Borrowed Forms
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Published by Liverpool University Press


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I cannot reduce my thoughts about life to the music of a single voice and a single point of view—I am, after all, a novelist.

—Orhan Pamuk

Borrowed Forms considers the impact of musical forms on late twentieth-century literature. The book looks closely at four musical concepts that have significantly influenced the novel and critical theory: polyphony, or the art of combining multiple, interdependent voices; counterpoint, the carefully regulated setting of one voice against another; variation, the virtuosic exploration of the diverse possibilities contained within a single theme; and opera, the dramatic setting of a story to a musical score. Although these musical forms took shape in the European Renaissance and Baroque, novelists have appropriated them as literary strategies because they open up alternative ways of conceiving relations among different subjectivities, histories, and positions, and provide a dynamic means to challenge and renew literary forms.

In our cultural moment, novels circulate more widely than any other literary genre, and possess an exceptional plasticity that readily accommodates multiple perspectives, languages, styles, and registers. Not surprisingly, the novel has emerged as the privileged literary vehicle for expressing plurality and difference. How the novel reflects this increasingly transnational consciousness, and more precisely, how novelists and critics deploy musical forms to respond to new ethical and aesthetic demands, are among the principal questions this book addresses.
The short novella, “Clone,” by Argentine author Julio Cortázar, offers a compelling example of the kind of formal experimentation that music has inspired among contemporary writers. Published in 1980, “Clone” follows a group of eight madrigal singers on tour throughout South America. Problems arise as the ensemble’s hot-tempered lead singer, Sandro, comes to suspect his wife, soprano Franca, of having an affair with another singer. His mounting jealousy increasingly compromises the collaborative spirit of their rehearsals, and threatens to derail their performances. The situation comes to a head on the evening of the group’s final concert in Buenos Aires, where they are to perform the notoriously difficult music of Carlo Gesualdo, an eccentric early Baroque composer known as much for his audacious use of dissonance as for having murdered his wife and her lover in the conjugal bed. As the curtain rises for the performance, Franca fails to appear. Sandro has re-enacted Gesualdo’s crime of passion, murdering his wife offstage and delivering a stunning blow to singers and audience alike.

Cortázar’s story presents a highly unusual—and unanticipated—musical construction that is emblematic of the novels we will examine throughout this work. As he reveals in an afterword entitled “Note on the Theme of a King and the Vengeance of a Prince,” Cortázar borrows the structure of Johann Sebastian Bach’s Musical Offering. The eight protagonists represent the eight instruments in an orchestrated version of Bach’s suite. Mimicking the Musical Offering’s thirteen contrasting movements, the story contains thirteen sections that closely follow Bach’s pattern of voicing. The final movement of the Musical Offering includes all eight instruments, save one. By extension, the closing scene of Cortázar’s story assembles all eight singers, with the exception of the murder victim, Franca. The structure of an eighteenth-century Baroque suite thus governs the organization and voicing of a contemporary Argentine novella: it determines the number and types of characters, as well as the mood and trajectory of the narrative, right up to its violent dénouement. At the same time, Gesualdo’s fabled history exerts a thematic pressure on the narrative: the composer is a frequent subject of conversation among the musicians, and his tumultuous history comes literally to repeat itself through Sandro and Franca. In this manner, two musical source texts from the European Baroque determine the demise of Cortázar’s unfortunate soprano in Buenos Aires. Gesualdo’s legendary past, which is repeatedly evoked in the story, plays out on the thematic level, while the Musical Offering—a work which is not once mentioned in the narrative itself, apart from in the afterword—operates at the level of structure and form.
It turns out that Cortázar is far from alone in appropriating Baroque musical forms and redeploying them as formal strategies in transnational narratives. However, the title he gives to the story, “Clone,” immediately problematizes what it means to create a literary response to a work of music. When scientists produce a clone, they analyze the genetic code that makes up an entity, and use it to fashion a full or partial copy thereof. Roberto, one of the characters in the novella, uses the word “clone” to describe the impression of seamless unity the musicians aspire to achieve in performance as they give unified expression to the music in a score: “El otro día leyendo ciencia-ficción encontré la palabra justa: éramos un clone […] el canto y la vida y hasta los pensamientos eran una sola cosa en ocho cuerpos” (Cortázar, 1980, 110). [“The other day, reading some science fiction, I found the exact word: we were a clone […] singing, living, and even thinking were all one single thing in eight bodies” (Cortázar, tr. Rabassa, 1983, 45)]. Ironically, however, by the beginning of the novella, this unity is already a thing of the past, as jealousy and desire have destroyed it. Instead of the clonelike unity promised in the title, the story recounts the gradual dissolution of the ensemble and the fatal elimination of one of its members. It is also worth noting that Roberto borrows the notion of “cloning” from science-fiction novels, as it indicates just how closely imbricated music and fiction are in this text. Music determines the course of the novella, but literature has already shaped the protagonists’ perceptions.

To pursue the genetic metaphor further, Bach’s Musical Offering functions as the determining code that generates Cortázar’s story. Its role only becomes visible through the author’s afterword, despite the pervasive thematic presence of music throughout the story. In this sense, the code is hidden in the text, much like the mathematical patterns and lipograms adopted experimentally by Oulipo writers of the mid-twentieth century in Europe and the United States, particularly Georges Perec, Harry Matthews, and Italo Calvino. These writers used formal constraints to produce literary texts, often embedding them into narratives unbeknownst to readers. Cortázar’s constant thematic references to Gesualdo’s madrigals obscure the formal relation between the story and the Musical Offering. The technical explanations of his afterword thus come as a great surprise, and to some degree displace the catharsis of the story from the thematic level (the murder) to its fascinating formal construction (its imitation of the musical structure of the Musical Offering).

At the same time, Cortázar’s story alerts us to the dangers of what Hayden White (1992, 288) calls the “structuralist fallacy: namely, the belief that when we have identified a structure in an artistic work, we have also found its
meaning.” Recognizing the role of the Musical Offering does not necessarily bring readers any closer to seizing the significance of the story. In fact, while the title may seem to offer a commentary on the work’s borrowing of musical form, it actually misleads readers into pursuing formal connections that are not supported by the text. The author takes pains in his afterword to list the sequence of contrapuntal movements to which each section of his story corresponds, only to proclaim subsequently his lack of musical expertise. He even quips that he simply read the movements (and their instrumentation) off the record jacket of Millicent Silver’s orchestral recording of the Musical Offering during an afternoon at the beach, thereby revealing that the source on which he modeled the story is not the authoritative original, but an orchestrated adaptation. Cortázar thus undermines the temptation to read the story itself as a “clone,” by asserting its necessary difference from the musical model, which itself already differs from an original text that recedes into the distance. Even for an author fully versed in musical composition, it would be an impossible project to render the multiple contrapuntal genres that make up the Musical Offering—crab canons, canons in contrary motion, and so on—in any literary text, let alone such an economical piece as a short story.

Cortázar thus brings virtuosity and experimental verve to “borrowed” material, just as Bach did before him. Bach produced the Musical Offering at the request of Frederick the Great who set him the task of extemporizing a fugue on a particularly unwieldy and chromatic theme. Bach improvised an impressive three-part fugue in the king’s presence, and later sent him a collection of thirteen elaborations of the theme, far surpassing his expectations. Cortázar in turn responds with his own extravagant elaboration of Bach’s work. Mario Vargas Llosa (2011, 145–46) observes that “no other writer has bestowed on the game the literary dignity that Cortázar gave it, or made the game such a flexible and profitable instrument of artistic creation and exploration.” Along with the game, Vargas Llosa sees freedom as vital to any discussion of Cortázar’s fiction: “Freedom to violate the established norms of writing and narrative structure, [...] to revolutionize [...] narrative time, the psychology of the characters, the spatial organization of the story and the relationships within it. To unwrite the novel, to destroy literature.” “Clone” illustrates Cortázar’s affinity for puzzles and radical approach to form, as does his earlier novel Rayuela (Hopscotch), whose chapters the author encouraged readers to read out of order, either according to their whim or following a sequence suggested in the text.

Through his formal and thematic appropriation of these different musical
sources, Cortázar develops a transnational and interdisciplinary aesthetic, while demonstrating the impossibility—and the undesirability—of achieving true coincidence of forms. As we have seen, the story is a hybrid creation rather than a perfect clone. Cortázar borrows the structural apparatus from Bach, while thematically embracing the darkness and murderous passion of Gesualdo’s biography. “Clone” thus stages an encounter—in Buenos Aires, no less—between multiple musical and literary sources. The author uses sixteenth-century Italian scandals, the contrapuntal voicing of a masterwork of the German Baroque, and the experimental spirit of the Oulipo movement of the mid-twentieth century to spin a contemporary murder story while asserting the essential difference between literature and music. In this sense, the story works against the very notions of uniformity and repetition invoked in its title, “Clone,” to affirm instead an aesthetics—and ethics—of difference as fundamental to creative expression.

In the context of this study, it is especially important to take note of what “Clone” reveals about the relationship between a musical “voice” and a voice in literature. Cortázar realizes each “voice” in Bach’s musical score through a corresponding literary character. By twinning a character to each instrument, he rewrites the contrapuntal lines of Bach’s work as dialogues or larger conversations. Virtually all the action takes place through verbal confrontations between characters, whose spirit is predetermined by the music.

“Clone” demonstrates the kind of innovative and virtuosic experimentation with musical form that this book locates in the novels of writers such as Maryse Condé, Assia Djebar, Nancy Huston, and J. M. Coetzee. The turn to musical form in transnational fiction must be understood as a move of both aesthetic and ethical dimensions: it reflects an effort to challenge the conventions of genre and form, an interest in bringing new perspectives to the fore, a desire for new ways to engage conflicting viewpoints and histories, and a commitment to preserving difference. Furthermore, it indicates a refusal to identify with any single national tradition and an understanding of artistic and cultural heritage as hybrid, multilayered, and complex.

The appropriation of musical forms by contemporary novelists goes hand in hand with the intense interest that literary and cultural critics have accorded to music throughout the twentieth century. Baroque forms, in particular, play a striking and explicit role in postmodern and postcolonial critical theory. As early as the 1930s, Catalan critic Eugenio d’Ors defined the Baroque as a revolutionary and destabilizing current that traverses every historical period. The atemporality and unbounded inventiveness of
the Baroque similarly captivated Alejo Carpentier, Gilles Deleuze, Antonio Benítez-Rojo, Wilson Harris, and Édouard Glissant. Like d’Ors, Carpentier identified the Baroque as an aesthetic that surfaces in all times and that accommodates the proliferation of forms and accumulation of styles. For Deleuze (1993, 5), the “Baroque refers not to an essence but rather to an operative function, to a trait. It endlessly produces folds. It does not invent things: there are all kinds of folds coming from the East, Greek, Roman, Romanesque, Gothic, Classical folds... Yet the Baroque trait twists and turns its folds, pushing them to infinity, fold over fold, one upon the other. The Baroque fold unfurls all the way to infinity.” Benítez-Rojo (1992) later lays claim to the Baroque as a creolizing aesthetic that spirals out from the Caribbean to touch the furthest reaches of the world. He locates traces of Caribbean dance—the swaying rhythm of a creole woman’s walk—in the florid, expressive gestures and repetition in European Baroque art and architecture. Glissant likewise embraces the Baroque “as a rebellious [...] decolonizing strategy to deform—creolize—the metropolitan standard” (Zamora and Kaup, 2009, 622). Significantly, all of these critics undermine European claims to Baroque forms and ideas, and seek to locate them instead within a dynamic, transcultural framework. While scholars have increasingly attended to the phenomenon of a New World or alternative Baroque that emerges from the Caribbean and Latin America (Kaup, 2005; Lambert, 2004), this book deterritorializes the Baroque even more radically to show how novelists deploy its forms transnationally across borders, forging new connections among diverse locations and historical contexts.

**Voice**

It is impossible to address polyphony, counterpoint, variation, and opera, without first engaging the question of voice. The term “voice” signifies differently in music and literature, and is the subject of debate within both fields. In “Clone,” we saw how Cortázar transposes each of the various musical voices that constitute Bach’s (instrumental) counterpoint into a corresponding literary character. And yet, as the novels examined in this book reveal, the act of translating the concept of voice from music to literature is far from simple. Between the musical and literary understanding of voice lies a crucial divide: a musical voice implies sound, while a literary voice is invariably silent. A musical score encodes a performance, whereas
a literary text occasions a reading. A performance often involves multiple actors who occupy a common space and time; reading, by contrast, is an intimate act. Music can simultaneously deploy multiple voices in relations of harmony, unison, or dissonance, while works of literature necessarily alternate voices in succession.

The notion of voice is extremely multifaceted, as even standard dictionary definitions attest. For instance, the first entry on “voice” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* places emphasis on sound. The voice is the “sound formed in or emitted from the human larynx in speaking, singing, or other utterance.” Significantly, the second entry on voice emphasizes the political: “the right or privilege of speaking or voting in a legislative assembly, or of taking part in, or exercising control or influence over, some particular matter; part or share in the control, government, or deciding of something.” Another entry links the voice to questions of singularity and alterity, and defines it as the mark of an individual: “sounds regarded as characteristic of the person and as distinguishing him from another or others.” “To voice,” in the verbal form, is “to act as the mouthpiece or spokesman,” “to give voice, utterance, or expression to,” and “to endow with voice, or the faculty of speech or song.” These definitions point to the tensions between voice as agency and singularity, on one hand, and voice in the sense of “to speak for” and “to take the place of,” on the other.

In music, there are also multiple dimensions to the understanding of voice. In one sense, “each of the melodic lines in polyphonic music, whether sung or not” constitute a voice, and thus voice is synonymous with a musical part. In another, the voice is the physical, resonant production of a human body, “the specific, irreplaceable quality of human vocal cords, membranes stretched across the larynx in song. [...] not reproducible in symbols and thus fixable on the page” (Abbate and Parker, 2012, 7–11). Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 96) argue that “as long as the voice is song, its main role is to hold sound.” The operatic voice is an extreme instance of voice, as the singer generates an unparalleled range of volume and expression.

These definitions indicate the fundamental ambivalence that haunts the notion of voice. On one level, voice connotes political agency and presence. Having a voice entails a capacity to communicate needs, desires and thoughts. This necessitates an audience, for as Gayatri Spivak (1988) demonstrated in her seminal essay on subaltern subjectivity, a subject who goes unheard or unacknowledged cannot be said to possess voice. At the same time, the voice rests on the precarious premise of a unified speaking or singing subject, a notion upended by the linguistic and psychoanalytic revolutions of the early
twentieth century that revealed the fractured and unstable nature of subjectivity. In *De la grammatologie*, one of the founding texts of deconstruction, Derrida revisits eighteenth-century works on the evolution of music and language to question the phonocentric bias of Western philosophy and the privileged status accorded to voice as an indicator of presence. Derrida unravels the binary distinction between writing and voice to show how writing and difference always already inhabit speech, and even thought itself.

Nonetheless, there has been an unmistakable resurgence of the term “voice” in literary criticism since the 1990s. The reinvestment of literary scholars in questions pertaining to the voice has often been understood in relation to the discovery of anti-Semitic publications authored by preeminent Yale critic Paul de Man. The revelation that de Man had contributed more than one hundred literary articles to Belgian collaborationist newspapers between 1940 and 1942, and never retracted the positions he espoused in these pieces, led many to question the ethical and ideological underpinnings of his critical approach. Deconstruction insists on the indeterminacy of the text, and affirms the capacity of language to produce meaning independent of authorial intention, which its opponents saw as highly problematic because it risks evacuating human responsibility and negating “the possibility of action and political opposition” (Bernstein, 1998). Ann Banfield (1991, 22) observes that “to linguistics, there was an ‘anti-linguistic response’ [called alternatively discourse analysis, pragmatics, speech act theory, communications theory]—that turns instead to the ‘human voice divine’ within linguistic performance, substituting communication for language. It provides the justification for the return of a unified authorial voice, in the guise of the speaker, to literature.”

The renewed critical interest in the voice signals an effort to re-inscribe political responsibility and agency into texts in response to deconstruction and the postmodern fragmentation of the subject as a function of language. In addition, it stems from the translation of Bakhtin’s critical work into English and French in the late 1980s, and the introduction into the critical vocabulary of terms like polyphony that explicitly focus on “voice.”

The issue of voice—what it is, who has access to it, how it is understood across different genres and disciplines—is of particular importance with respect to transnational fiction. As recent scholarship attests, the transnational experience is divided along lines of class. The growth of transnational corporations and the development of new communication technologies have led to the unprecedented global movement of people and ideas, but they have also increased inequality, widening the divide between “those who
circulate capital” and “those whom capital circulates” (Žižek, 1999). While the cosmopolitan elite elect their affiliations and determine their movements between different cultural contexts, this is not the case for working-class immigrants and refugees whose displacements are dictated by economic, environmental, and political pressures. Indeed, as Vertovec and Cohen argue, while capital, merchandise, and information move freely across the globe, restrictions on the movement of people—travellers, labor migrants, and asylum seekers—are tightening (Ezra and Rowden, 2006). Whose voices do not come across in transnational fiction? As David James (2011, 191) asks, “have modern and contemporary novelists offered stories about belonging that unsettle the outright celebration of perpetual relocation, complicating the model of global citizenship upheld by those of an economically comfortable cosmopolitan class?” The novels addressed in this book show access to voice to be both unequal and mediated. Alongside the concept of voice, these texts explore the possibilities and problems of “voicing”: how agency and voice are assigned within the text, who speaks for whom, and which voices remain underrepresented or excluded.

The Music of the Transnational Novel

Condé, Djebar, Huston, and Coetzee are among the most prolific and visible figures on the stage of contemporary transnational literature. The musical dimension in their work is emblematic of an ongoing engagement with multiple literary traditions, in local and global issues, and in a virtuosic experimentation with narrative form. Moreover, in spite of their success, each of these writers lays claim to a kind of marginality, because of the creative freedom such marginality confers. Educated abroad, subject to multiple displacements, and currently residing in voluntary exile, they claim “transnational” affiliations. Djebar, born in the coastal town of Cherchell, Algeria in 1936, moves between Paris and New York; Condé, born on the French Antillean island of Guadeloupe in 1937, worked for many years between New York and Paris; Huston, born in Calgary, Canada in 1953, writes from Paris in both French and English; and Coetzee, born in Cape Town, South Africa in 1940, currently writes from Australia and has long maintained a formidable presence in publishing, book reviews, and academia both in Britain and the United States. All four writers have engaged in multifaceted careers as writers, scholars, teachers, and public intellectuals, and maintain a subversive and
independent distance from fixed ideological positions. Their novels convey skepticism toward collective identities, an uneasy relationship with tradition, and a sense of being out of place and out of time.

Their deployment of musical forms to express complex, transnational affiliations recalls Edward Said’s (1993, 248) discussion of the Trinidadian scholar C. L. R. James:

Well after négritude, Black nationalism, and the nativism of the 1960s and 1970s, James stubbornly supported the Western heritage at the same time that he belonged to the insurrectionary anti-imperialist moment which he shared with Fanon, Cabral and Rodney. In an interview he said: “How am I to return to non-European roots? If it means that Caribbean writers today should be aware that there are emphases in their writing that we owe to non-European, non-Shakespearean root, and the past in music that is not Beethoven, that I agree. But I don’t like them posed there in the way they have been posed either-or. I don’t think so. I think both of them. And fundamentally we are a people whose literacy and aesthetic past is rooted in Western European civilization.”

James turns to music—and to Beethoven, specifically—to lay claim to a broad, aesthetic tradition, as does each of the writers considered here.

These writers were born between the late 1930s and 1950s, at a time when music was still very much part of a liberal, humanist education. They came of age before “the mass entertainment media eroded the culture of home performance and musical amateurism” (Kramer, 1995, 4). Djebar studied classical piano and has been identified as an unusually musical writer since the publication of L’amour, la fantasia [1985, Fantasia, an Algerian Cavalcade], an epic novel that deploys personal autobiography, oral testimonies, and historical accounts of Algeria’s colonization and struggle for independence, all the while making reference to the structural transgressions and expressive excess of Beethoven’s fantasies and to the traditional North African cavalry formations called fantasias. In more recent years, operatic adaptations of Djebar’s novel Loin de Médine [Far from Medina] have been premiered on stages in Italy and the Netherlands.

Said, as is well known, was a highly accomplished pianist and the music critic of Nation magazine. In addition to his extensive writing on music, which includes Musical Elaborations and a volume of essays entitled Music at the Limits, Said co-authored Paradoxes and Parallels with Daniel Barenboim, the
world-class pianist and conductor. The two also partnered in establishing in 1999 the West-Eastern Divan Symphony Orchestra to bring together Middle Eastern young musicians across political divides. Said wrote insightfully about his own position as an Arab intellectual who questioned the West’s imposition of its authority—political, cultural, economic—over the Middle East, and who nonetheless remained deeply committed to the performance and consideration of Western classical music.

Condé, though not a musician, asserts the importance of music to her writing. She claims she always writes to music, favoring artists as diverse as Vivaldi and Kassav. Many of her novels feature musicians, and again exhibit the same diversity in styles: the protagonist of **Victoire, les saveurs et le mots** (2006) is obsessed with classical music; **La vie scélérate** (1987) features a celebrated Gwoka musician engaged in the preservation of Guadeloupean traditions, while Marie Noëlle in **Desirada** (1997) marries an innovative Jazz musician whose compositions fail because they are too ahead of the times.

Huston has a particularly close relationship to music, as she studied piano and harpsichord. Her novels engage with music on all kinds of levels: thematically, they include many musicians; formally, they enact principles and narrative structures borrowed from music; philosophically, they explore the differences between music and language, and probe the social conventions that govern how music is produced and received. Huston has ventured into musical recording as well. In the early 1990s, she assembled an eclectic group of Baroque and jazz musicians to produce a musical reading of her novel **Les variations Goldberg**, which she released on disc as **Pérégrinations Goldberg** [Goldberg Wanderings], and which bears striking resemblance to Glenn Gould’s experiments in contrapuntal radio.

Coetzee came to music much later; by his own account, he was fifteen years old when he first heard Bach’s music wafting over from a neighbor’s garden. He later completed a doctoral thesis on Samuel Beckett’s writing and thus developed a rare intimacy with the work of one of the most interesting musical writers of the early twentieth century. Coetzee’s fiction, like that of Djebar, has inspired adaptations for the operatic stage: the Theatre of Erfurt, Germany in 2005 commissioned an operatic version of his novel, **Waiting for the Barbarians** (1980), with a musical score composed by the prominent American composer Philip Glass. **Disgrace** inspired a film version in 2008, for which Antony Partos and Graeme Koehne wrote original music to represent the opera that Coetzee’s protagonist is writing.

As each of these writers elects transnational affinities over national
identities, musical forms provide a means of addressing the complexities of their experience. This makes them vulnerable to Benita Parry’s (1996, 39) critique that “despite the fictions’ disruptions of colonialist modes, the social authority on which their rhetoric relies and which they exert is grounded in the cognitive systems of the West.” While their engagement with Western classical music\textsuperscript{11} undeniably brings into view the influence of their Western education, these authors self-consciously inflect this tradition and allow it to interact, overlap, and relate with others. It would be too simple to regard these forms as remnants of an elitist, imperial world order and an indication of a pervasive neocolonial aesthetics. In the act of borrowing and reappropriating forms, these novelists bring them into vastly new contexts, making visible new relations, and thus performing the kind of radical, relational poetics that Glissant advocates. Multiple musical traditions intersect in the novels of Djebar and Condé, including traditional Andalucian song, Berber chants, and North African military fantasias in the case of Djebar, and Zouk and reggae in that of Condé. Huston constantly probes the distinctions between “high” and “low” culture, juxtaposing classical music and genres such as popular folksongs, blues, and jazz, and evaluating spontaneous forms of music against those that require extensive instruction and practice. Coetzee incessantly calls into question the validity and relevance of all inherited forms, whether lyric poetry, the African griot tradition, opera, or the novel itself. The authors examined in this book thus self-consciously confront the possibilities and problems that arise in the “translation and transformation of borrowed or inherited categories”—musical, linguistic, philosophical, aesthetic, social, and political—which Gikandi (1992, 44) identifies as the primary task of postcolonial writing.

The novels under consideration here span the last decade of the twentieth century, and occupy pivotal roles in the literary production of each author. \textit{Traversée de la mangrove} (1989) is Condé’s first work to be set in Guadeloupe following the author’s symbolic “return” to the island. \textit{Les nuits de Strasbourg} (1997) is the first novel by Djebar to be entirely set in Europe, and to grapple with the entangled legacies of World War II and the Algerian War. \textit{Les variations Goldberg} (1981) is Huston’s first novel, often seen as an act of homage to her teacher and mentor Roland Barthes. Finally, \textit{Disgrace} (1999) is Coetzee’s first novel to address post-apartheid South Africa. \textit{Disgrace} provides a particularly illuminating counterpoint to the fiction of Djebar, Condé, and Huston not only through its engagement with music (opera), but more broadly because of Coetzee’s interest in and frequent references to the
French literary tradition, particularly to Rousseau and Beckett.12 Despite this affinity, this is the first time Coetzee’s work has been placed in dialogue with francophone fiction.

Transnational Studies

This study engages with a wide range of scholarship on transnational literature and on the interdisciplinary relations between music and literature. Benedict Anderson (1983) persuasively linked the rise of the novel to nation formation and to the constitution of national identities, showing how novels played a vital role in enriching European national languages by disseminating shared ideas about national history and shoring up collective identity. Novels legitimized certain voices and experiences, while relegating others to silence. Transnationalism shifts focus from the nation as the determining frame of experience, to consider the dynamic movement “within, beyond, and between nations” (Ashcroft, 2010, 22), as individuals and communities navigate multiple pulls of belonging and identification. Accordingly, scholars of transnational literature have sought to determine how the genre of the novel has changed to account for the different tiers of transnational experience, from migrant workers to refugees of political violence or environmental disaster, international students, employees of global corporations, and artists. Does the transnational novel require a new set of critical terms, or can existing theories of the novel adequately account for such developments in transnational fiction as the diversity and multiplicity of voices, wide-ranging cultural references, and shifts between vastly different geographies and temporalities? What part does music play in meeting the aesthetic challenges and priorities of transnational fiction?

Stephen Clingman (2009) and Peter Hitchcock (2010) both offer insightful responses to transnational writing. Clingman adopts a “navigational approach” to reading that attends to the temporal and geographical shifts in transnational fiction, and explores the status of boundaries. Hitchcock studies the issue of scale and duration, noting the tendency of transnational writers to exceed the spatial and temporal limits of the traditional novel and to produce series of trilogies and quartets. Accordingly, he uses Bakhtin’s notion of the chronotope to consider the extended duration and serialized form of Djebar’s Algerian Quartet, an expansive project that interweaves Algerian history and autobiography over the course of four novels. The chronotope enables
Hitchcock to consider the extended duration and serialized form of Djebar’s project as a response to decolonization and transnationalism. Musical forms similarly open up spatial and temporal dimensions in the novel.

In fact, music is an important device in transnational fiction because it provides formal strategies to address the aching disparities and rich contradictions of the transnational experience, as well as the spatial and temporal disjointedness it entails. To some extent, Paul Gilroy has already shown music to be integral to understanding transnationalism, as music is one of the key modes of expression that constitute the dynamic cultural and historical space he outlines in *The Black Atlantic*. Gilroy demonstrates how black musical expression played a role in reproducing “a distinctive counterculture of modernity” (36). For Gilroy, the “vitality and complexity of this musical culture offers a means to get beyond the related oppositions between essentialists and pseudo-pluralists on the one hand and between totalizing conceptions of tradition, modernity and post-modernity on the other” (36). Jazz occupies a complex status as an “important repository of black cultural values” and transnational historical experience and a highly intellectual, restless creative, and self-conscious mode of expression (97). Accordingly, writers from the Caribbean and North America appropriate and engage with jazz. Nick Nesbitt (2003), for instance, illustrates how Antillean writers reference jazz in their writing, showing how Daniel Maximin, in particular, dialogues with the history of jazz and introduces a jazz-like poetics into his novels.

African American authors have also experimented with musical forms. A striking example is Toni Morrison’s 1992 novel *Jazz*, a breathtaking evocation of Harlem in the 1920s. The novel recounts the story of a young couple who migrate from the rural South to New York City, and endure betrayal, murder, and madness. Morrison brings multiple elements of jazz into the novel—vernacular language, repetition, call and response patterns, scatting, or instances of wordless vocalization where the voice functions as a musical instrument—according to a willful strategy of appropriation and hybridization. As Morrison (1985, 342) explains, “I try to incorporate into that traditional genre, the novel, unorthodox novelistic characteristics—so that it is in my view Black, because it uses the characteristics of Black art.” By infusing the novel’s language and structure with a jazz-like aesthetic and explicitly calling the text “Jazz,” the author remakes the novel into an expressive vehicle for African American experience. As the novel unfolds in New York during the jazz age, this turn to jazz is also deeply consonant with the time, place, and ethos of the text.
The resurgence of Baroque musical forms in contemporary transnational writing poses a particular kind of challenge, as the application of these forms in twentieth-century contexts suggests a temporal and geographical disjunction. Yet it indicates the currency that key aesthetic values of Baroque art hold for contemporary writing: irregularity, multiplicity, dynamism, extravagance, undecidability, and simultaneity. D’Ors (1935, 23), anticipating Deleuze, highlights the impossibility of defining the Baroque in opposition to other periods by showing how elements of the Baroque pervade all periods and are manifest in the most diverse regions, from the Occident to the Orient:

“The style of civilization is called classicism. Should we not then give the name Baroque to the style of barbarity that persists in permanence beneath culture? We call a large irregular pearl baroque. But still more baroque, still more irregular is the ocean water that the oyster transforms into a pearl.”

He thus links the Baroque to processes of transformation, of becoming.

In a deliberate effort to read transnationally, this book crosses disciplinary divides by considering South African and Canadian writers alongside their Antillean and Algerian counterparts. These novelists do not fit neatly into either a postcolonial or a francophone framework. As Coetzee observed in March 1997 at a French-sponsored conference for francophone and anglophone African writers in Djibouti, the question “who speaks?” cannot be disconnected from “who listens?” Coetzee’s readership—like that of Djèbar and Condé—cuts across national boundaries. Such a transnational readership necessarily complicates an author’s affiliations and commitments. Who is considered a South African writer today? Or, as Coetzee frames the question:

What about someone who was born in South Africa, who perhaps resides there, who writes in English, is published in England and the United States, and who is widely read throughout these countries and translated across Europe, in such a way that for each reader he has in South Africa, he has hundreds or thousands elsewhere; someone who maybe considers himself a witness to his country of origin for the world, while at home he is accused of disseminating a foreigner’s vision of his country, or at least a vision comforting to foreigners?

And what of an Algerian or Guadeloupean author, who writes in French, lives in New York, publishes in Paris, and is translated throughout Europe and the United States? In Algeria, Guadeloupe, and South Africa, respectively, critics constantly call into question the authenticity—and by extension the
authority—of writers like Djebar, Condé, and Coetzee, as though international success were the marker of fraud and betrayal. Critics reproach Djebar because she lived abroad throughout the Algerian civil war of the 1990s and writes in French, Condé for her imperfect mastery of Creole, and Coetzee because he eschews the overtly political, realist tradition embraced by authors such as Nadine Gordimer. Huston also upsets categories of national and linguistic belonging. She is an anglophone Canadian who resides in Paris and who writes interchangeably in both French and English, translating her own work between these languages and confounding readers in her refusal to sanction either the French or English version as the original.

As Françoise Lionnet argues, the standard understanding of the term “postcolonial” fails to account for the differences between nations that emerged from the colonial experience at vastly different moments in history, and those still under metropolitan rule: the United States, for instance, became a postcolonial nation following the American Revolution in the eighteenth century, centuries before the wave of decolonization movements in Africa and Asia in the mid-twentieth century. The islands of the French Antilles, Guadeloupe and Martinique, have been departments of France since 1946; because they remain politically and economically dependent on the metropolis, they cannot properly be termed “postcolonial.” Algeria, by contrast, achieved independence from France in 1962, but the postcolonial regime’s exclusive monopoly on power and program of enforced Arabicization in turn marginalized constituent cultures, including Berbers, Jews, and French speakers. South Africa poses yet another set of problems: recognized in 1910 as a republic independent from Great Britain, the apartheid regime institutionalized a system of internal colonization from 1948 to 1994, relegating the majority of the population, Blacks and Coloureds, to a subordinate, circumscribed existence. At what point, and for whom, did South Africa become a postcolonial nation? Certainly, the end of apartheid in 1994 marks a watershed moment in South African history, but it signals not the end of a colonial era, rather the passage from an exploitative, discriminatory, and racist system to an inclusive, multicultural democracy. If the term “postcolonial” can still be useful, it is because it occasions this kind of comparative discussion of the colonial experience and its legacy on contemporary politics, and, as K. Anthony Appiah (1991, 353) observes, it facilitates the construction of “transnational” rather than a “national” solidarity.

Huston, Condé, and Djebar are generally categorized under the label of francophone studies, a category that many now regard as “a form of
neo-colonialism through which France continues to assert cultural (and perhaps even political) hegemony over formerly colonized peoples” (Hargreaves and McKinney, 1997, 4). Condé maintains that “the word francophone encompasses people who have nothing in common, apart from the fact that they speak French. None of these linguistic groups has anything to do with the others. Speaking French in Ivory Coast and speaking French in Guadeloupe does not foster a connection. The label ‘francophone’ is extremely fragile” (Broichhagen et al, 2006, 19). Christopher Miller (2006, 235) emphasizes that the literature called “francophone” emerges “from a thin veneer at the top of postcolonial societies and its authors strive to represent in an international idiom the experience of every day lives that are lived in hundreds of other languages.” Djebar’s essays speak vividly to this tension, as she seeks out modes of representing Algerian women without betraying or supplanting their voices. Djebar displays an acute awareness of her privilege as one of the few Algerian women of her generation to be educated in French, and to possess the freedom to navigate the public sphere. She argues that the label “francophone” has placed her in a “no-man’s land,” “on the margins,” in oscillation between languages, between the North and the South, between body and voice, between the solitary self and a collective history (Djebar, 1999, 29–30). In the late 1990s Djebar proposed the term “francographie” in place of francophonie, thereby shifting the emphasis from voice (phonè) to writing (graphe). This notion of francographie captures the interior struggle with multiple languages—colloquial Arabic, Berber, the body—that necessarily precedes and informs her writing in French.

In 2007, resistance to the term “francophone” coalesced into a movement of authors who demanded a more radical reassessment of francophonie, and who published an incendiary piece, “Le Manifeste des quarante-quatre,” in the French newspaper Le Monde on March 16, 2007. These writers clamored for the abandon of francophonie in favor of a “littérature monde,” a world literature in French that would liberate the French language from its “exclusive pact with the nation” (Le Bris and Rouaud, 2007). Like Djebar, they argue that “francophone” is an invalid term for writing in French: “l’émergence d’une littérature-monde en langue française consciemment affirmée, ouverte sur le monde, transnationale, signe l’acte de décès de la francophonie. Personne ne parle le francophone, ni n’écrit en francophone.” [“The emergence of a self-declared world literature in the French language, open to the world, transnational, seals the death certificate of Francophonie. No one speaks francophone, nor writes in francophone.”] As Paris remains unrivalled as the
center of French publishing, the movement has yet to achieve real autonomy and critics have an important role to play in eroding these disciplinary boundaries.

In her contribution to the volume *Pour une littérature monde* (2007), Condé calls on music to challenge the integrity of the French language. The author claims she worked hard to appropriate and reinvent the French she inherited from her parents and schooling, a French of submission, silence, and conformity. Significantly, she sees music as a more flexible, expressive register:

Je n’avais pas choisi cette langue. Elle m’avait été donnée. Non pas par la colonisation. C’est une absurdité de le prétendre. La colonisation ne sait que réduire les peuples au silence. C’est contrainte et forcée qu’elle bâtit quelques écoles dans l’intention de former les subalternes dont elle a besoin. Le français avait été marronné par des parents aimants qui me l’avaient offert, voulant me parer au mieux pour l’existence. Comme j’aurais aimé être poète ou chansonnier pour plier la rebelle à mes jeux! [...] Ou griot pour allier la parole à la musique et au rythme. Jean-Jacques Rousseau avait raison: l’écrit n’a pas de vie. Il faut lui restituer la chaleur qu’il a perdue. Comment? Je m’essayai à mille stratagèmes. (Condé, 2007, 213)

[I didn’t choose this language. It was given to me. Not by colonization. It would be absurd to make that claim. Colonization only knows how to reduce people to silence. It was through sheer necessity that colonization built a few schools in view of shaping the subalterns it needed. The French language was stolen away (marooned) by loving parents who gave it to me, wanting to equip me as best as possible for life. How I would have loved to be a poet or singer in order to bend the rebel language to my games! [...] Or a griot who could join speech to music and rhythm. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was correct: writing has no life. You have to restore the warmth it has lost. How? I tried a thousand strategies.]

Condé’s desire to ally her writing to music and rhythm speaks to the desire of authors to reappropriate the sonorous fullness of speech. While literature has been preoccupied with the tension between writing and orality since classical Antiquity—Socrates famously did not write, and Plato advocated
the exclusion of poets from the republic—these issues become especially charged in the colonial and postcolonial contexts, where the language of writing was often imposed by a colonial power, and remains disconnected from the multiple registers of everyday life. Orality presupposes direct contact with others. Writing, by contrast, is divisive, “breaks presence,” and mediates across distance. As Condé attests, the challenge is to give writing life and warmth.

Coetzee particularly attends to the status of colonial languages in Africa. He portrays English as morally and expressively “exhausted” in contrast to African languages that retain warmth and immediacy. In Disgrace, theater and storytelling stand out as literary genres that still manage to reach audiences, whereas the novel, opera, and poetry are in crisis in a world increasingly driven by consumerism and corporate interests. Coetzee nonetheless insists that the task facing writers is to create novels despite this irrelevance, to write while fully conscious of living beyond one’s time, to write in the very face of failure and alienation.

Taking a different approach, Djebar reclaims and valorizes writing primarily by asserting its historical place in North African culture. She recounts that her mother inherited a collection of notebooks containing musical settings of medieval Andalucian Arabic poetry. French soldiers mistook the notebooks for subversive tracts and destroyed them during the Algerian War, leaving her mother inconsolable, despite the fact that she knew every poem by heart. The notebooks represented a treasured family heirloom that had been passed down by generations of women. Djebar explains how these musical texts embodied “the culture of [her] mother. One speaks so often of orality but there is a written culture, a whole patrimony of writing in the Maghreb.” Djebar uses this story on one hand to assert the rich musical culture of Algeria, and on the other, to render visible a longstanding tradition of writing. She claims writing as the legitimate heritage of North African women, who belong to “a culture of learning and poetic inscription.” By asserting writing as the traditional inheritance of North African women, Djebar rejects the prevailing understanding of postcolonial writing as secondary, foreign, and borrowed. Her revisionary stance challenges preconceived notions about the relationship between written and oral culture, and aligns with Derrida’s critique (1976, 28–29) of the longstanding association of orality with fullness, presence, and authenticity.
Word and Music Studies

While the field of word and music studies has blossomed in the past two decades with important scholarly interventions, music remains marginalized in literary criticism. By contrast, music is by no means marginal to the novel tradition. In an impressive study of music in British fiction, Gerry Smyth (2008, 7) argues that “music looms surprisingly large in the history of British fiction. Novelists from every generation, working within every genre, have responded to the power of music by incorporating it into their narratives, by trying to harness its techniques and effects, and by attempting to recreate the emotions that come to be associated with particular musical styles, forms or texts. In fact, music represents a recurring feature of the canon.” This observation holds true outside the British tradition as well. A salient example is Marcel Proust’s attempt in A la recherche du temps perdu to emulate Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk, the totalizing, epic fusion of drama, poetry and music. In Doktor Faustus, Thomas Mann similarly takes on the music of his contemporary, Arnold Schoenberg, and proceeds to analyze and critique his controversial approach to composition, twelve-tone serialism.

This book attends to a different phenomenon: it examines the engagement of twentieth-century writers and critics with Baroque forms that are radically incongruous with the time and space they address. It also calls attention to two problematic tendencies among literary critics as far as music is concerned: on one hand, the tendency to treat music as a universal language that transcends the political, and on the other, to ascribe democratizing and emancipatory properties to music. Music, on the most basic level, is “organized noise,” and it is beset with political, social, and ideological implications. Musicologists and cultural critics have increasingly studied the relationship between music, ideology, and power. Jacques Attali, for example, argues that music is prophecy, because of its capacity to express social forces before they become visible elsewhere. Musical “styles and economic organization are ahead of the rest of society because it explores, much faster than material reality can, the entire range of possibilities in a given code” (Smyth, 2008, 3). The exceptional plasticity of music, its entanglement in economic and cultural discourses, its direct popular appeal, and its capacity to incorporate and layer diverse voices have fascinated many twentieth-century literary and cultural critics—including Bakhtin, Barthes, Deleuze, Milan Kundera, Gilroy, and Said—who have looked to musical forms for new conceptual models to understand narrative voice, multilayered narrative structures,
diasporic cultural production, and the relationship between overlapping and conflicting histories.

It is thus essential to evaluate the ideological tenor of the literary engagement with music more critically. On what grounds do critics refer to contemporary novels as polyphonic, participatory, and multivoiced? What can musical counterpoint teach us about conflict resolution and cosmopolitan coexistence? How far can we extend counterpoint and polyphony as metaphors in literary criticism before the terms break down? How does musical performance shed light on such literary issues as the tensions between textual authority and interpretative freedom, between the pressures to maintain social conventions and the desire for change? How might the literary representation of opera enable us to rethink not only the relationship between music and language, but also the encounter with alterity more broadly? Why do the Western European concepts of polyphony, counterpoint, variation, and opera continue to play a role in the contemporary novel? What do musical ideas that coalesced during the Baroque period offer contemporary transnational writing? Do these forms support efforts to challenge boundaries, transform notions of community, undermine dominant ideologies, and affirm the right to difference, or are they, as Cameron Fae Bushnell (2013) claims, indicative of the pervasive impact of colonialism and the continued hold of Western aesthetic forms? To what extent do musical forms provide a means of dislodging dominant ideologies, as Mai al-Nakib (2005) suggests? Critics on music and literature tend to fall into three general categories: studies that examine representations of music in literary texts; those that treat music as a metaphor in order to address existential, linguistic, or philosophical questions; and those that explore the potential of musical forms in literature. In recent years, the field of musico-literary criticism has seen the publication of several important works by Lawrence Kramer (1989), Werner Wolf (1999), Eric Prieto (2002), Stephen Benson (2003), Alison Rice (2006), Smyth (2008), Julie Huntington (2009), and Bushnell (2013), several of which exemplify the aforementioned categories. Wolf considers the relationship between music and fiction as a privileged instance of “intermediality,” a kind of intertextuality that emerges from the rapport not simply between multiple texts, but between different media. By revisiting English novels by Laurence Sterne, Aldous Huxley, Samuel Beckett, Virginia Woolf, and Anthony Burgess, he offers a set of criteria for determining whether a particular work of fiction truly engages with music, and for evaluating how music functions within the text. Wolf’s study is remarkable in its attempt to redefine the discipline of musico-literary
criticism. However, although Wolf calls for further analysis of the function of musical forms in literature, he gives very little consideration to the political or ethical dimensions of intermediality. Wolf focuses on writing in English, but neglects postcolonial fiction by non-Western authors. Smyth and Bushnell also address the influence of musical form on the anglophone literary tradition. Bushnell focuses exclusively on postcolonial anglophone writing, and argues that the use of classical forms indicates the persistence of Empire and the deep hold of Western cultural values on writers from around the world. Smyth offers a helpful and wide-ranging overview of developments in the field of word and music studies from 1940 to the present. He demonstrates how music is integral to the canon and to recent British fiction, proposing incisive readings of canonical and contemporary texts. Benson, by contrast, is concerned principally with the representation of music in contemporary literary texts, and with the limits of language to capture and express musical experience. He presents an extensive and thoughtful consideration of the strategies through which novels construct an encounter with music.

Writing in the context of French and francophone criticism, Rice tunes a musical ear to the work of three North African francophone writers: Hélène Cixous, Assia Djebar, and Abdelkebir Khatibi. She explores music as a supple metaphor in order to illuminate key aspects of their writing: their situation between languages, hybrid subjectivity, and self-conscious poetics. Huntington studies the role of rhythm and sound in francophone writing from Africa and the Caribbean, drawing particular attention to the drumbeat. Of these works, Prieto’s Listening In merits particular attention as an impressive attempt to account for the importance of music in modernist narratives. Prieto traces the history of the relationship between music and letters from Classical Greece to the early twentieth century. He argues that music came to play a major role in the writing of Samuel Beckett, Michel Leiris, Roger Pinget, and Claude Levi-Strauss precisely because it provided a literary model for emerging ideas on consciousness itself, a fluid way of representing subjectivity. Prieto (2004, 99) sees the modernist turn to music in relation to the burgeoning interest in subjectivity, psychoanalysis, and the workings of memory: music for modernist writers provided “a model for thought in its temporal dimension, opposed to the synchronic, spatializing dimension of the linguistic sign.”

Each of these studies has inspired this book in various ways, and laid the ground for a consideration of the influence of musical form in contemporary transnational writing. The prevalence of musical forms in fiction is the expression of a distinct historical and intellectual moment: the close of the twentieth
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century, the shift from postcolonial frameworks to theories of globalization and transnationalism, and the search for hybridized, multivoiced artistic forms that convey the complexities of transnational experience and subjectivity.

Music as Political Agency: the Transnational Legacy of Rousseau

The writers addressed here, like many authors shaped by the colonial experience, claim an affiliation to the eighteenth-century philosopher and musician Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Condé, Huston, and Coetzee all cite him liberally, and Coetzee even fashions the character of David Lurie in satirical homage to Rousseau. The fact that Lurie presumes to write an opera despite his evident lack of musical experience recalls Rousseau’s own entry into operatic composition. Returning from a disappointing evening at the opera where he found the music “faible, sans chaleur, sans invention” [weak, lacking warmth and originality], Rousseau determines he could do better: “A force d’y penser, et même malgré moi, je voulus [...] tenter de faire à moi seul un opera, paroles et musique” [The thought of it made me determined, despite myself, to try to write an opera alone, words and music] (Confessions II.7).

Rousseau argues that writing impoverishes speech and robs it of its inherent musicality, making it impossible to mobilize people in the public square. Stripped of accent and intonation, writing completely obscures the link between words and a particular speaker and situation. Although Derrida deconstructs this binary opposition of speech and writing, Rousseau’s thought continues to resonate with writers who experienced the imposition of a colonial language and whose relationship to oral culture was irrevocably disrupted and mediated. Moreover, Rousseau identifies a North–South divide well before such notions had currency, and gives thought to the issues of migration and colonization. In the Essai sur l’origine des langues, he conjectures that language must have originated simultaneously in the North and South, but in response to different situations. Northern languages developed out of necessity, as harsh environmental conditions and scarcity of food compelled people to work together to build technical skills for survival; as a result, these languages emphasized precision. By contrast, given the more hospitable climates and constant abundance of food in the South, Southern languages emerged out of passion, not of necessity, and privileged expression over technical exactitude. In a remarkable attempt to account for history, migration, global inequality, and the ascendancy of written culture
over music and speech, Rousseau imagines that a catastrophic event must have “tipped” the Earth on its axis to produce different climates and regional temperaments. Faced with increased scarcity and hardship, the people of the North migrated to the South, where they supplanted the musical, accented, vocalic languages of the meridian with their abstract, mute languages and writing. For the people of the Southern hemisphere, the language inherited from the North was a foreign imposition. Writing was doubly foreign, as it came from the Phoenicians and was tainted by commerce. Harmony, like writing, arrived from the North and displaced melody.

Rousseau takes an impassioned stance against harmony, insisting that the melodic line holds moral importance, whereas harmonic counterpoint and polyphony alienate the public and lead to anomie. In the *Dictionnaire de musique* (1768), Rousseau dismisses harmony as noise, “sans écho, sensuel mais pas spiritual” [“without echo, sensual but not spiritual”]. By contrast, he attributes immediate moral effects to melody: “c’est d’elle que dérive tout le pouvoir de la musique sur l’âme” [“The power music has on the soul derives from melody”]. Rousseau laments the predominance of harmony in French music under the influence of Jean-Philippe Rameau, as he links it to undemocratic developments in the political and social spheres: the decline of political agency, the absence of debate, and alienation. He goes so far as to declare that where harmony “engulfs melody and philosophy consumes language, social and political freedom are lost to servitude” (Thomas, 1995, 141).

For Rousseau, melody offers a possible remedy to social and political problems, while harmony aggravates inequity and autocracy. Ironically, in keeping with Rousseau’s assertion that every problem contains its own remedy (“le remède dans le mal”), contemporary authors write to recover voice, and the musical forms and concepts they deploy are Baroque, multivoiced, and harmonic. As the following readings demonstrate, novelists borrow multilayered musical forms in order to account for the entanglements and contradictions of contemporary transnational experience.

* * *

The chapters that follow each consider a particular musical concept in relation to a distinct ethical and narratological concern: polyphony and representation, counterpoint and history, variations and performance, opera and alterity. Why are these musical forms—which one might expect to find associated with elite, conservative, and Eurocentric values—instead seen to
offer such radical democratic and liberating potential for literature? What happens in the translation of musical concepts to the literary domain? In pursuing such questions, this book seeks to re-evaluate some of the utopian and celebratory claims of recent literary theory. Notions like hybridity and polyphony have become clichés—associated with positive, liberal values like multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, and pluralism—rather than useful tools for textual analysis. By examining the way music has informed these theoretical ideas, this book develops a more nuanced critical vocabulary for addressing contemporary narrative form.

Postcolonial novels are often described as “polyphonic,” with little consideration of what precisely this entails. Chapter 1 accordingly seeks to define polyphony, by reading Condé’s canonical novel, *Traversée de la mangrove* [1989, *Crossing the Mangrove*], against leading theorists of literary polyphony, Bakhtin and Kundera. Bakhtin developed the concept of literary polyphony in order to highlight the unique capacity of the novel to hold together multiple, sociohistorical perspectives without allowing any particular voice to dominate, an aesthetic he located in Dostoevsky’s novels. Kundera later used the term to describe the narrative technique of combining multiple simultaneous, interconnected plotlines that engage a common theme, as in Dostoevsky’s *Demons* and Broch’s *Sleepwalkers*. Bakhtin understands polyphony as the interplay of multiple perspectives and ideologies; for Kundera it is a question of multiple plotlines. Bakhtin’s conception is largely phonocentric and moral, whereas Kundera’s is both spatial and thematic.

One of the most prolific and widely read novelists of the Antilles and a formidable and uncompromising critic, Condé challenges a common misperception about literary polyphony in postcolonial criticism, namely the idea that the novel can approximate oral culture and give voice to disenfranchised subjects. The novel stages a ritual wake in the rural village of Rivière au Sel. Prompted by the sudden, inexplicable death of a tall, mysterious stranger, the local people come together in order to honor the dead man and to try to make sense of his unusual story. One by one, each of the inhabitants occupies the position of narrator, offering memories and speculations regarding the deceased. The text holds together their stories, refusing to privilege any particular account, and creating the illusion of a community event that unites the villagers. When one looks more closely at the novel, however, it becomes clear that there is no actual exchange between the villagers, who are deeply divided along lines of race, class, and gender. The silent monologues laid out in the text are only available to the reader, who by the same token, is shut out of much of what
actually transpires at the wake. The novel thus gives the impression of intimacy and community, while maintaining an aesthetic of opacity. Reading this novel against the criticism surrounding it demonstrates how the uncritical use of the term “polyphony” actually obscures our understanding of ethics and representation, and mutes the social critique present in Condé’s texts.

Chapter 2, “Edward Said and Assia Djebar: Counterpoint and the Practice of Comparative Literature,” moves from polyphony to consider the closely related term, counterpoint. Musicologists may well hold counterpoint and polyphony to be nearly identical, but the fact remains that they have had very different applications in literary theory and cultural studies. This chapter examines Said’s theory of counterpoint as developed in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) in relation to Assia Djebar’s novel *Les nuits de Strasbourg* (1997). Counterpoint is a practice of reading transnationally and transhistorically that challenges the literary canon by opening it to include texts relegated to the margins, thus undermining the very idea of the center and radically shifting the relations of power to foster reciprocal and equal exchange. In the years since Said’s untimely death in 2003, the musical dimension of his work has drawn critical attention. *Les nuits de Strasbourg* provides fertile terrain to extend this work. Djebar’s novel uses counterpoint in order to revisit the fraught relationship between France and Algeria. Instead of pairing the former colony with the metropolitan center, Djebar instead relates Algeria to Alsace, and highlights their similar histories of political and linguistic instability, occupation, and hybridity. The novel stages the crosscultural romance between Thelja, a young Algerian scholar and François, a native of Strasbourg who served in the French army during the Algerian War. The lovers’ probing conversations bring divisive historical issues down to a more manageable, human scale. Djebar revisits Franco-Algerian history within the context of an increasingly multicultural Europe, in which communities are faced with multiple conflicting histories. The novel’s contrapuntal approach consists of four principal dimensions: firstly, it juxtaposes conflicting histories to reveal their unexpected points of contact; second, it dialogues with a diverse array of writers who have been excluded from dominant canons; third, in a more poetic sense, it explores the contrapuntal possibilities of language, the ability of words to signify in multiple ways; and finally, it exploits the transnational influence of the Antigone myth. Djebar’s use of the Antigone story to address the conflict between memory and national history relates significantly to strategies adopted by Jacques Derrida in *De l’hospitalité* (1997) and Leïla Sebbar in *La Seine était rouge* (1999), texts similarly written during the time of the Algerian civil war of the 1990s.
The third chapter, “Glenn Gould and the Birth of the Author: Variation and Performance in Nancy Huston’s *Les variations Goldberg*,” examines the relationship between performance and authority in music and literature. In *Les variations Goldberg* (1981), an amateur harpsichordist invites thirty friends into her bedroom for an intimate performance of Bach’s Goldberg Variations on a midsummer evening in Paris. Huston structures the novel according to Bach’s theme and variations. The text consists of thirty-two loosely connected sections, the first and last of which are narrated by the performer, while each of the intervening chapters explore the thoughts of a different audience member in keeping with the mood of the corresponding musical variation. This chapter argues that Huston’s choice of the Goldberg Variations participates in ongoing debates about performance instigated by her compatriot, Canadian pianist Glenn Gould, who at the time of writing had just issued his second recording of the Goldberg Variations, the work with which he launched his career some twenty-five years earlier. Gould shook up the classical music world by withdrawing from the concert stage at the peak of his career to advocate recording as more democratic than live performance. Arguing that performance subjected musical interpretation to the vagaries of chance and to the unreliability of the human body, Gould held that recording allowed the artist more control over their interpretation and that it emancipated the musical experience by according the listener greater autonomy in shaping their experience of music. This reading of Huston shows how Gould’s revolutionary ideas on performance are inseparable from—and anticipate—important shifts in literary theory regarding the relation among author, text, and reader expressed in such seminal essays as Roland Barthes’s “The Death of the Author” and realized in the *nouveau roman*. Situated at the interstices between music and literature, Huston’s novel examines changing attitudes to performance and authority in both fields, and points to an unacknowledged but fertile exchange across disciplinary borders.

Chapter 4, “Opera and the Limits of Representation in J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*,” considers the role of opera in J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999). In the tradition of modernist novels such as Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu* and Sartre’s *La nausée*, *Disgrace* is a meditation on artistic creation that uses music in order to stage the problems of writing. With unflinching irony, Coetzee interrogates the value of the English language novel in contemporary post-apartheid South Africa, particularly in light of linguistic diversity, the vibrancy of African popular forms, and the aspiration for rapid political and economic transformation. The novel’s protagonist, David Lurie, is an aging English professor at Cape Town University who, weary of writing academic
studies of Wordsworth and Romantic poets, decides to try his hand at an opera about Lord Byron’s late romance with an Italian countess. His careless pursuit and rape of a student leads to his dismissal from the university, forcing him to take refuge at the home of his daughter Lucy in the rural Eastern Cape. A brutal attack unsettles Lurie’s sense of place in the post-apartheid South Africa, and challenges his assumptions about justice, entitlement, sexual violence, and representation. In the aftermath of the incident, he continues to work on the opera, but the project undergoes profound changes. Critics generally read the opera as an embedded narrative in the novel and take its progress as evidence of Lurie’s developing ethical sensibilities. I argue, on the contrary, that the opera is not a simple *mise en abyme*; the opera radically disrupts the text, opening a space of opacity and unreadability in the narrative, much like the story of rape that constitutes the center of violence in the novel. This chapter situates Coetzee’s engagement with opera in *Disgrace* in relation to his critique of classical forms in *Age of Iron*, and ongoing exploration of the limits of narrative production and authority in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and the later novels *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year*. Coetzee critiques both opera and the novel in order to make the case for their enduring and immeasurable value.

Ultimately, the deep engagement with classical forms that is evinced in the literary production of Condé, Djebar, Huston, and Coetzee reflects a particular moment in the history of ideas and in the ongoing transformation of the novel. While younger authors, including Chris Abani, Chimamanda Adichie, and Fatou Diome, deploy diverse musical strategies in their novels, the Baroque continues to exert a powerful hold on contemporary artists, as Kyle Abraham’s stunning dance production, *Pavement* (2012), illustrates. Abraham’s dance piece layers Baroque *castrato* arias with sound bites from John Singleton’s *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) to interrogate gang violence and the construction of masculinity in urban Black neighborhoods of Pittsburgh. This startling juxtaposition provokes new reflection on the broader cultural history of these issues across vastly different contexts.

When this book was already well underway, the editor of a leading literary journal published a call for “renewed scholarly interest in polyphony, dialogism and intertextuality: categories that have been superseded by materialist and historicist categories of reading” (Yaeger, 2007, 434). And yet, like so many others, her subsequent analysis leaves out music. It is my aim to bring music back into the discussion, and to develop a more cogent understanding of the interplay between musical form, narrative, and ethics in the transnational novel.