CHAPTER ONE

From Mikhail Bakhtin to Maryse Condé

The Problems of Literary Polyphony

Each person who enters the labyrinth of the polyphonic novel somehow loses his way in it and fails to hear the whole behind the individual voices.

— Mikhail Bakhtin

On ne traverse pas la mangrove. On s’empale sur les racines des palétuviers. On s’enterre et s’étouffe dans la boue saumâtre.

— Maryse Condé

Literary critics today invoke polyphony in order to characterize virtually any text that employs multiple narrative voices, languages, or storylines. Mikhail Bakhtin introduced polyphony into literary criticism in the late 1920s in relation to Dostoevsky’s novels, and Milan Kundera later popularized the term in *The Art of the Novel*. However, despite its extensive applications in contemporary criticism, and particularly in discussions of African and Caribbean fiction, it is still unclear what precisely polyphony means to different critics and what kinds of novels it best describes. This chapter takes up the task of situating polyphony, clarifying its mechanics, and attending to the political work it is called on to perform in the novel.

Bakhtin lays out his theory of polyphony in the seminal essay *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1929/1973). In his reading, polyphony evokes the particular capacity of the novel to accommodate contradictory positions and multiple discourses without imposing any central authoritative view. Whereas
a “monophonic” text affirms the point of view of its author, polyphonic writing embraces dissonance and moral ambiguity. Several of Bakhtin’s readers emphasize that polyphony is best understood as a loose metaphor, as an attempt to engage the “aural” and “oral” qualities of language and to account for the simultaneous interplay of voices within a text (Benson, 2003; Emerson, 2004). Jennifer Judkins (2011, 140) suggests that “musical forms themselves are generally soft concepts that are stretched and manipulated.”

The malleability and multidimensionality of polyphony have made it a particularly appealing term for critics, as it facilitates a consideration of sound, space, and time in relation to the novel, aspects that surface more readily in discussions of poetry than of prose. Yet polyphony implies an act of interdisciplinary translation, as we move from the “simultaneous and harmonious” melodic lines that sound in a work of music to the “multiplicity of independent and often antithetic narrative voices” that interact sequentially and silently in a text.¹ Whereas the polyphonic voices in a piece of music can unfold simultaneously, a literary text relies inevitably on the horizontal juxtaposition or alternation of voices or plotlines whose simultaneity—and vocality—must always be constructed or imagined by way of some narrative conceit.

Of particular concern is the tendency of scholars to invoke polyphony in relation to Caribbean and African texts, often without clarification or reference to music (or to Bakhtin, for that matter). For instance, Gérard Meudal (2000) claims that Maryse Condé writes with “the sovereign ease of a novelist who has reached the perfect mastery of a polyphonic art of narration.” David and Nicole Ball describe Djiboutian writer Abdourahman Waberi’s novel Passage of Tears (2009/2012) as “a polyphonic novel,” pointing to its “tense counterpoint between two totally different voices.”² Odile Cazenave and Patricia Célérier (2011, 133) also identify Waberi’s treatment of the narrative voice as polyphonic, and go further to assert that this type of narration articulates an ethics of “individual responsibility to the collective.” H. Adlai Murdoch (2001, 8) notes the presence of polyphony in the works of Caribbean authors Daniel Maximin, Patrick Chamoiseau, Édouard Glissant, and Maryse Condé, which he reads as part of a willful aesthetic of ambiguity, displacement, and narrative fragmentation that engages “the elusive core of an undefinable creoleness.” Delphine Perret (1995, 664), similarly, sees polyphony as a “typically Creole and doubtless postmodern phenomenon.” These instances convey a very broad, generalized understanding of polyphony. For Ball, the presence of even two voices is enough to constitute polyphony. Cazenave and Célérier are interested in how
polyphony highlights the relation of the part to the whole, the individual to the collective. Murdoch understands polyphony as a vehicle for a distinctly Caribbean aesthetic, while Perret sees it as both Caribbean and postmodern. Critics assume they are talking about the same thing when they use the term “polyphony,” but they rarely break down the textual mechanics of polyphony, and ascribe diverse properties to the term. The fact that polyphony resonates in disparate ways in contemporary criticism, and that it is so often applied to texts by authors of color from Africa or the African diaspora, illustrates the need for a much more critical definition of the term.

This chapter engages Maryse Condé’s *Traversée de la mangrove* [1989, *Crossing the Mangrove*] to show how a more situated account of polyphony shifts our understanding of authorial voice, plot development, sound, and space in the novel. Although thoroughly criss-crossed by scholars since its publication, Condé’s novel continues to present critical challenges. Hailed as her most “Antillean” work (Philcox, 2001), marking both a creative and physical return to her native island of Guadeloupe, the novel stages the fictional wake of Francis Sancher, a tall, charismatic stranger of mysterious Cuban origins who spends the last months of his life in the rural Guadeloupean village of Rivière au Sel. The novel opens as an elderly woman, Léocadie Timothée, stumbles upon Sancher’s corpse. The news of his death spreads through the village, but no one can make head or tail of it. There are no wounds on the body; the man was seemingly in perfect health. Suspecting Sancher has fallen victim to crime, the local authorities take the corpse to the capital and attempt to determine cause of death through an autopsy, to no avail. The body is then returned to the village, where the inhabitants assemble to perform the ritual wake. Throughout the night, each villager seeks to explain Sancher and his untimely death; their successive narrations draw a complex, contradictory portrait of the deceased, and show how the stranger’s brief sojourn in the remote, insular village has profoundly unsettled their lives. Ostensibly structured like a crime novel, the text offers no definitive answers for Sancher’s death, only a multiplicity of possible interpretations, each one undermined by the narrator’s acerbic irony.

Critics have generally read Condé’s novel as a critique of the Martinican-led créolité movement because of its subversive depiction of contemporary Caribbean community (Britton 2004; Dash 2003). Whereas the leading proponents of Créolité, Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphaël Confiant, and Jean Bernabé, celebrate the harmonious coexistence of the diverse communities who inhabit the Caribbean and argue for the literary use of Creole, *Traversée*
*de la mangrove* draws attention to the deep fractures among these groups, as well as their parochialism and xenophobia. The novel’s unique, circular structure has also drawn a good deal of attention, but has frequently been misread. Critics emphasize the “orality” of the text, pointing to its diversity of narrators, creative appropriation of the ritual time and space of the wake, and seeming emphasis on storytelling. They miss the crucial fact that the novel stages instead a sequence of silent interior monologues to which only the reader is privy. The people in this divided community neither speak to nor hear one another; they are competitive, jealous, xenophobic, and self-centered. The novel holds together their stories, through the artful narrative structure of the vigil, while nonetheless preserving the animosity between them. In other words, community and voice are illusory; they only come into being through the reading of the novel. As the following discussion sets out to illustrate, Condé’s text critiques not only the celebratory rhetoric of Caribbean community, but more importantly for our discussion here, the clichéd and often exoticizing discourse on polyphony and voice.

As is the case with many transnational writers, it is impossible to position Condé either at the periphery or the center because both she and her novels move so fluidly between worlds. Born in Guadeloupe in 1937, she went to Paris in 1953 to complete her education at the Lycée Fénelon and the Sorbonne, like many Antillean intellectuals of her generation. Following her marriage to Guinean actor Mamadou Condé in 1960, she left Paris to work as a teacher in the Ivory Coast, only later reuniting with her husband in newly independent Guinea. She remained in West Africa for twelve years, teaching in Guinea, Ghana, and Senegal while raising her four children, a period she revisits in her recent memoir, *La vie sans fards* (2012). In 1972, she moved to London with her present husband, translator Richard Philcox. She earned a doctoral degree in Caribbean literature at the Sorbonne in 1975, and published her first novel *Hérémakhonon* the following year. Her increasing acclaim as a novelist, especially after the publication of the epic novel *Ségou* in 1984, brought invitations to teach at universities in the United States, including the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Virginia, Princeton University, and finally, Columbia University, where she developed a vibrant program in francophone studies and remains an Emeritus Professor. For nearly twenty years, Condé divided her time between New York and Guadeloupe, while also maintaining a visible presence in Paris. Her work has garnered numerous international literary prizes, including the Grand Prix Littéraire de la Femme (1987), Prix de l’Académie Française (1988), Prix
Marguerite Yourcenar (1999), Prix Tropiques (2007), and the Grand Prix du Roman Métis (2010). In 2004, she received the title Chevalier de la Légion d’Honneur from the French government, and was called upon to preside over the Commission for the History and Remembrance of Slavery.

Condé’s fiction is dizzyingly transnational in scope, mapping out the complex web of interconnections between Guadeloupe, the Caribbean archipelago, West Africa, South Africa, the Americas, Europe, and Asia. Although *Traversée de la mangrove* unfolds in a tiny Guadeloupean village, it highlights the transnational diversity of the Antilles through characters of Indian, Syrian-Lebanese, Chinese, and Haitian heritage. As mentioned above, however, the novel does not offer a banal celebration of transnationalism, because it illustrates that not everyone has equal access to mobility. In fact, while the island elite may vacation in Paris and educate their children abroad, most of the subjects within the novel are enmeshed in circumstances from which they cannot escape, despite their transnational family histories. They are also prone to prejudice and intolerance. The novel exposes the tensions between global and local forces, most notably by juxtaposing Sancher’s global travels with the inexorable historical responsibility that ties him to Rivière au Sel. Despite the villagers’ attempts to classify Sancher, his exotic origins, extensive travels, writerly vocation, and worldly knowledge exceed their categories. Like numerous other characters in Condé’s fiction who engage in writing, art, or music, Sancher illustrates the problematic status of the writer in the Caribbean. As Lydie Moudileno (1995, 626) observes, the “artist serves to unveil the dynamic of their communities, while simultaneously revealing his inability to represent that community.”

Condé’s own resistance to classification has become one of her hallmarks as an artist and critic. She has been extremely vocal in protesting the application of European and North American theory to Caribbean literature. She argues that the use of theory often amounts to yet another form of intellectual colonization and stems from a misplaced arrogance on the part of Western critics, a will to render the text transparent. Following Martinican poet Glissant, Condé upholds opacity as a vital quality of Caribbean literature. Opacity constitutes the freedom not to be understood, and constitutes a strategy of resistance against a system of thought that reduces the other to an “object of knowledge.” Condé defends the opacity of her own texts through her resistance to glossing local expressions for an international audience, as well as through her refusal to authenticate any interpretation of her work. She asserts, “Ever since *Crossing the Mangrove*, l
have been writing much less didactically, bringing in more and more derision, humor, and mockery, so that the message, if there ever was a message, has become so muddled that it is difficult to perceive” (Broichhagen et al., 2006, 21). Cilas Kemedjio (2013, 185–87) sees the pervasive derision in Condé’s work as a marking of “postcolonial feminism,” a willful effort to prevent “the novel from being established as an edifying model. The intention to destabilize certainties is translated in a speculative writing that, by dint of suggesting a plurality of interpretations, instates indeterminacy in the reading process.” As Kemedjio astutely observes, however, critics have fallen under the spell of the writer’s notorious dissidence and refusal of classification, which ironically has resulted in a uniform critical response. For Kemedjio, this constitutes an ethical failing on the part of Condé’s critics. Condé “attempt[s] to formulate a voice that incarnates subaltern ones even while resisting any reduction into established categories. The dissidence that almost all critics detect in Condé’s oeuvre becomes, so to speak, the writer’s trademark. The unanimity in criticism regarding the transgressive dimension ends up being suspect.” To put this in slightly different terms, such a critical response ironically flattens out the polyphonic dimensions of Condé’s project. It reproduces an ambivalence that some see as already present in Bakhtin’s own position, the lingering desire for answers and authenticity that many of us share: “Even as we rejoice in polyphony, we prick up our ears for the Word’ (Erdinast-Vulcan, 1997, 267)—in this case, for Condé’s authoritative word.

In Traversée de la mangrove as in her other novels, Condé draws on an arsenal of stylistic strategies to undermine simple truths: these include a proliferation of narrators, a nonlinear narrative structure, a frequent recourse to the impersonal voice to express gossip and public opinion, and a savvy manipulation of irony and double-talk in order to cast doubt on virtually any statement. She is renowned for seeking “words and plot situations that provoke, tease, extort, dialogize,” to borrow Bakhtin’s terms (Bakhtin, 1973, 39). The author incorporates popular expressions and neologisms, along with constant references to music, film, polemical debates, and other literary texts. More importantly, it is often difficult to distinguish between what is merely being thought and what is spoken. The successive interventions of the different narrators give off the impression of spoken dialogue, leading readers to perceive the novel as an instance of theatricality (Perret, 1995), and to emphasize the role of storytelling in the text (Fulton, 2001). In fact, however, the characters’ narrations are fragmented, interior monologues that are not actually spoken out loud within the realm of the text.
If critics have largely failed to pick up on the subversively non-vocal dimension of the narratives in *Traversé de la mangrove*, a striking ambivalence between silence and vocality nonetheless haunts many critical readings of the novel. Critics interchangeably refer to acts of reading and hearing, demonstrating their uncertainty as to the ontological status of the narratives (Morrison, 1995; Fulton, 2001). Murdoch (2001) notes the slippery indeterminacy of voice in many of Condé’s texts, pointing to the impossibility of pinning down discourse to a particular speaker. Only Crosta (1992) pursues this investigation further and insightfully separates out the distinctive narrative planes of the text, to delineate two levels of representation: the diegetic level of action, consisting of all the externalized happenings and conversations at the wake, which for the most part are inaccessible to the reader; and what she calls the meta-diegetic level comprising the internal thoughts of the characters and which, conversely, are exposed to the reader’s gaze.

To put the case more clearly, Condé’s novel does not demonstrably privilege the voice, although it deploys multiple narrators and has been interpreted by most critics as a text that comes remarkably close to approximating oral culture. Instead, the novel reveals the problematic status of the voice and points to the limits of literary polyphony, even while deploying many of its characteristic features. Revisiting the novel’s structure allows us to develop a more rigorous notion of what polyphony entails, particularly in the transnational context, and to reflect critically on why the term has been applied so liberally to African and Caribbean authors. As we have seen, the critical consensus maintains that Condé’s work is “polyphonic,” but it is unclear what precisely this means. Polyphony functions something like the other labels attached to her work, like “francophone,” “feminist,” and “postcolonial” (Moudileno, 2006). This is symptomatic of a more general problem: the lack of clarity and precision in the current use of musical terms in literary criticism. On one hand, this ambiguity reflects the equivocal status of music in literary studies, where music is all too often associated with “the physical, the immediate, the bodily, the emotional as opposed to the rational and cognitive character of language” (Tolbert, 2001, 451). On the other, it reinforces Thomas Pavel’s (1998, 580) claim that “such typically Bakhtinian notions as ‘polyphony,’ ‘dialogism,’ and ‘carnival,’ are unreliably defined, imperfectly defended, and, as a result, can easily be challenged” and appropriated. Emerson (2004, 113) arrives at a similar conclusion to assert that Bakhtin’s influence is due in part to the porous nature of the concepts.
he proposed. His terms “are highly suggestive, but many potentials [are] left undeveloped.” On a more significant level, the cavalier use of the term indicates the exoticizing and essentializing tendencies in criticism on African fiction.

The popular, egalitarian dimensions of Bakhtin’s thought have made it appealing to postcolonial and postmodern scholars. Homi Bhabha, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Stuart Hall, and Robert Young have taken up and extended the Bakhtinian concepts of hybridity and heteroglossia (Young, 1995, 21–22); Peter Hitchcock and Sanders deploy the chronotope; while numerous critics, including Glissant, Benítez-Rojo, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, have appropriated the term “polyphony.” Despite its wide resonance in theory and criticism, however, there have been few serious attempts to think about literary polyphony in relation to music. As Stephen Benson (2003, 293) contends, “Nowhere in the literature has any attention been paid to the work of polyphony as metaphor, to the nonliterary discursive sphere it implicates, as opposed to the concept that it passively enables.” Dale Peterson (1993, 761–68), writing on African-American literature, argues that the adoption of Bakhtin’s theoretical notions by North American scholars has been far too facile, celebratory, and commercial. Peterson claims that the incorporation of Bakhtin by such theorists as Gates and Houston Baker, Jr., has amounted to “serving” up a “Russian-American Creole.” In the hasty consumption of Bakhtin, immense differences in contexts—historical, cultural, and geographic—have been erased. Furthermore, critics have neglected to examine the tensions between “the author’s willed monologue and a character’s zone of speech.” Peterson demonstrates how Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God, like many other so-called “speakerly texts,” is actually a writerly tour de force exhibiting stunning “literary ventriloquisms of orality.” Who does such a text actually empower? This question suggests another related issue: Do polyphonic novels equip readers to attend more closely to the diversity of voices within their own communities, and make them more conscious of their relations with others?

Polyphony in literature carries seductive and misleading associations with orality and democracy because it refers to a sonorous, complex, and collective phenomenon. But whether the polyphonic text holds special “democratic” or “emancipatory” potential is highly debatable, because of the masterful authorial control polyphonic writing implies. Ken Hirschkop (2001, 3) notes that for many scholars, Bakhtin became “a philosophical spokesperson for humanity at large,” without adequate attention to the precise textual, political,
and social implications of his thought. “We have to ask: What is this ‘dialogism’ that so many celebrate as liberating and democratic: what are its actual cultural forms, its social and political preconditions, its participants, methods and goals?” (Hirschkop, 1989, 2). How can we distinguish between the organized pluralism of democracy and the chaos of cacophony? In the context of postcolonial and transnational fiction, what specific techniques contribute to creating polyphony in the novel, and to what ends?

On the most basic level, polyphony means “many voices” or “many sounds”; the term is derived from the Greek polyphonia. In Western musical composition, polyphony refers to the simultaneous combination of several vocal or instrumental parts. The Oxford English Dictionary defines polyphony as a “multiplicity of independent and often antithetic narrative voices, none of which is given predominance; [also] the use of this narrative technique.”

Polyphony brings our attention back to the voice, highlighting the potential of music—and by extension, narrative—to be multivoiced, and to inscribe a plurality of equal and unmerged voices. Yet, as we saw in the Introduction, the voice itself is an ambiguous term, and continues to preoccupy philosophers and linguists. In Of Grammatology, Jacques Derrida shows voice to be a deeply problematic metaphor, with only a tenuous connection to sound, exteriority, and language. Derrida (1976, 20–22) submits Heidegger’s discussion of voice to a rigorous critique in order to dislodge the prevailing association of voice with sound and immediacy. He particularly points to the contradictions between Heidegger’s claim that the voice is “heard (understood) […] as the unique experience of the signified producing itself spontaneously from the self […]” and his notion of the “voice of being” as “silent, mute, insonorous, worldless, a-phonic.” Derrida thus points to a fundamental rupture between “meaning and the voice, between ‘the voice of being’ and the ‘phonê,’ between ‘the call of being,’ and articulated sound.” For our purposes here, it can also be helpful to consider voice against the related concept of “voicing,” which Bakhtin refers to as “orchestration.” In music and literature, “voicing” refers to how an author or composer distributes musical or fictional material to different instruments, singers, or subject positions. Voicing implies differential relationships of power and subservience, as the author or composer has the capacity to “animate” or “give voice” to others. Polyphony—except when spontaneous, collectively improvised, and unwritten—is produced through an act of voicing, so it inevitably becomes a site of tension between these contradictory elements of agency and submission.

Bakhtin (1973, 6–7) defines the polyphonic novel as “a plurality of
independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses [...] with equal rights and each with its own world.” Each character’s word “sounds, as it were, alongside the author’s word and in a special way combines both with it and with the fully and equally valid voices of other characters.” Thus defined, polyphony places emphasis on sound and voice, equality and plurality, independence and interdependence. Several key elements come into Bakhtin’s understanding of literary polyphony: the equality and independence of each narrative voice; the importance of conflict and opposition even at the level of each individual utterance; the absence of teleology or overarching ideology; the positioning of the authorial voice on the same level as the characters, who each carry a truth equal to that of the author; the interweaving of different kinds of extra-literary material into the narrative; and the prevalence of mass-scenes where as diverse an array of characters as possible is assembled.

These attributes come into play in Condé’s novel. The vigil, for instance, has elements of an unruly dinner party that unites “motley” guests from different social classes and generations, and successively explores their various points of view without producing any fixed, definitive conclusions. Different narrators intervene in turn, much like the passing of a motif among voices in a fugue. In addition, Condé incorporates disparate texts, from fragments of Ecclesiastes to newspaper articles, catalogues, citations from operas, and off-color jokes, bringing them into irreverent proximity. She works to expose the contradictions and dissonances within the very cultural forms that others (and particularly the critics associated with the créolité movement) celebrate as uniting Antilleans across their differences. Condé thus writes against the self-congratulatory rhetoric that has characterized both postcolonial studies and Caribbean criticism.

Before turning to a detailed analysis of how this plays out in the novel, we need first to map out the contours of the theoretical debate a bit further, by examining how Kundera appropriates and redefines polyphony.

The Polyphony of Storylines

Kundera popularized the concept of literary polyphony in his treatise on the novel, L’art du roman [1986, The Art of the Novel]. Kundera argues that the most important quality of the novel is its capacity for ambiguity and uncertainty. Surprisingly, although he engages many of the same fictional works that Bakhtin uses to develop his ideas, Kundera never credits Bakhtin
as a precursor. The parallels between their writings on literary polyphony have not escaped scholarly attention. Benson (2003, 300) observes that both Bakhtin and Kundera experienced the oppressive Soviet state and are passionate advocates of the “ethical significance of the modern European novel.” Both critics foreground the novel’s capacity to raise questions, regard polyphony as a stage in the ongoing evolution of the European novel, and define it against other forms. Bakhtin places the polyphonic novel in opposition to the “monological” fiction of Tolstoy that champions a single ideology. Kundera (1988, 17–18) contrasts the novel to the media, which he sees as the agent of “unification of the planet’s history,” distributing throughout the world “the same simplifications and stereotypes.” 11 For both Bakhtin and Kundera, the polyphonic novel holds ethical value because it preserves uncertainty and difference.

There are, however, key differences in how Bakhtin and Kundera situate polyphony in the novel. For Bakhtin, polyphony refers to multiple, divergent voices within a sentence or even a word, while Kundera thinks of polyphony on a much larger compositional scale, in terms of the grand plotlines of the novel. 13 Bakhtin positions the author in the role of an orchestrator. For Kundera, the polyphonic author is a “poet and philosopher,” spinning out different plotlines without ever losing the essential connection between them. This points to an important distinction in their vocabulary. Bakhtin’s sense of polyphony is highly phonocentric, as he frequently refers to narrative “voices” that “sound” in the novel. Kundera evokes narrative “lines,” and compares the horizontal unfolding of plot to melody. Kundera draws on his formal training as a musician to make precise comparisons between music and literature, whereas music plays a metaphorical and vague role in Bakhtin’s thought (Emerson, 2004).

Kundera sees the polyphonic novel as consisting of multiple, equal plotlines that are unified in such a way that none of these storylines can be removed without destroying the meaning and intelligibility of the whole. 14 Kundera (1988, 82–83) regards Dostoevsky’s Demons as an exemplary polyphonic text, because it consists of three distinct narrative lines that evolve simultaneously and that consider the same abstract theme from a different angle, “like a thing reflected in three mirrors. [This] gives the novel as a whole an internal coherence.” Hermann Broch’s Sleepwalkers presents another instance of polyphonic writing, even though it satisfies only one of the three conditions Kundera posits as essential to the genre, multiple plotlines. The novel’s five narratives are of unequal importance in the text. The first storyline dominates
to the point that the others function as “a simple accompaniment,” and one could easily eliminate one narrative from the novel without compromising the rest of the work. Furthermore, the different storylines are only tenuously interconnected; characters from one thread do not reappear in the others. In Kundera’s assessment, Broch’s novel fails to achieve the fully fledged polyphony of a Bach fugue, which he holds up as the ideal illustration of polyphonic form since not one note of Bach’s music is superfluous. Ultimately, however, Kundera’s desire for indivisibility is problematic because it sustains the very values of unity and wholeness that the novel is meant to question. He ascribes an untenable perfection to Bach’s work, idealizing music rather than submitting it to the same rigorous analysis he brings to the novel.\(^{15}\)

This is not the only inconsistency in Kundera’s discussion of literary polyphony. The author is unclear as to whether literary polyphony amounts to a poetic intention, a style, a technique, or a form. In one instance, Kundera (1996, 95) claims that “La polyphonie romanesque est beaucoup plus poésie que technique.” [“Novelistic polyphony is much more [like] poetry than technique.”]\(^{16}\) Later, however, he emphasizes the importance of technique when he seeks to explain why the polyphonic novel only fully came into being in the nineteenth century. Kundera locates the beginnings of novelistic polyphony in the embedded narratives of sixteenth- and eighteenth-century novels such as \textit{Don Quixote}, \textit{Jacques le fataliste}, and \textit{Tristram Shandy}, but holds that these early instances fall short of true polyphony because the stories they contain do not unfold simultaneously, but instead sequentially. Kundera credits nineteenth-century novelists as having been the first to develop the compositional techniques necessary to sustaining multiple, simultaneous lines.\(^{17}\) In many ways, the term “polygraphy”\(^{18}\) suits Kundera’s purposes better than polyphony, as he never mentions voice or sound, but rather lays out a technical approach to writing that treats the text like a score with multiple, simultaneously evolving lines.

Despite these inconsistencies, Kundera’s treatment of polyphony helps to sharpen the questions we need to bring to Condé’s novel and other texts. Where precisely does multivoicedness play out in the novel: on the level of the utterance or through long plotlines? Are all of the constituent voices or lines absolutely essential to the novel? What role does authorial intervention play in a novel, and is it ever possible to tease out authorial voice from the other voices within a text? Does the text place emphasis on sound, or on spatiality?
Authorship and Voice

This brings us to the thorny question of authorial voice, one of the places where the comparison between music and literature is most fraught. Bakhtin portrays the author as an orchestrator who strategically assigns voices and ideas to a cast of characters. This analogy is difficult to reconcile with his other claim that the author is “just one of the many voices in the text.” In other words, can the authorial voice really be equal to the other voices within a text, while at the same time exercising creative authority over those other voices? Bakhtin’s claims concerning the position of the author are difficult for a contemporary critic to evaluate, because his terms are so outdated. Generally speaking, literary critics no longer regard the author as a unified voice or persona, but instead either as a function of language (Barthes), or produced by the text (Foucault). As criticism on Condé reveals, however, critics often fall into the trap of reifying authorial voice when engaging with African or Caribbean writers. By contrast, music entails a much more marked separation between the composer and the musical work. Few musicologists seek to locate a composer’s voice within a musical composition, with the striking exception of Edward Cone whose controversial position on the subject distinguishes him from the bulk of his colleagues. Composers may have a recognizable musical style, but even in the case of Lieder, or songs, listeners rarely confuse the singing voice with that of the composer. The status of the author’s voice in a literary text is far more misleading, since a narrative voice feels so alluringly immediate, especially where first-person narration is used. Readers animate the voices of a text in their own heads; by contrast, music is generally experienced as coming from the outside, except when one silently reads a score.

The lingering fascination with authorial voice is particularly evident in the immense interest on the part of critics in the persona of Maryse Condé. Scholars have not given up on trying to situate her voice with respect to her novels. At the same time, much has been made of the author’s famous irreverence and refusal to confirm readings of her work. Nearly all of her novels test the boundaries of voice. Condé plays this up in her comments on Histoire de la femme cannibale [2003, Story of the Cannibal Woman]: “It rejects, in fact, the trio formed by the author, narrator, and main character. I wanted to create a work in which you don’t really know where all these voices you hear are coming from. Is it Maryse Condé talking? Is it Rosélie? Is it the narrator who’s expressing an opinion?” (Broichhagen et al., 2006,
In fact, Condé’s description of *Histoire de la femme cannibale* comes remarkably close to Bakhtin’s (1981, 77) definition of the modern novel in 1940: “One often does not know where the direct authorial word ends and where a parodic or stylized playing with the characters’ language begins.”

Bakhtin (1973, 49) asserts that the polyphonic novel “is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather, a plurality of consciousnesses with equal rights and each with its own world combine but are not merged in the unity of the event.” The characters within the polyphonic world exceed the author’s control; each of their voices carries a truth that rivals that of the author. For Bakhtin, this represents a revolutionary shift as to where authority is situated in a text: “What the author used to do is now done by the hero who illuminates himself from all possible points of view.” In a sense, Bakhtin anticipates here the poststructuralist turn in the middle of the twentieth century: “For Dostoevsky as Bakhtin understands him, and for Bakhtin himself, ‘secondhand’ definitions of others are fundamentally *unethical*. One must approach another as a ‘personality,’ that is, as someone ‘who has not yet uttered his ultimate word’” (Morson and Emerson, 1990, 265). This concern for the other’s irreducible alterity is central to Condé’s work, and illustrated in the opacity that Francis Sancher retains throughout the novel.

The issues of authorial voice and responsibility are particularly contentious in the Caribbean. When Condé “returned” to Guadeloupe in the late eighties, she found herself confronted with a local audience who preferred “lived culture” to writing and who regarded her as a foreign import with little relevance. As she describes it, they saw her as “published in France, written in French” with a reputation developed in the French- and English-speaking press and in American universities (Clark, 1989, 111). The shock of this initial encounter motivated her to redefine her relation to that public.21 In “Habiter ce pays” [1989, “To Inhabit This Land”], Condé argues that the principal role of the Caribbean writer is to listen:

Dans un pays comme le nôtre, l’écrivain c’est une femme, un homme parmi les autres, à l’écoute du pays d’une manière un peu particulière, essayant d’exprimer la voix du pays avec ses mots, avec son imaginaire, avec sa sensibilité. Mais le temps de l’écrivain, être privilégié, n’existe plus. Habiter ce pays nous ramène donc à cette humilité. (Condé, 1989b, 14)
[In a country like ours, a writer is a woman, a man, among others, who listens to the land in a rather particular way, trying to express the voice of the land with her words, her imagination, her sensitivity. But the time of the writer as a privileged being no longer exists. To live in this country brings us back to this humility.]

Through this statement, Condé adds her voice to the longstanding debate over the responsibility of the Caribbean writer. Martinican poet Aimé Césaire saw it as the duty of the Caribbean writer to speak for those who cannot. In the Cahier d’un retour au pays natal (1939), Césaire declares: “Ma bouche sera la bouche des malheurs qui n’ont point de bouche, ma voix, la liberté de celles qui s’affaissent au cachot du désespoir.” [“My mouth will be the mouth of misfortunes that have no mouth, my voice, the liberty of those who are sinking in the dungeon of despair.”] Abiola Irele (2008, 124) observes that these lines are a “gesture of identification and of self-dedication. [...] Césaire lent the extraordinary energy of his poetry to voicing the existential predicament of the black race.” Three decades later, Glissant redefined the role of the Caribbean writer to reflect a new commitment to alterity. In L’intention poétique, Glissant (1969, 197) claims to write for “ceux qui n’ont pas eu de voix et dont nous ne saurions être la voix” [“those who had no voice and for whom we would not know how to be the voice”]. Glissant thus contests Césaire’s notion that the writer can speak for others. Condé takes this one step further. She asserts that the writer must listen to the land, but that her ultimate function is not to serve as a voice for others, but to seek her own voice.

This claim allows the writer to mark her distance from Guadeloupans, even as she asserts her connectedness to the island and its history. In an interview in 1989, Condé admitted to VéVé Clark that her relationship to other Guadeloupans was not easy. Her efforts to reconnect with the local people were not always reciprocated. Condé recalled, “I went out and met with not so much the people but with the island itself. I learned how the island speaks to your mind; how it smells. It has a life of its own despite the meanness of individuals or their limitations” (Clark, 1989, 133). More than a decade later, in conversation with Emily Apter (2001, 96), Condé described her ongoing experimentation with language, form, and voice as a personal artistic venture: “More than the layering of languages, I’m interested in the polyphony of voice. I’ve worked with mixing first- and third-person voices, but I’m still not satisfied with the results. I’m still looking for the right form
of the novel, the right voice; I’d like to create a ‘Maryse Condé language.’ I haven’t found it yet; I’m still searching.”

Condé’s willful search for her own writing voice in French has multiple implications. As outlined above, it represents her impatience with the prescriptive doctrines through which Martinican writers have successively sought to define Caribbean writing, namely négritude, antillanité, and créolité. It articulates a defense of authorial freedom, and vindicates the value of fiction as art, outside of its capacity to serve as a political weapon. At the same time, however, the statement flirts dangerously with myths of authenticity and originality. Condé is by no means blind to this: she seems to play this up, by fashioning a “Maryse Condé language” that is richly intertextual, often cannibalistic, bitingly ironic, fragmentary, and contradictory, pitting different voices and positions against one another.

The question of what constitutes a Guadeloupean voice is a constant obsession throughout Traversée de la mangrove. The novel presents twenty “voices” who alternate as narrators and who are far from unified, but “multiple, located, contradictory” (Smyth, 2002, 22). An implicit narrator interjects ironic commentary throughout these accounts, casting doubt on each one’s authenticity and authority. Condé’s fictional narrators themselves refuse responsibility for their words, and instead claim merely to relay what others say. The text stages an incessant pattern of statement and negation. Phrases such as “Les gens prétendent que” [“People claim that”] are followed closely by their refutation, “Mais les gens racontent n’importe quoi” [“But people say anything”] (34). The use of impersonal expressions such as “on,” “certains,” and “les gens” constantly obscures the source of information. A variety of metaphors evacuate human agency from statements: gossip is a flowering plant, rumors are attributed to the wind, and news items to a storm. Moreover, the text frequently leaves us no way to distinguish between rumor and “truth”: “Les histoires les plus folles se mirent à circuler. En réalité, Francis Sancher aurait tué un homme dans son pays […] Ce serait un trafiquant de la drogue dure, un de ceux que la police […] recherchait en vain. Un trafiquant d’armes ravitaillant les guérillas de l’Amérique latine” (Condé, 1989a, 38–39). [“The craziest stories started to circulate. In reality, they supposed Francis Sancher had killed a man in his country […] that he was a drug dealer, one of those the police […] sought in vain. An arms dealer supplying South American guerillas.”] As these examples illustrate, nothing separates the wildest rumors from the supposedly “real” accounts that oppose them. No one voice speaks from a position of unquestionable
authority; there are contrary claims for each utterance and everything is the site of social contestation.

Multivoicedness thus emerges at the level of each statement in Condé’s text, reflecting what amounts to a “microtextual,” dialogic approach to polyphony. In Julia Kristeva’s reading (1970, 16–18), Bakhtin sees Dostoevsky as a scribe who confronts points of view, consciences, voices, and texts. Ideologies are not organized according to a hierarchy in the novel, nor are they thought out or judged; instead, they function only as material. In this sense, the polyphonic text has only one ideology, that of form; the polyphonic novel puts multiple ideologies on display, only to empty them out in their confrontation. Kristeva suggests that Dostoevsky’s influence in the French tradition is most strongly felt in the *nouveau roman*, which marks “the dissolution of the character novel towards novels that stage the intersection of multiple voices.” In fact, more than any of Condé’s other novels, *Traversée de la mangrove* demonstrates an affinity to the *nouveau roman* because it is structured precisely as a confrontation between different narrators and their conflicting interpretations.23

The discontinuous structure of *Traversée de la mangrove* has elicited a variety of metaphors, such as the mosaic (Perret), the patchwork quilt (Ramsay), and the creole garden (Rosello). Christopher Miller (1996, 180) describes it as an “egalitarian parceling out of the style.” All of these metaphors reflect the eclectic distribution of material throughout the novel, but they are also essentially all static and fail to account for the dynamic interaction between narrative voices. The narrations of the various characters do not simply follow one another in neat succession, as the novel’s table of contents seems to indicate; the characters’ interventions are silent and internal, and as such can easily unfold simultaneously. The metaphor of polyphony, unlike any of the analogies above, allows us to address the mutual interpenetration and interdependence of the voices in the text and to consider the possibility of their simultaneity. There are, however, several other issues that remain to be considered before we can establish more precisely how polyphony functions in the novel.

**The Spatial Configurations of Polyphony**

One of the most radical attributes of polyphony is the potential for temporal simultaneity. A polyphonic score consists of a horizontal and vertical
dimension: individual lines can be read horizontally, or the lines can be read together vertically, point by point. This multidirectionality is especially important in the context of postcolonial literature. Postcolonial critics Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1989, 34) argue that “history, ancestry, and the past” have constituted a powerful reference point for European epistemology; postcolonial thought challenges this by emphasizing how “time broadens into space. [...] Hybridity in the present is constantly struggling to free itself from a past which stressed ancestry and which valued the ‘pure’ over its threatening opposite, the ‘composite.’ [Postcolonial thought] replaces a temporal linearity with a spatial plurality.” Derrida notes a similar shift in linguistics, contrasting Ferdinand de Saussure’s linear and horizontal view of speech and writing, to the innovative musical paradigms Roman Jakobson proposed a few years later that accommodate horizontality and verticality. Saussure (1959, 70) argues that “auditory signifiers have at their command only the dimension of time. Their elements are presented in succession; they form a chain. This feature becomes readily apparent when they are represented in writing and the spatial line of graphic marks is substituted for succession in time.” By contrast, Jakobson (1966, 15) proposes that writing can break free of linear constraints by substituting “for the homogeneousness of the line the structure of the musical staff, the chord in music.”

Bakhtin emphasizes the spatial dimensions of polyphony by describing how voices in the novel do not merely follow one another in sequence, but “spread out in one place, standing alongside one another” (Benson, 2003: 299). Bakhtin thus likens the polyphonic novel to a “labyrinth” in which readers inevitably lose their way. Condé’s tangled mangrove gives a distinctly Antillean twist to Bakhtin’s image of the polyphonic labyrinth. The title of the novel juxtaposes two contradictory notions: the linear idea of crossing and the messy circularity of the mangrove swamp, whose knotted roots and branches actively resist navigation.24 The novel itself offers an ironic commentary on its title: Sancher announces he is writing a novel called Traversée de la mangrove which he claims he will never finish because it was prematurely named. Vilma retorts that the novel will fail for other reasons, namely that its title stands on an impossible premise: “On ne traverse pas la mangrove. On s’empale sur les racines des palétuviers. On s’enterre et s’étouffe dans la boue saumâtre” (Condé, 1989a, 192). [“You can’t cross the mangrove. You’d get stuck on the mangrove roots. You’d suffocate in the brackish mud.”]

The title drew criticism from Chamoiseau, whom Condé invited to serve
as the novel’s first public reader. Chamoiseau (1991, 390) argues that the title “Tracée dans la mangrove” would have been more productive, as it would have allowed Condé to evoke the paths forged by runaway slaves (nèg mawon) in the island forests, which he sees as a more significant aspect of the Caribbean experience. To be sure, the trace is an important term in the Caribbean imaginary. In Glissant’s poetics of antillanité, for instance, the trace connotes poetic freedom, the capacity to forge transnational alliances and reject the constraints of possession and belonging. Furthermore, in psychoanalysis and trauma theory, the trace indicates the inscription of experience on the psychic apparatus. The trace thus speaks not only to the traumatic histories of displacement, enslavement and exploitation, but also to the historical resistance practiced by slaves and the poetic freedom claimed by Caribbean writers. Chamoiseau’s critique, however, exhibits the prescriptive agenda for Caribbean literature that Condé so adamantly resists, and puts forth certain words and images as more “Caribbean” than others. It also illustrates the pettiness of some of these debates, as Condé’s title already evokes a distinctive dimension of Antillean history. Crossing recalls the transnational crossings that mark Caribbean experience: the Atlantic crossing that brought slaves from Africa to the Caribbean plantations; the later migrations of Indians and Lebanese who came to work the plantations after the abolition of slavery; the privileged, repeated crossings of the island elite who vacation in the metropolis and send their children to obtain advanced degrees abroad; the inbound waves of Haitians and Dominicans who come to Guadeloupe in hope of work; and the outbound waves of West Indians who leave the archipelago for the United States in pursuit of the American Dream.

While the title places emphasis on the act of crossing, the novel itself takes on a circular structure that reflects Condé’s search for an aesthetic that would transcend particular Caribbean literary movements. As she indicated to Apter (2001, 96), “I disagree with créolité. What matters much more to me are problems of finding the right structure for the story, of translating cultural practices. I used a circular language to render the ritual of the night vigil.” She identifies Traversée de la mangrove as her most circular narrative: “In place of a linear story with a beginning and end, the narrative is defined by the sunset and the sunrise. Within these contours, there is circularity. I don’t think this recurs in any of my books” (Broichhagen et al., 2006, 26). The novel’s three sections—le serein, la nuit, le devant-jour—denote the cyclical passage of night into day. The wake resembles a concentrated theatrical
experience whereby spectator and actor share the same temporal and spatial confines for the duration of the representation. The story unfolds between evening and daybreak, and the action is confined entirely to a house (Fulton, 2001, 301–9).

The alternation of narrators constitutes a critical aspect of the novel’s circularity. The narrative progresses like a revolving wheel, whereby each movement or revolution brings a different point on the circle to the top. As in polyphonic music, no voice dominates except momentarily. A chorus of prayer circulates beneath the individual narratives, functioning throughout the novel like the continually repeated “ground” or bass line in polyphonic music. Taken from the book of Ecclesiastes, the prayer itself emphasizes eternal cycles of renewal and healing: “To everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven, / There is a time to be born, a time to die, / There is a time to sow, a time to reap” (Ecclesiastes, 3.1–11). Against this constant refrain, Condé animates the thoughts of twenty individuals. Sancher is “the symbolic point to which everyone converges in their differences” (Rosello, 1995, 572). His foreign origins excite both admiration and derision. Romantic speculations circulate about his fortune, his involvement in anticolonial struggles, the historic curse that has plagued his family, and his vocation as a writer. Women project their desires on him, are tempted to nurture and console him, and see in him the possibility of self-liberation.28 In this sense, Condé’s narrative exemplifies yet another of the definitions Bakhtin proposes for literary polyphony: “different voices singing variously on a single theme” (Bakhtin, 1973, 4). To further complicate matters, however, the novel’s main subject, Sancher, constitutes yet another “voice.” Far from a static focal point, he is repeatedly described as a talking windmill, a “moulin à paroles,” propelling words in all directions (Condé, 1989a, 30). Moreover, as we will see in a moment, the text subverts the very idea of vocality. The narrations are only “heard” by the reader; they are otherwise silent, set against the noise of prayer, jokes, eating, and howling dogs.

What Constitutes a Caribbean Aesthetic? Who Decides?

Condé’s invitation to Chamoiseau to serve as the novel’s first public reader attests to a literary dialogue between the two writers that was already underway, and which erupts in places throughout the text like a palimpsest. Traversée de la mangrove is partly a rejoinder to the novel Chamoiseau published the
preceding year, Solibo magnifique. Both novels open with the inexplicable death of a symbolic figure. In Solibo magnifique, the highly revered storyteller Solibo drops dead in mid-sentence and the writer, represented in the text as a scribe ["scripteur"] or “marqueur de paroles,” attempts to prolong his legacy. Traversée de la mangrove turns instead on the discovery of a writer’s corpse; the writer, moreover, is a stranger to the community. Chamoiseau builds on the mythic tradition of the storyteller in Caribbean culture, and positions the writer in the same lineage. Condé pushes aside both the storyteller and the writer in order to facilitate the emergence of other subject positions. Her irreverent act demolishes the traditional hierarchies in Caribbean society and creates space for a more radical polyphony in the novel, making it possible for anyone to become a storyteller.

Chamoiseau praises Condé for staging the novel as a vigil, a trope he sees as quintessential of Caribbean history and literature. In Chamoiseau’s view, the wake is the space from which a Caribbean collective identity emerges, the space of the storytellers, of intrigues, of rebellion:

The wake is for us a melting pot of Creole culture, of its speech, of its orality, and it gave the extraordinary pretext that would allow plantation slaves to gather without spreading the fear that they were plotting to revolt or burn down a plantation. I even have the feeling that the Creole language, in its whispers, that the Creole culture, in its ruses and detours, and the Creole philosophy, in its underground, clandestine and fatalist character, all were shaped in the wake’s contours; there, too, was shaped our most painful subjectivity. The wake also is the space of the storyteller, our first literary figure, the one who in the silence, gave us his voice, and who, facing death in the night, laughed, sang, challenged, as if to teach us how to resist our collective death and night... (Chamoiseau, 1991, 390–91)

Condé, however, harnesses the wake’s history to very different ends: she uses its historic significance as a space of defiance in order to stage her own resistance to the prescriptive agenda of the créolité movement spearheaded by Chamoiseau and his Martinican colleagues. Instead of presenting the wake as a “melting pot of Creole culture,” she uses it to reveal a profoundly fractured community of alienated individuals, linked by their tenuous relationships to a dead man, who is, moreover, a stranger. The novel presents “a community of differences that must be negotiated and tested, in the midst of, in some
cases, intransigent conflicts and power differences. [...] It is a contemporary view of creolization [...] that allows for the changing dynamics of continual immigration and diasporic movement, as well as the cultural leaching caused by departmentalization” (Smyth, 2002, 22).

Condé radically undercuts the figure of the storyteller. Cyril is a minor character and what is more, he stumbles and stutters inexpertly in his speech. His modest genealogy is no match for Sancher’s exotic ancestry and impressive experience with foreign lands, freedom struggles, and unmentionable crimes (Condé, 1989a, 156). Condé’s parodic portrayal of the storyteller has led several critics to read the novel as a thorough emasculation of “the male figure of créolité, the contour” (Smyth, 2002, 22–23). It demonstrates her unwillingness to spin nostalgic eulogies for a past she views as complex and imperfect.

If the storyteller no longer functions as the mouthpiece of collective consciousness in Condé’s novel, the “writer” fares little better. The implicit narrator represents writers, would-be writers, and historians with a hearty dose of skepticism and critique. The fictional writers in the novel, Francis Sancher, Émile Etienne, and Lucien Évariste, are all paralyzed by self-doubt, identity politics, and the linguistic and aesthetic prescriptions of the media. Lucien, for instance, anticipates the media’s critical response to his as yet unwritten book, “As-tu comme le talentueux Martiniquais Patrick Chamoiseau, déconstruit le français-français?” (Condé, 1989a, 228). ['Have you deconstructed proper French, like the talented Martinican Patrick Chamoiseau?”] Fulton (2001, 303) calls attention to the novel’s “cynical disempowering of the role of the author,” pointing to how “the people of Rivière au Sel express a profound mistrust of this mysterious occupation which involves ‘sitting and doing nothing.’” Such contempt for writing—and particularly for the genre of “politically correct,” “cultural studies” writing that celebrates Caribbean folklore and oral traditions—recalls the caustic portrait in Condé’s La vie scélérée (1987) of a writer who struggles to produce a volume, La Guadeloupe inconnue, that hardly anyone will read (Clark, 1989, 106). These derisive representations of writing poke fun at prevailing doctrines in Caribbean literature, while further problematizing what it means to be a Guadeloupian “voice.” Such remarks de-fetishize literature, using humor and irony to bring writers down to an accessible level.

Condé also parodies select passages from Solibo magnifique, to critique Chamoiseau’s simplistic veneration of origins. In Solibo magnifique, the storyteller advises the writer to pay attention to roots: “Z’Oiseau, tu dis:
La tradition, la tradition..., tu mets pleurer par terre sur le pied-bois qui perd ses feuilles, comme si la feuille était la racine! ... Laisse la tradition, pitite, et surveille la racine...!” (Chamoiseau, 1988, 63). [“Z’Oiseau, you say: Tradition, tradition..., you get down and weep for the tree that loses its leaves, as if the leaf were the root! ... Leave off tradition, my son, and keep an eye on the root...!”] In Traversée de la mangrove, Condé rewrites this passage to transform the root from a source of origin into something much more rhizomatic: “Les problèmes de la vie, c’est comme les arbres. On voit le tronc, on voit les branches et les feuilles. Mais on ne voit pas les racines, cachées dans le fin fond de la terre. Or ce qu’il faudrait connaître, c’est leur forme, leur nature, jusqu’où elles s’enfoncent pour chercher l’eau, le terreau gras. Alors peut-être, on comprendrait” (Condé, 1989a, 170). [“Life’s problems, they’re like trees. You see the trunk, you see the branches and the leaves. But you do not see the roots, hidden in the depth of the earth. And yet, what you have to experience is their form, their nature, to where they dig down to seek water, rich compost. Then perhaps you’ll understand.”] Condé thus suggests that one needs to take into account the broader environment that nourishes these roots: by extension, one needs to engage the dynamic interplay of transnational influences on Caribbean subjectivity.

Roots and trees constitute privileged metaphors in the Caribbean literary imagination, and their evolution in the work of successive authors reflects key shifts in the understanding of identity and history. Césaire promised to “plant a tree of sulfur and lava among a vanquished people,” demonstrating his view of the intellectual as a pillar of power and strength. He portrayed the tree as “an explosive, plunging shaft,” a link to authenticity and origins. In Glissant’s writing, by contrast, trees project outwards, and are a locus of “confusing, contradictory forces,” reflecting an emphasis on relation and diversity. Chamoiseau tellingly stages Solibo magnifique at the foot of a tamarind tree, whereas Condé privileges the tangled mangrove swamp. While Chamoiseau establishes an artistic genealogy whereby the writer inherits the legacy and cultural authenticity of the conteur, Condé rejects this simplistic paradigm. As Smyth (2002, 18–19) notes, “Condé’s use of the mangrove swamp image confounds a celebratory creoleness that seeks to trace well-defined roots to an earlier, more authentic, cultural identity.” The mangrove connotes new, artistic potential, as opposed to the forest that has been exploited and ravaged by the French. Condé (1989a, 67) portrays the Guadeloupean forest as a “cathédrale saccagée,” a “sacked cathedral” that has been brutally deflowered by colonization.
Condé ultimately caricatures Chamoiseau’s view of writing as always secondary and inferior to orality. Solibo maintains that writing is detached from reality: “Ecrire, c’est comme sortir le lambi de la mer pour dire voici le lambi” (Chamoiseau, 1988, 53). [“Writing is like taking the mollusk from the sea in order to say, here is the mollusk.”] In this view, writing reflects the loss of immediacy and presence. Within the environment of the sea, and by extension in oral culture, the meaning of the shell is immediately evident. Writing rips words from their social and lived context, and then tries to compensate for the rupture. In Traversée de la mangrove, Condé playfully inverts Chamoiseau’s statement to produce an enigmatic Creole refrain of her own: “Chobet di paloud/ Sé an lan mè/ An ké kontrèw” “La chaubette dit à la palourde, c’est dans la mer que je te rencontreraï” (Condé, 1989a, 190). [“The whelk said to the clam, I’ll meet you in the sea.”] The rebellious young Mira sings the refrain when she routinely arrives late for school, preferring leisurely detours through the forest to the monotony and efficiency of the direct route. Her whimsical Creole song contrasts with the quiet obedience of her classmates who apply themselves to their assigned math problems. Mira’s resistance to the ordered logic and discipline of the school mirrors Condé’s own refusal to follow the dictates of the Créolistes, and to celebrate oral culture as a source of plenitude and meaning. As Anthea Morrison (1995, 620) notes, the novel “avoids dichotomizing ‘parole’ and ‘écriture’.”35 In fact, as we will now see, Condé explodes the limits between vocality and silence, in such a way that it becomes difficult to separate out these different dimensions of the text.

Silence and Opacity

The confusion between speech and silence in the text brings us to the crux of what is most problematic in existing criticism of the novel. Even the most discerning critics have misread the alternating narratives in Traversée de la mangrove as oral testimonies, and seen the wake as a liberating prise de parole (speech act) on the part of the community. Fulton (2001, 307) writes, “Story-telling itself thus becomes the link between characters.” However, this vocal dimension is unsupported—and even actively undermined—by the text itself.

While the structure of the novel seems to suggest a circle of mourners who come forward one by one to commemorate the deceased, their narrative
interventions are not spoken, but constitute instead internal monologues set against a clamor of prayer and drunken laughter. When one attends carefully to Condé’s representation of the vigil, one “hears” persistent rainfall, the howling of dogs, the chorus of prayer led by Dinah and other women around the body of Francis Sancher, the raucous sounds of men drinking on the veranda, people partaking in the traditional soupe grasse, the occasional belch, off-color jokes, and the weak improvisations of Cyrille, the storyteller—not a succession of vocal performances. In fact, the twenty narratives in the novel are not vocal performances in any sense, but instances of silent retrospection. By stringing out these reflections in succession, Condé demarcates a distinct narrative plane, a level of silent interiority that underlies the external happenings of the wake. In theatrical terms, this constitutes a level of dramatic irony, as only the reader partakes in these otherwise private reflections.

The transitions between “speakers” clearly expose the status of the interventions as unspoken and silent. When the postman Moïse concludes his reflections on the deceased, for instance, the implicit narrator tells us that he joins his voice to the choir which presumably has been singing the entire time: “Dinah Lameaulnes entonnait un nouveau psaume. [Moïse] inclina très bas la tête et mêla sa voix à celle du chœur” (Condé, 1989a, 48). [“Dinah Lameaulnes launched into a new psalm. [Moïse] tilted his head way back and joined his voice to the chorus.”] Moïse’s thoughts on Sancher, like those of the other characters, are silent, indicating his alienation from a community that is otherwise occupied. Similarly, when the hermit Xantippe arrives at the wake, we are told that the other villagers are engaged in either raucous celebration or silent introspection. His entrance causes the others momentarily to cease their activities: “Immédiatement, les bruits s’éteignirent dans un lac glacé de silence et certains envisagèrent de le pousser aux épaules. […] Bientôt donc, certains reprirent leurs blagues et leurs rires. D’autres en silence se mirent à penser à Francis Sancher, suçonant leurs souvenirs comme des dents creuses” (26). [“Immediately, the sounds ceased in a frozen lake of silence and some contemplated shoving him on the shoulders […] Then soon they went back to their jokes and laughter. Others silently began to think about Francis Sancher, sucking on their memories like hollow teeth.”] The narrator uses repeated “s” sounds in this passage to represent audibly the villagers’ chewing over their memories. As this passage makes clear, the villagers are either busy in their own thoughts or joking around, and certainly not listening to each other’s
monologues on Sancher. There is a palpable hostility between them; they are all shoulders and teeth, hardly a warm endorsement of community.

Condé’s text thus unravels the “vocality” associated with polyphony. This, of course, does not necessarily make the novel less “polyphonic”; it illustrates instead that literary polyphony does not have a privileged connection with the voice, or with sound. To return momentarily to Bakhtin, Emerson suggests that there is nothing particularly “verbal” about Bakhtin’s understanding of dialogism: “The whole dynamic between I and Other could be a dialogue in space conducted through gestures, images, and shifting perspectives. […] The three-dimensional context in which bodies interact—the entire ‘scene’ or ‘scenario’—is crucial” (Emerson, 2005, 4). This concurs with Henri Meschonnic’s (1982, 72) expansive definition of language as made up of “communication, signs, but also actions, creations, the relationships between bodies, the hidden unveiling of the unconscious.” Throughout Traversée de la mangrove, there is a physical, nonverbal dimension to communication that reflects Condé’s interest in the stage and cinema. These nonverbal forms of communication, however, often prove as opaque as speech. Fulton (2001, 309) shows how a collective sigh raises multiple possible interpretations: “Il y eut un chœur de soupirs d’approbation sans qu’on sût très bien si c’était le commentaire sur la vie ou le commentaire sur Francis Sancher qui faisait l’unanimité” (Condé, 1989a, 251). “[‘There was a chorus of sighs of approval although one couldn’t tell if it was a commentary on life or a commentary on Francis Sancher that won unanimous agreement’] Even though the sigh is produced in unison, it does not indicate unity or homogeneity. Instead, it too yields numerous conflicting interpretations.

In a particularly perceptive reading of the novel, Crosta discerns two distinct concurrent planes of narration in the text: a diegetic level encompassing the implicit narrator/author’s discourse about the wake, and a meta-diegetic level consisting of the “characters’ thoughts, impressions and recollections” about the deceased. She thus stands out as one of the few critics to have understood the private, introspective nature of the narratives themselves. Rosemary Erlam also refers to the different dimensions in the text. She notes that a vibrant “décor sonore” (background noise) often replaces the narrative thread itself, creating the impression of multiple levels of reality. But she goes on to assert that “Loin d’être une cérémonie polyphonique, c’est au moyen d’une sorte de cacophonie que nous sont communiqués les sentiments et les souvenirs de ceux qui connaissaient Sancher” (Erlam, 1997, 36). [“Far from a polyphonic ceremony, it is through a kind of cacophony that the feelings
and thoughts of those who knew Sancher are conveyed to us.”] If there is cacophony in the novel, it consists not of audible voices, but the juxtaposition of contradictory thoughts.

We can now identify the major technical innovation that *Traversée de la mangrove* achieves with respect to literary polyphony: two separate narrative planes extend throughout the duration of the novel, to which the reader has unequal access. The first of these planes constitutes the interior world of the characters’ thoughts, which the reader is invited to share; the second comprises of all the external, voiced aspects of the wake, from which the reader is held apart. The reader, while privy to the thoughts of the characters, is excluded to what goes on in the physical space of the wake: the jokes, the stories, and so on. This is the author’s very clever way of maintaining opacity, of denying the reader access into the most obvious dimension of the wake, while creating the impression of inclusiveness.

Critics have invariably noted that the novel narrates the thoughts of female characters in the first person, while those of male figures are bracketed off in quotation marks, and narrated in the third person.40 Crosta (1992, 147) suggests this oscillation demonstrates “the implicit author’s intention to differentiate and problematize the narrative voices of her characters.” When asked to comment on this, Condé was characteristically opaque: “This decision had no real conscious theoretical underpinnings, as the narratives simply came to me that way in my imagination” (Pfaff, 1996, 73).41 Each shift in narrative voice, however, effectively places the reader in a different position, from imaginary interlocutor to voyeur. As Jorge Luis Borges suggests: “Such interventions suggest that if the characters of a fictional work can be readers or spectators, we, their readers or spectators, can be fictional characters” (Genette, 1966, 238). The reader becomes an active participant in the novel, on par with the characters, much as Bakhtin imagines the polyphonic author.

Significantly, the silent status of the narratives allows the novel to break out of the model of temporal linearity. *Traversée de la mangrove* belongs to those texts where the time of narration is written into the text. The novel emphasizes the time in which it unfolds. As night passes into day, the characters become impatient, they look forward to returning home and to shedding their Sunday clothes. The text relates each narration in succession, moving around the circle to include each member of the community as though each spoke in turn. However, as the narratives are not spoken but silent internalized thoughts, they can easily play out simultaneously. It thus becomes impossible to situate the characters’ thoughts with respect to time.
All the “narrations” could conceivably unfold simultaneously, throughout the entire span of the wake, even though they are related successively in the text. This is certainly one of the most audacious innovations of the novel: Condé presents each element in succession, but in such a way as to suggest their simultaneity and synchronicity. To put it differently, the twenty narratives follow one after the other in the text because of the constraints of writing, but nothing prevents them from actually unfolding concurrently in the imagined universe of the wake because they are not spoken, but interior monologues.

Conclusions: Condé’s Polyphony

The widespread use of the term “polyphony” to describe literary texts—and in particular, works by African or francophone authors—has led to problematic assumptions, in part because the notion of phoné or voice, while seductive, is misleading. In *Traversée de la mangrove*, Maryse Condé creates what appears to be a quintessentially polyphonic form, the traditional Guadeloupean wake, and subverts it by threading together silent reflections in lieu of what many have read as vocal narrations. Critics have generally celebrated the orality of the novel. Closer examination, however, reveals instead its portrayal of the breakdown of communication within a community. The characters neither publicly voice their reflections, nor hear one another. The seemingly vibrant interchange provoked by Sancher’s death is an illusion. Like meta-diegetic music in a film, it is only accessible to the reader. At the same time, Condé ironically denies the reader access to much of what actually transpires at Sancher’s wake, providing only intermittent glimpses of the jokes, the efforts of the storyteller, and the psalms. The novel thus maintains opacity and keeps the reader at a distance, all the while conveying the illusion of intimacy.

In final analysis, although Bakhtin and Kundera are helpful in situating Condé’s deployment of polyphony in *Traversée de la mangrove*, both models come up short. In a Bakhtinian sense, Condé stages a corrosive confrontation of ideologies, whether political, literary, or aesthetic, on every level of the text. The twenty narratives represent a broad spectrum of ethnicities, genders, social classes, professions, and ages, and Condé goes even further to show how each individual voice is itself internally riven by irony, shifts in perspective, and inconsistencies. According to Kundera’s model, Condé uses innovative compositional techniques to achieve the simultaneity and equality of the
respective parts, which each contribute to a coherent—although perhaps not indivisible—“whole.” The successive internal monologues revolve around the same mysterious figure of Sancher, but each tells a story that exceeds Sancher, as each storyteller revisits his or her own life trajectory in light of the stranger’s death. Although laid out in sequence in the text, the various interventions—since they are internal and unspoken—could well unfold simultaneously. They hardly serve to advance the plot since the “events” of the novel have already taken place prior to the beginning of narration. What propels the reading, then, is the desire to piece together the mystery of Sancher’s death, a puzzle for which there is no single answer and which can only be seen through the prism of variegated perspectives.

Beyond the models proposed by Bakhtin and Kundera, Condé’s treatment of polyphony draws on the Caribbean literary tradition. This is most evident in her reworking of key tropes from Césaire, Glissant, and Chamoiseau and in her engagement in the particularly fraught debate in Caribbean letters over the writer’s responsibility to the people, and the extent to which the writer can serve as a mouthpiece for others. From Césaire, who argued that the duty of the poet is to speak for those who have no voice; to Glissant who affirmed the ethical impossibility of the poet to speak in place of those to whom a voice has been denied; to Chamoiseau who suggests that a writer can serve as a scribe, ethnologist or “word marker” and thus preserve the voices of the Caribbean community; Condé provides her own distinctive response. What a writer ultimately seeks in the commotion of diverse perspectives is her own voice: necessarily fractured, borrowed, hybrid, composite, provisional, written, and silent. If it has become increasingly common for transnational authors to deploy multiple narrators or to interweave several simultaneous storylines—Nancy Huston’s Les variations Goldberg [1981, The Goldberg Variations], a text considered in Chapter 3; Leila Sebbar’s Shérazade: 17 ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts [1982, Sherazade: Missing, aged 17, dark curly hair, green eyes]; Abdourahman Waberi’s Transit (2003); and Nicole Krauss’s The History of Love (2005) are just a few examples from among recent novels from contexts as diverse as Quebec, Algeria, Djibouti, and the United States—Traversée de la mangrove stands out in the degree to which Condé explores both the horizontal and vertical axes of polyphony. The novel offers a magnificent illusion of community and exchange across its different constituent voices, even while exposing the illusion for what it is.

There are compelling ethical stakes in recognizing the silence and social fragmentation in Condé’s novel. Whereas critics do not read Huston or
Krauss as having given voice to marginalized subjectivities, they routinely make such claims about Condé—and Waberi, Sebbar, and other authors from the Global South—which indicates a highly problematic tendency in the way polyphony has been deployed in criticism. Revisiting the question of polyphony in Condé’s *Traversée de la mangrove* pointedly reveals the tensions between voice and voicing, as well as the irreducible divide between “orality” and literature, which no degree of literary virtuosity can efface.