaqua l'assistance d'une seule phrase véhémente et martelée: 'Mes frères, vous êtes dans le malheur, mes frères, vous l'avez mérité'" (2: 98) 'he attacked the audience with a single vehement, pounding sentence: "My brethren, calamity has beset you; my

brethren, you have deserved it.'" At the same time, rain and wind gusts beat down forcefully, as if to emphasize the cleric's message of retribution sent from on high. But more generally, as I argue elsewhere, Camus's sky references here and in other works register existential solitude and metaphysical silence; they respond to the absence or ultimate nonexistence of God that renders human suffering scandalous (Ponnou-Delaffon 13-14). Each inhabitant of plague-ridden Oran hence lives "au jour le jour, et seul en face du ciel" (2: 84) 'from day to day, and alone under the heavens.' "[I]ls furent apparemment livrés aux caprices du ciel," "'ce ciel où [Dieu] se tait'" (2: 84, 122) 'They were apparently at the mercy of the sky's whims,' '"the heavens where [God] remains silent."' Shared metaphors further link sky and plague: the narrator describes the people as 'prisoner' of both (2: 55, 80), and mentions just after Paneloux's first sermon that the inhabitants feel "une sorte de séquestration, sous le couvercle du ciel" (2: 102) 'a sort of incarceration, under the dome of the sky.'

La Peste's elaboration of exile as social and spatial, individual and collective, physical and metaphysical paradoxically creates "une histoire collective" (2: 149) 'a shared history and narrative,' and the community it weaves together. The transition from part one to part two signals this shift. The authorities' detached decree, "'Déclarez l'état de peste. Fermez la ville'" (2: 77) '"Declare a state of plague. Close the town,"' gives way to the narrator's inclusive observation with the return of the first person plural, "À partir de ce moment, il est possible de dire que la peste fut notre affaire à tous" (2: 78) 'From that moment on, it can be said that the plague was the concern of us all.' In *Albert Camus, l'exil absolu*, Jean-Jacques Gonzales contends that for the author, "La peste pose la question des fondements de la seule communauté qui vaille et qui est celle des exilés" (74) 'The plague poses the question of the foundations of the only community that matters, that of the exiled.' Indeed, provided that 'exiled' is read polysemically as Camus intended (2: 286). The progressive expansion of borders—from a home's shutters or hospital's doors, to the city's gates, to the sky's limit—implies a condemnation extending to all who dwell on earth. As a generalized human condition, the crisis of exile creates the potential for radical solidarity. If borders traditionally delimit an *inside* and an *outside*, an *us* and a *them*, their extension to the sky's dome encircles and unites everyone.

The sky thus signals shared exile, just as a second important natural site, the sea, holds the promise of community on an intimate level. A well-known passage, Rieux and Tarrou's "bain de mer," literally 'sea-bathing,' has all the makings of a secular communion and baptism (2: 211). For one brief moment, the two escape the prison of Oran and the plague for the beach and a nighttime swim. "[D]ans le silence et la solitude de la nuit" 'In the silence and solitude of the night,' the two find "le même rythme," "la même cadence et la même vigueur" (2: 212), 'the same rhythm,' 'the same pace and the same vigor.' Stronger still, the

text describes them even as sharing "le même cœur" (2: 213) 'the same heart.' On a syntactic level, Rieux and Tarrou's positive, shared solitude ("le même . . . la même . . ." 'the same . . . the same. . .') contrasts strikingly with the previously examined negative litany of lacking traits ("sans . . . sans . . ." 'without . . . without. . .') that plagues Oran long before the epidemic's outbreak. While not a ritual initiation for these two already committed individuals, Rieux and Tarrou's immersion shares with common understandings of baptism the rite's symbolic power to bind together in community, as it seals their 'friendship' (2: 211). The moment also functions as physical and symbolic respite and renewal, inspiring a 'strange happiness' and 'liberation' before they return to Oran and begin their struggle anew (2: 212). We can detect the same theme of renewal in Camus's notebooks from his time in Oran, where he expresses admiration for the dunes before the sea: "Tous les matins d'été sur les plages ont l'air d'être les premiers du monde" (2: 925) 'Summer mornings on the beaches all look like the first on the earth.' Rieux and Tarrou's "bain de mer" acutely evokes what David Carroll has called Camus's "imaginary" geography, the "promise" of "an intense, sensuous appreciation of, identification with, and possession by the stark, powerful, infinite beauty of the land itself" ("Camus's Algeria" 517, 534).

Sites of Contestation

This formative experience of solitude and solidarity in a particular setting brings us back to responses to the plague rooted in an awareness of being in and out of place. The novel situates its protagonists not only historically, in the Sartrean sense, but physically and spatially. Despite differences distinguishing the cast of main characters, all share a general sense of being out of place, which in turn informs their ethics. Rambert and Rieux typify this point, but a case can be made for the others as well. A lone wanderer, Tarrou is, like the journalist Rambert, a newcomer to Oran. In fact, Tarrou has never felt at home there since an experience in a particular place, a courtroom where his father pleaded for the death of a condemned man, exposed his own implication in a sociopolitical system built on murder. He thus concludes, "'chacun la porte en soi, la peste'" (2: 209) "'each of us carries the plague within himself.'" Tarrou's understanding of his true situation prompts exile literally as he flees home and figuratively as he attempts to side with victims. Of the Oranais, the mediocre bureaucrat Grand lives separated from his estranged wife, from meaningful work, and most notably from language itself, since words elude him as an aspiring writer. Yet, Grand eventually finds his place in his desire to be 'useful' to the plague relief efforts (2: 126). Moreover, in his tireless search for the right words, the seemingly ironically-named character reveals in fact his modest heroism.[11] As for Cottard, the outlaw can only temporarily find his place in the chaos the plague brings, hence his

madness with the return to order at the novel's end. Even Paneloux, with his absolutist theology and bookish erudition, proves out of place in an individualistic, spiritually apathetic society. In the doctor's assessment, Paneloux's removal from life's grittiness, rather than his vocation per se, explains his initial (mis)interpretation of the plague: unlike rural parish priests, the Jesuit is "'un homme d'études. Il n'a pas vu assez mourir'" (2: 120) "'a scholar. He hasn't seen enough people die.'" Although Paneloux's character evolves, he ultimately has no place, for as he himself explains, "'[les religieux] ont tout *placé* en Dieu'" (2: 195; emphasis added) "'[priests] have *placed* everything in God's care.'" And of course, Oran's ultimate exiled and displaced are the absent Muslim Arabs, as has been commented by critics to different ends.[12] Rieux's recordings give only glimpses of the suffering masses of faceless victims. If, to Judge Othon's chagrin, the plague touches all classes in a social leveling (2: 53), a spatial hierarchy nonetheless exists, with the poorer, peripheral *faubourgs* where Rieux works hit harder and faster than the wealthier center.

Of all Rieux's companions, Rambert provides the most complex reaction. Unexpectedly trapped in an unknown city far from his loved one, the journalist figures among "les plus exilés" (2: 83) 'the most exiled.' Due to his literal displacement in Oran, he initially sees himself as innocent and distinct from the city's condemned inhabitants, with no role to play in their collective drama. "'[J]e suis étranger à cette ville'" (2: 91) "'I'm a stranger to this town,'" he insists after meeting Dr. Rieux for the first time, notably right outside a hospital where the infected are treated. From the narrator's perspective, those like Rambert who are unable or unwilling to "s'enraciner dans la terre de leur douleur" 'root themselves in the land of their sorrow' are reduced to "[des] ombres errantes" 'wandering shadows' (2: 82). Lack of a literal and social place endangers one's very being, such imagery implies. Only when Rambert realizes that his situation connects him precisely to the Oranais can he commit to the anti-plague efforts. A shared narrative and place transform Rambert. First, he appropriates the heavily symbolic "Saint James Infirmary."[13] After hearing the song at the hotel bar, he plays it in the intimate space of his room while talking with Rieux (2: 141, 146). Shortly after, the journalist learns that the doctor also lives separated from the woman he loves. Changed by the knowledge of their connection, Rambert volunteers to help with the relief efforts while planning his escape. Through this work, he comes into being. No longer "une ombre perdue" (2: 108) 'a lost shadow,' Rambert eventually affirms, "'je ne pars pas et je veux rester avec vous'" (2: 177) "'I'm not leaving, and I want to stay with you.'" He finds his place, linking spatial rootedness and social belonging. A distance between subject and object ("*je* suis étranger à *cette ville*" '*I*'m a stranger to *this town*') gives way to a relationship between two subjects who together form a community ("*je* veux rester avec *vous*" '*I* want to stay with *you*'). In this way, Rambert's character strikingly enacts

L'Homme révolté's modified *cogito*, "Je me révolte, donc nous sommes" (3: 79) 'I revolt, therefore we are,' with its surprising shift from the individual to the collective.

Finally, Tarrou's expressed desire to join the relief efforts sums up our protagonist-narrator Rieux's reaction to the plague as a crisis of place. Madame Rieux begins by asking her son, "'Est-ce qu'on va garder l'éclairage réduit pendant toute la peste?'" (2: 118) '"Are they going to keep the lighting reduced as long as the plague lasts?"' In addition to setting the tone, Madame Rieux's inquiry introduces symbolic light and darkness imagery, which illustrates once again the ability of time (here, diurnal and nocturnal cycles) to inflect place. Tarrou then arrives, welcomed into this intimate space lit by a single lamp. When he unexpectedly inquires, "'Croyez-vous en Dieu, docteur?'" '"Do you believe in God, Doctor?"' Rieux 'hesitates' and responds, "'Non, mais qu'est-ce que cela veut dire? Je suis dans la nuit, et j'essaie d'y voir clair. Il y a longtemps que j'ai cessé de trouver ça original'" (2: 120) '"No, but what does that mean? I'm in the dark, trying to see clearly. I ceased finding that novel a long time ago."' Rieux acknowledges his epistemological and ontological limits. As the conversation draws to a close, he stresses his deliberate will to stay 'in the dark,' indifferent to unknowable grand-order 'Truth.' After Tarrou asks why a man who doesn't believe in God invests himself so completely in the fight against the plague, the text specifies that the doctor answers "[s]ans sortir de l'ombre" (2: 121) '[w]ithout emerging from the shadow.' Rieux only 'comes back into the light' to confirm Tarrou's interpretation that his commitment stems from "'l'idée qu['il se fait] de [son] métier'" (2: 121) '"the idea [he has] of his profession."' In other words, only his concrete efforts and the urgent material realities of this place, rather than any abstract metaphysical or religious reflections, can light his path. But shadow stalks even this glimmer of hope. When Tarrou reminds the doctor that his victories are but temporary and futile, "Rieux parut s'assombrir" (2: 122) 'Rieux's face seemed to darken.' Indeed, with a seemingly insignificant detail, the narration emphasizes that darkness envelops the two as they exit to tend to the sick: "le docteur essaya en vain de faire fonctionner la minuterie. Les escaliers restaient plongés dans la nuit" (2: 122) 'the doctor tried in vain to turn on the light on the landing. The stairs remained plunged in darkness.'

Rieux's situation suggests a modern, existential dark night of the soul, except without any end or light in sight, nor even Tarrou's zealous certainty on which to fall back. Rieux embraces the categorical refusal of "l'évasion" 'escape' in the face of a seemingly unintelligible world that Camus elaborates in his 1942 *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (*The Myth of Sisyphus* [1955]) (1: 241). For Camus, such escapism takes the form of suicide, either literal or 'philosophical,' whether the Kierkegaardian leap or the crypto-religious move he associates with even the most atheistic strands of existentialism (1: 247). Facing literal and metaphysical

exile, Rieux refuses escape. He does not attempt to flee Oran like Rambert or seek "la lumière de Dieu" 'the light of God,' or "cette lueur exquise d'éternité qui gît au fond de toute souffrance" 'that exquisite glimmer of eternity that lies in the depths of all suffering' extolled by Paneloux (2: 99, 101). Instead, he stakes his rightful place as in Oran and in the dark. Rieux's exchange with Tarrou articulates more fully his philosophy and ethics, intimated in the previously discussed window scene reverie where the word 'plague' was first mentioned. Neither nihilism nor resignation, the protagonist's response proposes a quiet, active resistance rooted in place.

Some of the most insightful, best-known readings of Camus's novel have centered on its historical dimension, from Barthes's famous critique, to Roger Grenier's and Shoshana Felman's likening of its fictional testimony to the (im)possibility of bearing witness to the Occupation and the Holocaust, respectively. In contrast, this article has engaged the recent spatial turn in literary and cultural studies, which stresses that history, politics, identity—considerations long privileged by theory and criticism—unfold *in place*. The present reading of *La Peste* highlights how in the Camusian imaginary, narrative places catalyze contestation. Places thus constitute not merely settings, sites, and objects to be read, but a dynamic way of encountering and reading the world. *La Peste*'s construction of place as both particular and exemplary informs the novel's universalized ethics of revolt, one that views evil and suffering as always out of place in a just world. This existential experience is only the starting place. As Camus writes in a 1946 letter to Louis Guilloux, "Ce qui équilibre l'absurde, c'est la communauté des hommes en lutte contre lui" 'What counterbalances the absurd is the community of people struggling against it.'[14] In the novel, the protagonists' sense of out-of-placeness and solidarity in exile gives concrete expression to their revolt. From and in a given place that he both accepts and strives to correct, the Camusian hero labors to eradicate "la mort et le mal" (2: 185) 'death and evil' symbolized by a plague that kills rats and children indiscriminately. Like an artist, he inhabits a world "créé par la correction de celui-ci" (3: 288) 'created by the correction of this our own world.' And so, like the mythical Sisyphus, Rieux and his companions persevere in what the doctor acknowledges is "[u]ne interminable défaite" (2: 122) 'a never-ending defeat.' For after all, in Camus's estimation, "La lutte elle-même vers les sommets suffit à remplir un cœur d'homme. Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux" (1: 304) 'The struggle itself toward the summits suffices to fill a human heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.' Or rather, we must imagine our absurd hero fulfilled and happy in his particular place.

Notes

1. Subsequent French references to Camus's work cite only the volume and page of the most recent Pléiade edition of his *Œuvres complètes*. Because published translations of *The Plague* obscure the importance of place in their rendering of key passages cited here, English translations in this article are my own, with the exception of *La Peste*'s epigraph, which preserves Daniel Defoe's original language.

2. Camus originally envisioned beginning the novel with the discovery of dead rats, rather than the description of Oran (2: 1138).

3. Following Cresswell, I employ the term "place" rather than "social space" (as does Henri Lefebvre in *La Production de l'espace* [*The Production of Space*]) to preserve the emphasis on subjectivity the former term has long conveyed in human geography (177 n2).

4. See Barthes 540-45.

5. With its focus on individual perspectives and understandings of place, this approach is not strictly geocritical, i.e. "geo-centered" rather than "ego-centered" (Westphal xiv).

6. I would thus concur with Colin Davis that the rats at the beginning of the novel "represent a residue or semantic excess through which the questions of ethical choice and action are posed" (1008). For Davis, *La Peste* fails to "tidy" the "mess" it refuses: dead rodents, disorder, competing narrations, ambiguities (1017). This tension relates to what he views as "the repudiation of otherness in Camus's ethics and aesthetics" (1009). Unlike Davis, however, the present article reads the rats as a symbol not of otherness or human relations, but rather of natural and moral evil and resulting suffering. This, it seems to me, is the worldly "messiness" that Camus most forcefully rejects.

7. For instance, Carroll, *Albert Camus* 59 and Lévi-Valensi 62-63.

8. Cf. 3: 568, 572, 574.

9. Rieux's confusion of disease-ravaged times and places with his own finds contemporary resonance in critic Michael Schaub's recent National Public Radio book review, "Albert Camus and the Search for Meaning in the Midst of Ebola."

10. Cf. 2: 86 and 3: 573.

11. A quiet, discreet heroism is indeed confirmed by the narrator (2: 128).

12. For the most critical voice, see chapter two of O'Brien, and for a more measured response, chapter two of Carroll's book.

13. In this folk song, popularized by Louis Armstrong's rendition, a young man views his love's cold cadaver laid out before imagining his own death.

14. Qtd. in Blondeau 2: 1151, an essay prepared for the Pléiade edition. Guilloux's correspondence with Camus is held by the Bibliothèque de Saint-Brieuc.

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. "*La Peste*: Annales d'une épidémie ou roman de la solitude?" *Livres, textes, entretiens, 1942-1961*. Ed. Éric Marty. Paris: Seuil, 2002. 540-45. Print.

Blondeau, Marie-Thérèse. "*La Peste*: Notice." *Œuvres complètes*. By Albert Camus. Ed. Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi. Vol. 2. Paris: Gallimard, 2006. 1133-69. Print.

Camus, Albert. *Œuvres complètes*. Ed. Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi. Vols. 1-2. Paris: Gallimard, 2006. Print.

---. *Œuvres complètes*. Ed. Raymond Gay-Crosier. Vols. 3-4. Paris: Gallimard, 2008. Print.

Carroll, David. *Albert Camus the Algerian: Colonialism, Terrorism, Justice*. New York: Columbia UP, 2007. Print.

---. "Camus's Algeria: Birthrights, Colonial Injustice, and the Fiction of a French-Algerian People." *MLN* 112.4 (Sept. 1997): 517-49. Web. 15 July 2014. http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/mln.1997.0053

---. "The Colonial City and the Question of Borders: Albert Camus's Allegory of Oran." *L'Esprit Créateur* 41.3 (Fall 2001): 88-104. Web. 15 July 2014. http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/esp.2010.0166

Cresswell, Tim. *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996. Print.

Davis, Colin. "Camus's *La Peste*: Sanitation, Rats, and Messy Ethics." *Modern Language Review* 102.4 (2007): 1008-20. Web. 15 July 2014. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/20467547

Defoe, Daniel. Preface. *Serious Reflections during the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe: With His Vision of the Angelick World*. London: W. Taylor, 1720. N.pag. Print.

Felman, Shoshana. "Camus' *The Plague*, or A Monument to Witnessing." *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. By Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. New York: Routledge, 1992. 93-119. Print.

Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces." Trans. Jay Miskowiec. *Diacritics* 16.1 (Spring 1986): 22-27. Web. 15 July 2014. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/464648

Gonzales, Jean-Jacques. *Albert Camus, l'exil absolu*. Houilles: Manucius, 2007. Print.

Graebner, Seth. *History's Place: Nostalgia and the City in French Algerian Literature*. Lanham: Lexington, 2007. Print.

Grenier, Roger. *Albert Camus, soleil et ombre: Une biographie intellectuelle*. Paris: Gallimard, 1987. Print.

Lefebvre, Henri. *La Production de l'espace*. Paris: Anthropos, 1974. Print.

Lévi-Valensi, Jacqueline. "Le Temps et l'espace dans l'œuvre romanesque de Camus: Une mythologie du réel." *Albert Camus 1980: Second International Conference, February 21-23, 1980, The University of Florida, Gainesville*. Ed. Raymond Gay-Crosier. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1980. 57-68. Print.

O'Brien, Conor Cruise. *Albert Camus of Europe and Africa*. New York: Viking, 1970. Print.

Ponnou-Delaffon, Erin Tremblay. *The Echoes of Silence: Silence as an Ethical and Textual Problem in Contemporary French Literature*. Diss. Yale University, 2011. Web. 15 July 2014. http://search.proquest.com/

Relph, E. *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion, 1976. Print.

Schaub, Michael. "Albert Camus and the Search for Meaning in the Midst of Ebola." *All Things Considered*. Host Audie Cornish. National Public Radio. 2 Aug. 2014. Web. 30 Sept. 2014.

Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: U of Minneapolis P, 1977. Print.

Westphal, Bertrand. Foreword. *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies*. Ed. Robert T. Tally, Jr. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. ix-xv. Print.