Borrowed Forms
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The basic humanistic mission today, whether in music, literature, or any of the arts or the humanities, has to do with the preservation of difference without, at the same time, sinking in to the desire to dominate.

—Edward Said

Processes of companionship and conviviality [...] are not pre-existent givens but are elaborated between heterogeneous living beings in such a way that they create a tissue of shifting relations, in which the melody of one part intervenes as a motif in the melody of another (the bee and the flower). [...] Relations of counterpoint must be invented everywhere, and are the very condition of evolution.

—Gilles Deleuze

In a lecture at the American University of Beirut on July 1, 1999, Edward Said argued passionately for the reimagining of Israeli and Palestinian history. To illustrate how these conflicting experiences inextricably overlap and intersect, Said drew on the metaphor of musical counterpoint. He urged both Palestinians and Israelis to engage one another contrapuntally, to recognize and embrace the connections and contradictions between their respective histories and claims to the land. Considering the overwhelmingly anti-Israeli
sentiments of his audience, it took courage and vision to advance such an
argument. Moreover, that Said should have drawn specifically on musical
counterpoint to propose an alternative strategy to the polarized hatred in
the Middle East—and that he should have done so in an environment
where appreciation and knowledge of Western classical music is increasingly
rarefied—is remarkable. It testifies to Said’s efforts to extend counterpoint as
a viable political rhetoric and analytic tool both within academia and beyond.

In the years since this memorable lecture, the possibilities for contra-
puntal exchange between Israel and Palestine have further deteriorated, and
the idea of a bi-national, one-state solution has all but vanished from the
political vocabulary. If Palestinians still occasionally endorse it, most Israelis
today dismiss the idea of a bi-national shared state as absolutely unviable.
The separation barrier crosses the landscape as a concrete reminder of
intractable conflict and the anxieties it has produced on both sides. And yet
Said’s insistence on attending to the counterpoint of multiple, intersecting
narratives in history continues to impact scholarship across the humanities
and holds particular relevance for scholars of comparative literature.

The work of Algerian author Assia Djebar stands out as an important
attempt to produce a more nuanced, contrapuntal approach to the past. Born in 1936 in what was then French Algeria and educated at the Ecole
normale supérieure, Djebar is part of a generation of writers who came of age
just prior to Algerian independence, and whose intellectual formation was
shaped by a plurality of influences: Western, Arab, and Berber. Her fiction
recognizes the instrumental role that women played in the Algerian war for
independence from France from 1954 to 1962, as well as in resisting French
occupation throughout the nineteenth century. On a broader level, Djebar’s
work seeks to renegotiate the relationship between France and Algeria, to
establish grounds for mutual recognition and reconciliation despite the
legacy of violence and inequality. In pursuing this work, Djebar anticipates
Michael Rothberg’s notion of multidirectional memory, in that she exposes
the ways in which the major historical experiences of the twentieth century
are imbricated in one another. Djebar advocates an approach to history and
memory that is neither competitive nor exclusive, but involves openness to
the other. At the same time, she is deeply invested in questions of language
and form. Djebar (1999, 150) describes her approach to writing as “une
alternance entre mon besoin d’architecture et mon aspiration à la musique”
[“an alternation between my need for architecture and my aspiration toward
music”]. Djebar’s work thus provides an ideal case study for examining the
possibilities of counterpoint as a formal device and ethical stance in the transnational novel.\(^5\)

This chapter submits Said’s notion of contrapuntal analysis to critical examination, before considering how such an approach can inform a comparative and transnational reading of Djebar’s ambitious novel, *Les nuits de Strasbourg* (1997). As we will see, the novel implements counterpoint on multiple levels to develop a more complex and ethical approach to history, to interrogate canon formation, and to address the tensions between individual and collective memory. On one level, the novel juxtaposes the tumultuous history of Algeria to that of Alsace, so as to highlight connections between the two regions, and particularly their similar experiences of foreign occupation. Thus, it illustrates how the German occupation of Alsace in the 1870s actually led many Alsatian refugees to settle in Algeria, where they became *colonos*; subsequently, successive European conflicts led to the conscription of Algerians into the French army; after World War II, waves of Algerian immigrants came to Alsace to serve as cheap, manual labor. On a second level, *Les nuits de Strasbourg* brings “minor” texts into dialogue with major canonical works through epigraphs and intertextual allusions, shifting the hierarchical relations between major and minor, as well as between center and periphery. Third, the novel uses crosscultural relationships to stage contrapuntal exchanges between different individuals. Finally, it contributes to a broader dialogue between several contemporaneous Franco-Algerian works that use the Antigone myth to assess the claims of memory and mourning: Leila Sebbar’s *La Seine était rouge* [1999, *The Seine was Red: Paris, October 1961*] and Jacques Derrida’s *De l’hospitalité* [1997, *Of Hospitality*].

**Counterpoint and Democracy**

Edward Said introduced the term “counterpoint” in *Culture and Imperialism*, some fifteen years after publishing *Orientalism* (1978), his groundbreaking critique of Western scholarship on the Middle East. Said defines counterpoint as a rigorously comparative perspective that enables us “to think through and interpret together experiences that are discrepant, each with its particular agenda and pace of development, its own internal formations, its internal coherence and system of external relationships, all of them co-existing and interacting with others” (1993, 37). He promoted counterpoint as a critical
strategy capable of addressing the entanglements (or complex “alignments”) that characterize the transnational condition:

Gone are the binary oppositions dear to the nationalist and imperialist enterprise. [...] The old authority cannot be simply replaced by the new authority, but the alignments made across borders, types, nations, and essences are rapidly coming into view, and it is those new alignments that now provoke and challenge the fundamentally static notions of identity that have been at the core of cultural thought during the era of imperialism. (1993, xviii)

In Said’s view, a contrapuntal approach does not seek an overarching resolution, teleology, or synthesis, but instead focuses on the dynamic interplay of contradictions. As such, it represents a decisive departure from the Hegelian dialectic. Rather than simply overturning the established canons and hierarchies, Said proposes counterpoint as a way “to assimilate to canons these other contrapuntal lines” (Marranca and Said, 1991, 36). Through counterpoint, he seeks to bring previously marginalized perspectives into dialogue with dominant voices and, ultimately, to replace a system of hierarchical relations with one of equal exchange.

Following Said’s lead, many postcolonial critics have appropriated the term “counterpoint,” but few attend to its historical and musical specificity. A highly trained pianist and former music critic for Nation magazine, Said deploys the term “counterpoint” with keen awareness of its musical significance. Although his use of counterpoint clearly relates to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, who half a century earlier deployed the metaphor of polyphony to describe Dostoevsky’s multivoiced poetics, Said never publicly engages with Bakhtin’s work, nor does he attempt to articulate the differences between his notion of counterpoint and Bakhtin’s theory of polyphony.

In order to understand how Said’s notion of counterpoint relates to—and departs from—polyphony (explored at length in the preceding chapter), it is essential to establish a clear theoretical distinction between the two terms. This is no simple task, because the terms are often used interchangeably. Both counterpoint and polyphony refer to the musical art of combining two or more simultaneous and independent lines, but polyphony is a more general term, while counterpoint is associated with specific historical developments in music. Polyphony is a broad stylistic and historical classification—the opposite, for instance, of monophony and homophony—while counterpoint
connotes theoretical rigor and a systematic method of compositional instruction. The theory and practice of counterpoint developed during the Renaissance and Baroque periods of the Western musical tradition, and extends through the twentieth century, notably in the music of Schoenberg. Although the term originally comes from the Latin for point against point or note against note, in musical practice the horizontal development of each voice is just as important as the vertical juxtaposition between voices. The relationship of the part to the whole is thus complex and highly regulated. Each voice must be fully realized on its own and able to stand independently. All voices are considered of equal importance; no voice dominates, except momentarily. Finally, each voice must satisfy certain rules in order to combine with the others.

Counterpoint offers a useful model for literature because of these very qualities: it is dynamic, in the sense that it describes a relation between voices in movement; regulated, according to conventionally agreed-upon sets of rules; and egalitarian, in that voices are equal and only temporarily assume a dominant position. This notion of alternation is critical to our understanding of democracy. In his essays on democracy, Jacques Derrida (2003) proposes the rotation of a wheel as a metaphor for democratic governance, since every position is held only momentarily and in turn. Likewise, in contrapuntal music, each voice only briefly assumes a dominant role, before allowing another to rise to the fore. As a theoretical tool, counterpoint provides a mode of conceiving relations between different parts within a whole. It is not overtly political, emerging instead out of music theory and practice. Moreover, counterpoint, unlike polyphony, has long had a rhetorical dimension.

In the preceding chapter, we saw how the term “polyphony” accounts for the interplay of multiple narrative voices or plotlines in a novel. Polyphony touches on narratological questions and problems of representation: who speaks within a text; which voices are privileged or withheld; how do the structures of address and audience within the text reflect patterns of social inequality; to what extent can we speak of “voices” that “sound” in a text? Counterpoint similarly brings historical and political issues to the fore, but does so chiefly by juxtaposing different histories and texts, and attending to the new relationships that emerge between narratives and subject positions.

Said is by no means the first to have taken note of the democratic possibilities in counterpoint, but the specific political and intellectual contexts to which he applies them—the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, and more broadly, postcolonial criticism—are radically new. Musicologist Karen Painter (2001,
(210), for instance, has shown that counterpoint was similarly aligned “with political ideals” in early twentieth-century Vienna; critics of Mahler’s Seventh Symphony attacked the “limitless individualization and democratization of voices,” as well as their stark juxtaposition and superimposition. And yet, a crucial question remains to be asked: in what sense can counterpoint embody such qualities beyond the realm of music, and more importantly, outside Western Europe?

Several initial problems stand out. Firstly, counterpoint, unlike polyphony, is not universal. While many musical traditions throughout the world have polyphonic qualities, counterpoint is distinctly European and of a particular moment in the history of European music. Secondly, the development of counterpoint was closely linked to the Christian faith. The finest examples of contrapuntal music, including Bach’s chorales, were sacred works written for the Church. Finally, although polyphony can easily arise spontaneously, counterpoint is an extremely written art because of the tight regulations governing it. One of the more interesting aspects of Said’s contrapuntal theory is precisely that such a difficult and thoroughly written art should be accorded such a radical, democratic, and healing potential.

On the other hand, the very idea of counterpoint, like that of polyphony, is linked to the human voice. Counterpoint grew out of medieval vocal music, in which each component line had to be “singable,” or accessible to the human voice. Each line had to fall within a certain range and avoid excessively large leaps across intervals. Behind each contrapuntal line lies the trace or memory of the human voice. The associations that Said emphasizes between democracy, humanism, and counterpoint make sense when one considers counterpoint’s roots in the vocal tradition. In fact, composer Pierre Boulez even uses the term “responsibility” to characterize counterpoint, because the constituent voices have a responsibility to attend to one another and respect the needs of the collective (de Groot, 2005, 221).

It is crucial to note that Said affirms the democratic aesthetic of counterpoint in opposition not to polyphony, but to the hierarchical structures that came to characterize Enlightenment classical music. When the sonata form took hold in the eighteenth century, a clear hierarchy between musical parts emerged, musical phrases shortened, and the tonic became the dominating source of order. In Orientalism, Said writes persuasively about how the European Enlightenment constructed a system of knowledge that used, reduced, and asserted control over the non-European other. When he refers to the sonata form in Musical Elaborations, he associates it with domination, tyrannical
authority, and oppression. “The model for the sonata form is [...] pedagogic and dramatic. [...] It is the demonstration of authoritative control in which a thematic statement and its subsequent development are worked through rigorously by the composer in the space between two strongly marked poles” (Said, 1991, 100). He finds in counterpoint, by contrast, an alternative, more utopian model, one that often allows for exploration, reciprocity, and tolerance.

According to Said, counterpoint is one of the primary features that distinguish Western from Arab music. In a much-cited anecdote, he recalls the first time he saw the Egyptian singer Umm Kalthoum in concert, and admits he found it difficult to relate to her music precisely because it lacked the “counterpoint” of Western music. Having internalized the Western “ethic of productivity and of overcoming obstacles,” he found Kalthoum’s music to be mind-dulling. It seemed to lull the listener into listless melancholy with its monophony, its constant “byways, details, and digressions,” and its lack of developmental tension. As an adult, he eventually came to appreciate the “exfoliating variations” of her music, and as a result, began to listen differently to Western music as well, developing a new interest in the late works of Beethoven, Richard Strauss, and Olivier Messiaen that evolve likewise through variation (de Groot, 2005, 220).¹²

Counterpoint, the sonata form, and non-Western music are thus imbricated in Said’s thought in complex ways. Said values the pluralistic, dialogic nature of Western counterpoint, in explicit contrast to the hierarchical, linear structure of sonata form. It is this appreciation of counterpoint that causes him to hear—and initially to dismiss—Arabic music as monophonic. When he later comes to admire the open-ended and circular art of variation and ornamentation in Kalthoum’s songs as an alternative to the driven nature of sonata form, he then seeks out these very elements in the classical repertoire, locating them in pieces slightly outside the canon. Both variation and counterpoint become important tropes in Said’s critical writings not only on music, but also on history and literature, where he continues his interrogation of established canons. Thus, while musicologists have argued that Said’s work on music ignores important recent developments in ethnomusicology—a case put forth most forcefully by Kofi Agawu (1992) in a review of Music Elaborations entitled “Wrong Notes”—his thoughts on music nonetheless inform much of his intellectual project.¹³ As one critic has noted, Said conceived of counterpoint along three key axes: “as a musical practice, as his
personal guide to relate divergent musical and cultural backgrounds, and as a metaphor for humanistic emancipation” (de Groot, 2005, 221).

Said deploys counterpoint in view of showing how writing and culture both participated in colonial politics. He thus reads the works of canonical writers such as Joseph Conrad, Albert Camus, Jane Austen, and others to expose the presence of imperial and counter-imperial discourses. In these readings, he undermines “static notions” of history and power by bringing multiple perspectives—within and among texts—into contrapuntal relation. Ultimately, Said shows all cultural forms to be “hybrid, mixed, impure” (1993, 13), and holds the critic responsible for drawing out the relations among these different strands. This approach continues to resonate with critics across different contexts. For instance, Jonathan Arac (1998, 57) adopts Said’s contrapuntal methodology to address Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, in order to evaluate the novel’s contradictory attitudes to race and emancipation, and navigate the controversies the work continues to generate in public school systems. Arac observes that while “the counter in counterpoint is a term of opposition, [...] contrapuntal criticism is loving; it joins.” Counterpoint has clear affinities with recent critical methodologies inspired by Édouard Glissant’s poetics of relation, including Michael Rothberg’s (2009) multidirectional memory, and Françoise Lionnet’s and Shu-mei Shih’s (2005) notion of minor transnationalism and relational comparativism.

Examining Djebar’s work in this context is especially productive because, of all Algerian writers today, she is the most acutely aware of her entanglement in both the European and Algerian traditions. Her literary project reflects a constant effort to redefine the relations between fiction and autobiography; between history and oral testimony; and between the music, art, and philosophy of the West and of North Africa. Because her writing places emphasis on theoretical and formal questions, she is not always the most accessible of authors. She has often been critiqued as elitist and alienated from the Algerian public. She occupies what some see as a privileged position because she lives in voluntary exile in New York and Paris, has won favor in the French academy, and successfully marketed herself for American, German, and Italian readers. Several Algerian publishers and writers have voiced frustration at Djebar’s popularity abroad, regretting the relative paucity of interest in the work of those authors who remained in Algeria and whom they view as better positioned to understand and represent Algerians. Djebar undeniably cuts a controversial figure. But it is precisely her complex status and her commitment to structuring these multiple poles that make Djebar’s
fiction so compelling, and that bring it meaningfully into relation with Said’s theoretical work. Said, too, was very conscious of his position as an exile, and of the privilege and responsibility that came with his academic role. He also could be seen as elitist.

Yet, unlike Said who had a rigorously classical formation, Djebar’s musical experience cuts across several cultural traditions. She was exposed to Berber, Andalucian, Arab, and European classical music from an early age. As she reveals in a recent autofictional novel, *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père* [2007, *No Place in My Father’s House*], she studied piano throughout her youth despite her evident lack of talent. Her mother liked to sing traditional Andalucian melodies and hoped her daughter would learn to accompany her on the piano. Unfortunately, Djebar never acquired the skill to improvise in the Andalucian style, in part because her teacher insisted on adhering rigidly to a classical Western curriculum. Later, at boarding school, Djebar participated in at least one comic operetta, an experience she relished because the rehearsals gave her the opportunity to interact with students from a nearby boys’ school.

The autobiographical link to music that receives the most weighty treatment in Djebar’s work, notably in *Vaste est la prison* [1995, *So Vast the Prison*], involves the loss of her mother’s prized collection of musical manuscripts of Berber songs during the Algerian War for Independence. In searching the family home, French soldiers mistook the manuscripts for political tracts and destroyed them, squandering the ancestral inheritance of a long line of Berber women who had treasured this music and passed it on to their daughters. Djebar recounts the loss of this traditional music in conjunction with the disappearance of an ancient Berber alphabet of which women were the custodians. She thus emphasizes the connections between traditional music, orality, and writing, and establishes them as the privileged domain of Algerian women.

Djebar’s interest in multiple musical traditions comes across in the diverse variety of musical references that surface throughout her fiction. She deploys the musical indication, “Quasi una fantasia,” from Ludwig van Beethoven’s Sonata for Piano as a title for the third section of her autobiographical novel, *L’amour, la fantasia* [Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade], gesturing at the improvised, free character of the writing that follows. In a radical move, she then juxtaposes Beethoven’s notion of fantasia to the traditional fantasias performed by North African cavalry prior to engaging in battle. The author dedicates two of her works, the film *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*
[c.1977, *Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua*] and the novel *La disparition de la langue française* [2003, *The Disappearance of the French Language*], to Hungarian composer Bela Bartók, in recognition of his journey to the Biskra region of Algeria in 1913 in order to collect and document traditional music. She also frequently includes ethnomusicologists as characters in her fiction, such as Sarah in *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement* [1980, *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*] and Isma in *Vaste est la prison*. More recently, Djebar collaborated in adapting *Loin de Médine* [1991, *Far from Medina*] for the operatic stage, participating in a new genre of postcolonial opera. The work recounts the stories of notable women poets and warriors in the formative years of Islam, celebrating instances of female leadership in response to a patriarchal tradition that has sought to efface women’s political agency.

Djebar’s effort to accommodate multiple perspectives and voices through increasingly elaborate narrative forms has led critics explicitly to call her writing contrapuntal (Lionnet, 2011) and polyphonic (Rice, 2006). Interestingly, Djebar herself has commented on the unfortunate lack of polyphony in North African music, which she sees as all the more regrettable in light of research that suggests that the extent of polyphony in a culture’s music indicates the democratic potential of that society. By structuring various forms of contrapuntal exchange into her fiction, Djebar takes steps to remedy this absence. While creating counterpoint in fiction does not amount to establishing it in the public sphere, novels provide a way of imagining and modeling the kinds of discourse that can take place, and thus play a vital role in making political change happen. As Rothberg (2009) argues in his study of multidirectional memory, novels (and films, for that matter) serve a critical function in building relations across different communities by envisioning new possibilities for recognition and ultimately, empathy.

In the midst of the violent civil conflict between Islamic factions and the Algerian government in the 1990s, Djebar found herself in exile in the United States and Paris, and concurrently produced three very unusual texts that relate in different ways to the political crisis. The first, *Le blanc de l’Algérie* [*Algerian White*], is a raw, personal testimony that protests the assassinations of Algerian intellectuals by Islamists. The text holds the FLN governing party accountable for stunting the development of democracy, distorting Algerian history, and exacerbating deep, unresolved divisions between Algerians. Djebar sees in the Algerian civil war of the 1990s the return of repressed traumas from the Algerian War for Independence, citing the practice of targeted assassinations and terror that the FLN used after the war to consolidate their own legitimacy
and eliminate opposition. The second work she completed during this time, *Oran, langue morte* [The Tongue's Blood Does Not Run Dry], is a collection of short stories that convey the devastating impact of Islamism and civil war on Algerian women. The third, *Les nuits de Strasbourg*, is the focal text of this chapter. It deploys a contrapuntal approach to history, offering a nuanced and complex analysis of the relationship between Algeria and France. The novel interweaves narratives of World War II, the Algerian War for Independence, and the unification of Europe in the late 1980s, to problematize binary distinctions between victim and oppressor, colonized and colonizer, East and West. It thus explores the connections between memories of colonialism and of the Holocaust in contemporary Europe.

*Les nuits de Strasbourg* marks a significant departure from Djebar’s previous work on several levels. It is the first of her novels to be set entirely in Europe and one of her most erotic pieces of writing. The novel uses the principle of contrapuntal dialogue to stage vibrant, difficult exchanges between individuals whose backgrounds and historical experiences are fraught with conflict. These dialogues forge new possibilities for understanding, and combat the culture of “competitive victimhood” (Rothberg, 2009).

Like many of Djébar’s novels, *Les nuits de Strasbourg* follows a tripartite logic, consisting of a prologue, body, and epilogue. But unlike the affirmative, symmetrical structure that characterizes sonata form—A, B, A’, where A stands for the exposition of the theme, B its development, and A’ its subsequent recapitulation—the novel concludes not in affirmation, but rather in disintegration, as indicated most graphically by the epilogue’s title, “Neige, ou le poudroiement” [“Snow, or Powdering”]. This movement is mirrored on a temporal level: the prologue covers a span of nine months in 1939; the main section encompasses nine days in March of 1989; the epilogue unfolds some time in September later that same year. The sections thus progressively diminish in scope from nine months, to nine days, to an indefinite moment in time. Each part of the novel further subdivides into numbered subsections, underscoring Djebar’s preoccupation with form. This structural complexity is a signature of her work, and recalls the clocklike architecture of the text many consider to be the founding work of modern Algerian fiction, Kateb’s *Nedjma* (1956).

The prologue of *Les nuits de Strasbourg*, “La Ville” [“The City”], documents the massive evacuation of civilians from Strasbourg in September 1939 in anticipation of the German invasion that followed much later, on June 15, 1940. The central part of the novel, “Neuf nuits… cinquante ans après” [“Nine Nights... Fifty Years Later”], imagines the romance between Thelja, a
young Algerian art historian, and her French lover, François. Thelja comes to Strasbourg for nine days to consult medieval manuscripts in local archives. During her stay, she renews contact with Eve, a Jewish-Algerian friend who recently moved to Strasbourg. She also explores the history of the region, and uncovers surprising parallels between the Alsatian settlement of Algeria, on one hand, and Algerian immigration to the region of Alsace, on the other. Each night, she and François have long, intimate conversations that inevitably turn around the turbulent history of Alsace and Algeria, and lead them to discover unexpected connections between their experiences.

Djebar places the Franco-Algerian love affair between François and Thelja in counterpoint to several other crosscultural relationships, notably that of Hans (a German) and Eve (a Jewish-Algerian photographer). On Thelja’s penultimate day in Strasbourg, Jacqueline, the artistic director of a local theater company is raped and murdered by Ali, her former lover and the son of Algerian immigrants. This crime of passion is painfully reminiscent of the bloody political assassinations and honor killings in Algeria, and interrupts the protagonists’ obsessive preoccupation with the past, compelling them to rally together as a community. The brutal murder provides the first suggestion of a remainder of violence that can neither be integrated nor recuperated in the novel’s elegant contrapuntal scheme.

The second intimation of the limits of counterpoint comes in the novel’s epilogue with Thelja’s suicide. Her suicide is indicative of the immense pressures facing Algerian women intellectuals in the late 1980s and 1990s: Thelja is alone in France to conduct academic research; she is estranged from her husband and separated from her child according to the provisions of the Muslim family code that grants fathers custody at the expense of mothers. Her inability to come to terms with her own past as well as with the collective past indicates what Michael O’Riley (2004, 117) describes as a “postcolonial haunting,” wherein the disruptive trace of the colonial past surfaces in the postcolonial rewriting of history as an absence or as a testimonial silhouette. Indeed, Thelja obsessively imagines the shadowy figures of nineteenth-century poets walking the streets of Strasbourg. At the same time, her encounters with the city’s residents reveal the emotional scars of annexation and World War II. While Thelja actively seeks out knowledge about these different pasts, the stories she encounters overwhelm her. For instance, she chooses to visit the archives on Algerian immigration to Strasbourg, where she finds historical documentation of the hardships Algerian immigrant workers endured: “Me replonger, et à Strasbourg, dans mes lieux d’enfance
grâce aux traces d’exils multiples et presque effacés: migrations multiples qui étaient certes celles de la faim, de la sueur, et, à cette époque, de la peur...” (Djebar, 1997a, 401). [“To return, in Strasbourg of all places, to the sites of my childhood, thanks to the barely visible traces of multiple exiles: migrations that were surely those of hunger, sweat, and at the time, fear.”] This neglected historical record moves her to empathy, and reminds her of her own history of loss. Thelja engages with multiple, conflicting strands of history throughout her time in Strasbourg, and becomes consumed by the *devoir de mémoire*, the obligation to remember.

Strasbourg is thus the repository of multiple transnational and transhistorical traumas that are voiced and shared by the protagonists. By dealing with these overlapping experiences, the novel addresses an issue of great importance to contemporary multicultural societies, namely “the relationship between different social groups’ histories of victimization, the relationship that groups establish between their past and their present circumstances” (Walter Benn Michaels, qtd in Rothberg, 2009, 2). What happens when different histories confront each other in the public sphere? Does the remembrance of one history necessarily erase others from view? Thelja’s suicide suggests that dwelling too much on these multiple histories of trauma can be destructive. Her inability to let go of the past anticipates Derrida’s (1997) figuration of Antigone as an exemplary instance of interminable mourning, as we will examine more closely at the end of this chapter.

**De-territorializing the Novel**

In a lecture at the House of World Cultures in Berlin in November 1998, Djebar (1999, 239) presented *Les nuits de Strasbourg* as a radically new project. Whereas her previous literary production had focused entirely on Algeria, she set her new novel in Strasbourg, bringing her imagination and passion for history to bear on the European context. Although this geographical shift was undoubtedly also motivated by Djebar’s material circumstances—the author had just won a prestigious writer’s grant from the municipality of Strasbourg that funded her residency in the city for three months—it produced an additional layer of complexity in her writing. Algeria remains an ever-present concern, but now becomes an inner layer within a dynamic palimpsest of multiple terms. Algerian memory and experience intersect with the European context. Moreover, by setting the novel in Strasbourg
instead of in Paris, Djebar destabilizes the traditional notion of the metropolis, casting it slightly off-center. The novel is not simply about French–Algerian relations, but about internal divisions within Europe as well.

By choosing Strasbourg as her subject, Djebar claims the authority to write an “Occidentalist” novel. The author’s act of subversion is even more complex, however, than she admits. Rather than a simple inversion of the Orientalist novel, the work confounds binary positions. In true contrapuntal style, Djebar completely intermeshes the Orient and the Occident to stage “transnational” histories, exposing “the processes of collusion and contention, of appropriation and transformation, that link Algeria and France—Algerians and Franco-Algerians” (Silverstein, 2004, 6).

The novel illustrates how both Alsatians and Algerians experienced successive waves of occupation, forced military service for a foreign power, and linguistic oppression. Thelja’s father was tortured and killed by the French in the Algerian War; she is thus surprised to learn that her lover François, who came of age just as French soldiers were deployed in Algeria to crush the Independence movement, similarly lost his father in a Russian prison camp. Thelja’s visits to the archives in Strasbourg reveal the direct impact that the German annexation of Alsace and Lorraine in 1871 at the end of the Franco-Prussian war had on the colonial settlement of Algeria: many of the region’s francophone refugees settled in Algeria where they became members of the pied noir community. Algerian labor was integral to mining Alsace’s rich mineral resources in the early twentieth century. The novel highlights the connections between these histories of immigration, foreign domination and exile, in order to create a contrapuntal dialogue between Algeria and Alsace.

This contrapuntal treatment of Algerian and Alsatian history represents an implicit challenge to the way Algerian national history has been produced and disseminated. Djebar has been outspoken in her criticism of the monolithic nationalist agenda of the Algerian state. In Le blanc de l’Algérie [1995, Algerian White], for instance, she denounces the Algerian government’s refusal to recognize the plurality of Algerian society, its forced insistence on the Arabicization of intellectual and public life, its marginalization of both the French and Berber languages, and continued repression of women. In resistance to such narratives, the text represents the vibrant plurality of Algerian society and particularly foregrounds the Berber heritage. As early as 1993, Djebar delivered an essay version of Le blanc de l’Algérie in front of the Strasbourg Parliament of Writers, indicting fellow authors “for keeping
silent with regard to the civil carnage in Algeria, its declared open season on intellectuals,” a stance that confirmed “her entry into permanent exile” (Zimra, 2004, 152).

In *Les nuits de Strasbourg*, Djebbar strategically deploys the device of the chiasmus to reveal unexpected connections between Alsace and Algeria, and to undermine binary narratives of the past. A chiasmic relationship links Alsace to Algeria throughout the novel, to the point that they eventually merge to form a fused entity, “Alsagérie.”28 The two regions exchange their defining attributes: on one hand, abandoned Strasbourg is repeatedly described as a desert; on the other, the name of the Algerian protagonist, Thelja, comes from the Arabic word for snow, *thalj*. Thelja received her name from her mother as a bitter reminder of the circumstances surrounding her conception. Her mother fell pregnant while visiting her husband in the maquis during the Algerian War for Independence. Her feet froze on the return journey and her husband died shortly afterwards. By naming her daughter Thelja, or snow, she memorialized her own suffering and loss, imparting it as a legacy to the next generation. This history of loss accompanies Thelja through life, but it also facilitates her ability to empathize with others. In one of the early exchanges between Thelja and François, she translates her name into French. As she does so, she is able to voice the story of her father, a narrative that resonates with François who also lost his father in a Russian prison camp in World War II. Although born on opposite sides of the Franco-Algerian conflict and belonging to different generations, both are victims of violence and loss. Moreover, throughout the course of the novel, abandoned Strasbourg comes to resemble the deserts of Algeria, while Thelja, the Algerian protagonist, despite her dark features and ardent nature, evokes the snow of the Alsatian winter.29 This kind of chiasmic writing brings different positions closer together, provoking mutual recognition. It calls to mind the musical technique of contrary motion, whereby different voices in a composition approach one another from opposite directions and exchange positions.

**Authorial Signatures: From Intransigence to Reconciliation**

Djebbar’s writing took an increasingly autobiographical turn in 1985 with the publication of *L’amour, la fantasia*, the first installment of a series she called the Algerian Quartet. The quartet features four novels that interweave autobiographical narratives contrapunctally between significant episodes of
Algerian history; its subsequent installments consist of *Ombre sultane*, *Vaste est la prison*, and *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*. By contrast, the author presents *Les nuits de Strasbourg* as a very different project. It represents her attempt to withdraw into a purely fictional world, distant from the daily reports of massacres of civilians in Algerian villages. Nonetheless, the novel’s retreat into “pure fiction” does not go very far. The novel takes on the traumatic legacies of war and occupation. Just as many of Djebar’s works draw on oral histories she collected in Algeria in the 1970s, *Les nuits de Strasbourg* is informed by the author’s encounters and conversations in Strasbourg as writer in residence (Djebar, 1999, 240). In addition, the central protagonist is an Algerian woman who, like Djebar herself, conducts historical research, is well versed in the writers and poets of both the European and the Oriental traditions, and whose marriage has fallen apart.

Against Frantz Fanon’s claim that Algerian women should remain veiled in order to deny the European desiring gaze, the novel explicitly “unveils” the Algerian female body and represents female desire, including that of a pregnant woman. The love scenes are extremely interesting on the level of language, as the protagonists experiment with different modes of translation to convey their experiences to one another across linguistic, religious, and cultural differences. In these scenes, the movements of the body become yet another register of communication that transcends linguistic divisions. The narrator describes the dance-like movements of the body as “*arabesques,*” borrowing from the vocabulary of ballet, but also bringing to the surface Thelja’s dialectal Arabic from beneath the veneer of written French (Djebar, 1997a, 226).

Djebar embeds her signature into the text in two key places. The history of her pseudonym has been amply documented: born Fatima Zohra-Imalhayene, she hurriedly chose the pen-name of Assia Djebar in 1956 when her first novel was about to be published, in an attempt to conceal her identity and avoid calling attention to herself and bringing shame to her father. “Djebar” (usually transcribed *djebbar,* but the author was under such pressure to choose a name that she misspelled it with only one “b” and thus it remains) comes from the traditional praise-names for Allah in classical Arabic, and signifies uncompromising and unyielding. “Assia,” on the other hand, is a healer, one who accompanies and consoles. In *Les nuits de Strasbourg,* Djebar links the intransigence associated with her name to Antigone. A youth theater group made up of young, second-generation Algerian immigrants from the Strasbourg *banlieue* is preparing a new production of Sophocles’s
Antigone. Their director refers to Antigone as *l’intransigeante*, and asserts that her primary role is to bear witness: “la mort d’Antigone, dans sa tombe, est là pour éclairer la vérité de toutes ces morts en marche” (Djebar, 1997a, 210). [“Antigone’s death, in her tomb, is there to illuminate the truth of all these walking dead.”] Antigone as an intransigent witness recalls the component of intransigence in Djebar’s authorial name and the importance of testimony and resistance in her work. As a novelist, filmmaker, and historian, she has sought to write Algerian women into history by collecting oral testimonies in rural villages during the 1970s and then inscribing their voices into film and fiction.

This same passage also allows the author to comment on the responsibility of the historian. The nineteenth-century French historian Jules Michelet identified the figure of the historian with Oedipus. Michelet was the “first self-consciously to write on behalf of the dead,” insisting “with poignant authority, that he could say what they ‘really’ meant and ‘really’ wanted, since they themselves did not understand” (Anderson, 1983, 198). Djebar challenges this patriarchal model by asserting an affiliation to Antigone, a figure who has come to occupy increasing importance in contemporary feminist political thought and in Franco-Algerian writing. Whereas Michelet regarded it as the historian’s duty to speak for the dead, Djebar is acutely aware of the danger of speaking “for” and in the place of others. At the very opening of *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement*, for instance, Djebar (1980, 9) writes: “Ne pas prétendre ‘parler pour,’ ou pis, ‘parler sur,’ à peine parler près de, et si possible tout contre: première des solidarités à assumer pour les quelques femmes arabes qui obtiennent ou acquièrent la liberté de mouvement, du corps et de l’esprit.” [“Don’t claim to ‘speak for,’ or worse, ‘to speak about,’ barely speak near to, and if possible right up against: the first act of solidarity to be taken on by those Arab women who obtain or acquire the freedom of movement, of body and mind.”]

The idea of intransigence returns later in the novel, again in connection to Djebar’s name and political convictions. Thelja recounts the tragic love story of a Franco-Algerian couple who fell in love during the Algerian War for Independence. The heroine of her story is a twenty-year old Algerian woman who executed multiple terrorist operations throughout the war by passing alternatively as a European or as a native: disguised as a European, she planted bombs; in her traditional veil, she transported weapons. The French authorities ultimately captured and imprisoned her. During the course of her interrogation, she seduced the chief officer and the two began a passionate
affair. The romance shook the French officer’s convictions and allegiances, leading him to take on suicidal missions, during the course of which he was soon killed. In retelling the story to her own French lover, Thelja admits she has never quite forgiven this resistance heroine for falling for a French man: “si longtemps après, je fus troublée, moi, l’intransigeante, par ce détail: elle aimait son bourreau, ‘elle se laissa séduire un moment par lui!’” (Djebar, 1997a, 221–22). [“for such a long time afterwards, I was troubled—me, always so stubborn—by this detail: ‘she loved her torturer, she let herself be seduced by him for a moment!’”] Such compromising behavior on the part of a venerated national heroine reinforced her own patriotic interdiction against any romantic involvement with the French, something she visibly tries to overcome throughout the novel. Djebar aligns herself with Thelja through the phrase “moi, l’intransigeante” [“me, the intransigent one”], underscoring her autobiographical affinity to her protagonist. The anecdote, however, is especially significant to Djebar’s contrapuntal project as it introduces a nuanced, humanized image of both the resistance heroine and the French officer, blurring the binary of blame and responsibility. Djebar suggests that desire is a sort of Achilles’ heel, one place where empathy and understanding can emerge even between two bitterly opposed subjects. In this signatory passage, Djebar critiques strict intransigence to advocate a more nuanced, tolerant approach. The passage highlights the productive tensions inherent in the author’s pen name, reconciling the intransigent militancy of Djebar and the restorative and creative potential implied in Assia.

Revisiting History and Remapping the Canon

Epigraphs constitute another key contrapuntal strategy in Les nuits de Strasbourg, as they bring multiple authors and narratives into dialogue, ultimately shifting the boundaries of the canon and highlighting new relations between texts. According to Gérard Genette’s seminal study, epigraphs occupy a special status within a text: they are simultaneously outside and of the text; on the border of the text, but in the closest possible proximity to the text itself. Genette assigns four functions to the epigraph: to provide a commentary on the title, a commentary on the text itself, a legitimization of the text through reference to a canonical author, and a way for an author to situate a text in a specific literary tradition. Anne Donadey (2001, 65–68) argues that Djebar’s use of epigraphs introduces an additional dimension,
because the author manipulates her epigraphs to subvert the tradition they represent, thus performing a “reverse commentary” on the canonical texts themselves. Epigraphs in postcolonial writing thus take on a fifth function in that they critique and challenge hegemonic texts. Djebar’s epigraphs often seem to work in yet another way: they expand the very boundaries of what is considered canonical. In this sense, Djebar uses epigraphs contrapuntally to bring the work of writers from the periphery into relation with more dominant, metropolitan authors, as well as to reveal the connections among minor writers working in different contexts. The epigraphs in *Les nuits de Strasbourg* exclusively privilege works by women authors: Iranian poet Forough Farrokhzad (1935–67), medieval French scholar Héloïse (twelfth century), and Spanish philosopher Maria Zambrano (1904–91). They work to situate the novel within a rich history of women’s writing across diverse historical and national contexts.

The prologue depicts the displacement and loss experienced by the people of Strasbourg during World War II when, fearing imminent invasion, the municipal government evacuated all of its 150,000 civilians in September 1939. As it turns out, German forces only took Strasbourg in June of the following year, at which point the city had already been empty for months. Djebar (1999, 235–36) found that histories of the period neglected this strange episode and thus determined to address it herself: “[L]e vide de 1939, je le remplis avec des histoires d’amour en 1989, cinquante ans après” [“I fill the emptiness of 1939 with love stories from 1989, fifty years later”].38 Ironically, although the prologue begins with the anticipation of invasion and the evacuation of civilians, it then skips over the eight intervening months to conclude with the belated German invasion on June 15, 1940. The text thus passes over the very period Djebar claimed she wanted to document. The art of this omission is striking: the text circumscribes its object, speaking around it, designating the vacant space. The love stories intended to fill the void are displaced fifty years into the future, to 1989. Instead of putting one history in the place of another, the author prolongs the memory of loss.

The prologue’s account of the German invasion of Strasbourg echoes a much-cited scene from the author’s earlier historical novel, *L’amour, la fantasia*, which depicts the French invasion of Algiers in 1830 as a violent sexual conquest. But whereas the narrator of *L’amour, la fantasia* presents the initial moment of encounter as a spectacle of operatic proportions—with Algerian women all over the city ascending to rooftop patios to see the spectacle of French ships assembled in the bay, and a plethora of European
artists and scribes looking out from aboard the ships, eager to record their first impressions of the North African city—Strasbourg is deserted. No one remains to witness the impending invasion. The pilots of the German warplanes overhead are alone in contemplating the “desert” below: here again, Strasbourg and Algeria exchange qualities as the Alsatian city takes on the qualities of the North African desert. The only eyes to return the invaders’ gaze are those of statues, soon to be “déboulonnées, concassées, transportées à la remise, déportées” [“unbolted, crushed, transported to the depot, deported”] (Djebar, 1997a, 17). As statues have empty cavities in the place of eyes, the image further underscores the haunting absence of witnesses. The text never directly mentions the deportation of Jews, but alludes to it through powerful metonymic images: the deportation of statues and the ghostly music of a radio left behind by a Jewish family who forgot to turn it off in their haste.

As Djebar wrote Les nuits de Strasbourg in the mid-1990s, the novel’s spectacular, technical description of the German air force’s assaults on Strasbourg inevitably calls to mind the highly mediatized images of coalition air power. In fact, the novel emphasizes the trauma and loss the inhabitants of Strasbourg experience as if to challenge the sterile language used by the media when reporting on Operation Iraqi Shield. Terms such as “surgical strikes” or “laser-guided missiles” negate their impact on the civilian population. Djebar’s narrator explicitly laments the devastation wrought by airstrikes on the cultural heritage of Strasbourg at multiple points in the city’s history. She recalls that more than 2,500 rare manuscripts were destroyed in the Prussian firebombing of 1870, an incident which aroused the indignation of Victor Hugo and other intellectuals throughout Europe (Djebar, 1997a, 102). In a sense, the text is also prescient of the second Iraq War in the fall of 2004, during which the author was to vocally condemn the “coalition’s” disregard for the historical and artistic heritage of Iraq, much of which was reportedly destroyed or looted in the aftermath of the air strikes.39


Crosscultural love relationships function throughout the novel as “performative encounters,” which Mireille Rosello (2005, 1) defines as “a type of encounter that coincides with the creation of new subject positions, rather than treating preexisting (preimagined) identities as the reason for, and justification of,
the protocol of the encounter—whether it is one of violence or trust, respect or hostility.” As Rosello argues, “the violence of some historical contexts makes any initial encounter with another subject almost impossible. No first encounter can take place when the history, language, religion, and culture exert such pressures upon the protagonists of the encounter that their desire to speak or be silent is trapped by preexisting, prewritten dialogues and scenarios.”

Although Rosello does not specifically employ the term counterpoint, these performative encounters are exemplary instances of contrapuntal exchange, in that the opposition of different voices produces some new unanticipated harmony. The central narrative in *Les nuits de Strasbourg* stages multiple crosscultural relationships, most importantly that between Thelja and François. Through Thelja’s first-person narration, we see how her liaison with a Frenchman allows her to engage and work through her continued resentment over France’s role in Algeria. In *Les nuits de Strasbourg*, Djebar proposes a model of encounter that depends on the presence of bodies in dialogue, so that inevitable lapses in understanding can be mitigated by the body, through physical love, touch, laughter, and the music of a voice.

The title of the main section of the novel, “Neuf nuits” [“Nine Nights”], initiates a contrapuntal dialogue between two very different literary traditions. On one hand, it evokes the canonical Persian text, the *Mille et une nuits*, in which a sultan’s bride, Scheherazade, tells story upon story in order to forestall her execution. On the other, it recalls a line from an erotic poem by René Char, “L’amante” [1992, “The Lover”], in which the speaker imagines the “nights of wild novelty” he spent in the arms of his lover. Eve later recites the full text of Char’s poem to Hans, and explicitly mentions Char’s active role in the French Resistance during World War II (Djebar, 1997a, 167–68). Through these references to Char, Djebar reminds us that she similarly took up the pen in the spirit of resistance, although Algerian audiences at first did not recognize this. They initially dismissed her as insufficiently political, and judged her early novels, *La soif* [1957, *The Mischief*] and *Les impatients* [1958, *The Impatient Ones*], as frivolous and unengaged at a time when the Algerian struggle for independence was rapidly gaining momentum. On the contrary, Djebar asserts that the writing of her first novel was unequivocally an act of political resistance (Adler and Djebar, 2006). While still a student at the Ecole normale supérieure, she participated in the Algerian students’ strike in Paris and refused to take her exams in 1957. Freed from the task of preparing for her exams, she produced the entire manuscript of *La soif* in two months of frenzied writing.
Medieval allusions are also extremely prevalent in *Les nuits de Strasbourg*, and here again, canonical works like *The Letters of Abélard and Héloïse*, *Tristan and Isolde*, and the *Serment de Strasbourg* come into dialogue with lesser known manuscripts, such as *Le Jardin des délices* [*The Garden of Delights*] by the Abbess Herrade de Landsberg, which forms the subject of Thelja’s current research. These medieval works occupy a special position in the history of the French language; they constitute the inaugural texts through which writers established the authority of the French vernacular as a vehicle for writing independent of Latin, and began to construct a secular literary tradition in French. Djebar in turn experiments with ways to “extra-territorialize” her writing, bringing dialectical Arabic, Berber, Alsatian, and physicality into the text to newly challenge and reinvigorate the French language.

In a similar vein, the novel deploys images that resonate across both the Eastern and Western literary traditions, although they evoke different associations in each context. For instance, the narrator deploys classical expressions such as the trope of night’s hair (Djebar, 1997a, 49) or dawn’s golden fingers (119), which then merge with Arabic images. The *doigts de l’Aurore* [*fingers of Dawn*] evoke the name of the most prized dates from Algeria, the *deglet en nour*, literally “fingers of light” (88). Thelja describes the cultivation of these dates as a courtship ritual, a voluptuous task given to the most agile men of the oasis, who shimmy up and down the palms to take the male seeds and fertilize the female trees (87). The narrator describes childhood memory as a “lait de palme” [*palm milk*] that surges up spontaneously, ready to overflow (86). These images recall the evocative palm trees in twentieth-century European poetry: Valéry’s majestic “Palme,” James Merrill’s “Lost in Translation,” and the palm at the end of the mind in Wallace Stevens’s “Of Mere Being.” Later in the text, Djebar uses the image of the palm again to describe the laugh lines around François’s eyes, fanning out like palm trees (228). Djebar performs such subtle modulations throughout the novel, describing the process of linguistic and metaphorical exchange as a “tangage,” or oscillation (282).41

The author strategically uses only first names throughout the novel in order to undermine static notions of identity and history. The absence of surnames frees the protagonists of the historical weight of the father, and enables them to forge new relationships across ethnic and national boundaries.42 The symbolic significance of names is evident in Thelja’s initial unwillingness to pronounce François’s name because it contains the syllable “France,” which reminds her of France’s colonial domination over Algeria and the bitter struggle for independence in which she lost her father. Her
eventual act of naming François signifies reconciliation and recognition of his history: “François, et je vous appelle, je vous hèle, et répétant votre prénom, j’accepte en vous toute votre histoire, ce que j’en sais” (344). [“François, in naming you, I call out to you, and repeating your first name, I accept in you all your history, what I know of it.”] In their successive encounters, Thelja and François work towards mutual recognition and understanding. On their final night together, they playfully combine Alsace and Algérie to form new entities with hybrid French and Arabic sonorities, “Alsagérie” and “El zadjerie” (372). They thus reconfigure histories of violence and conflict to create a fragile space of plurality.

And yet, despite moments of rapprochement, historical and cultural conflicts are never completely resolved in the novel, despite the protagonists’ best efforts to engage one another. One of the most problematic scenes of the novel arises when Eve and Hans argue over the upbringing of their (still unborn) child, whom Eve plans to circumcise according to Jewish tradition, despite Hans’s objections that the act is barbaric. In order to make amends, the couple decides to reenact the Serment de Strasbourg, the medieval political oath between Germany and France. After performing the oath in each other’s language, Eve claims: “toute guerre entre nous est finie” (238) [“all warfare between us is finished”]. The notion that this medieval oath will provide “closure” is highly utopian and deceptive because the Serment de Strasbourg did not prevent further conflicts between Germany and France. Moreover, the fact that Eve remains unwilling to enter German territory, despite the toll it will take on the new family she and Hans are founding together, undermines her claim that she has put the past behind her. The couple’s enactment of the ancient pledge remains, nonetheless, an attempt to recognize the other on his or her terms. In light of the turbulent history of Franco-German conflict and the immense trauma and loss caused by the Holocaust, this movement toward the other will continuously have to be renewed. While their bi-national child merges their two distinct historical trajectories, his or her upbringing will constantly require them to negotiate the tensions between “the individual, embodied, and loved side and the collective, social, and constructed side of [their] relations to the past” (Rothberg, 2009, 4).

Thelja’s suicide is also deeply problematic. As she jumps to her death from the Strasbourg cathedral, she cries out into an empty sky. The novel closes on a haunting description of Thelja’s scream as a “cri dans le bleu immerge” [“call immersed in blue”]. This call issues from the highest spire in Europe, the site of one of Europe’s most historically contested frontiers, now the capital
of a newly unified Europe and a city of refuge for exiled writers. Thelja’s cry anticipates that of Zoulilka, the heroine of the Algerian resistance movement who appears in Djebar’s later novel *La femme sans sépulture* (2006), and whose voice continues to sound well after her murder at the hands of French soldiers. It also recalls the unforgettable figure of Atika from Djebar’s short story “La femme en morceaux” [“The woman in pieces”], a young teacher who is brutally murdered by Islamist militants in front of her students and whose voice continues well after her head is severed, just as Orpheus’s head went on singing as it floated down the river. In each of these cases, female voices command our attention and engagement, and refuse to be silenced. Their political agency, however, remains questionable, particularly in the case of Thelja, whose final cry leaves open many possible readings.

Mireille Calle-Gruber (2001, 12) reads this final scene as emblematic of Djebar’s writing in general. Thelja’s wrenching cry transports us momentarily out of ourselves, just as Djebar’s fiction does in a larger sense: “Les architectures littéraires d’Assia Djebar empruntent à la musique cette faculté qu’elle a de nous tirer vers le haut. De nous faire […] plus grands que nous. Et l’on note qu’elles portent jusqu’au bout d’elles-mêmes, jusqu’à la béance sur quoi tous les livres s’interrompent, cri, prière, apostrophe, plainte, conjuration, cri jeté, ‘un cri dans le bleu immergé’…” [“The literary architectures of Assia Djebar borrow from music the faculty of elevating us. Of making us […] greater than ourselves. And they go to the very limit, to the gaping abyss that interrupts all books, cry, prayer, apostrophe, incantation, complaint, shout, a cry immersed in blue.”] While poetic, this reading evacuates politics and agency by not attending to what Thelja’s scream seeks to express: is it her empathetic response to the diverse, overlapping traumas that she has encountered in Alsace and Algeria, or her protest of the seemingly endless cycle of violence and victimhood?

Throughout *Les nuits de Strasbourg*, the contrapuntal intermeshing of conflicting histories and experiences works to complicate the exclusionary narratives and binary oppositions that have characterized relations between France and North Africa, as well as between France and Germany, Jews and Muslims. The novel takes on the kind of difficult work which Said argued is the responsibility of intellectuals and artists: “Overlapping yet irreconcilable experiences demand from the intellectual the courage to say that *that* is what is before us” (Said, 2012, 39). While never equating the diverse historical traumas that figure in the novel—the Algerian war, the murder and displacement of Jews during the Holocaust, the successive
occupations of Alsace, Soviet prisoner-of-war camps, the dispossession of North African Jews after 1948—Djebar brings them into relation with one another and explores the possibilities for, and impediments to, reciprocal recognition and healing.

**Antigone: Counterpoint and the Canon**

We now turn to examine a final thread in the contrapuntal texture of *Les nuits de Strasbourg*: the recurring references to Sophocles’s *Antigone*. Djebar evokes Antigone not only in the novel, but also in essays, lectures, and interviews throughout the 1990s. In an interview with Laure Adler, Djebar explained that her interest in Antigone dates back to her school days when, denied the opportunity to learn Classical Arabic, she studied Greek and read Sophocles’ tragedies in the original. Antigone’s courageous public stance made a deep impression on her, particularly since Algerian women were still largely confined to the domestic sphere (Adler and Djebar, 2006). Elements of the Antigone myth surface repeatedly in *Les nuits de Strasbourg*: the play itself is under production, and several unburied or displaced corpses haunt the text, prolonging mourning and resisting closure. Neither Thelja nor François ever recovered their fathers’ bodies, and consequently, neither was unable to hold a proper burial. In another passage, we learn that Jewish graves in Constantine, Algeria have been unearthed and displaced to clear the land for real estate development. Catherine Dana (2004, 113–25) suggests that Djebar’s interest in Antigone participates in a wider phenomenon. Antigone came to have renewed significance for Algerian writers in the wake of the violent civil conflict of the 1990s, when the disappearance and murder of thousands of civilians was compounded by the Algerian government’s subsequent failure to provide information or to bring perpetrators to justice. As the Algerian state passed successive amnesty laws, imposing silence at the expense of justice and accountability, writers felt compelled to take on the role of witness.

Djebar makes a particular effort to consider contemporary versions of Antigone by authors working outside the main metropolitan centers of literary production: Swedish poet Gunnar Ekelöf, Belgian psychoanalyst Henry Bauchau, and Spanish philosopher Maria Zambrano. She thus brings a quintessentially contrapuntal dimension to the Antigone myth, showing how this highly canonical figure has inspired multiple rewritings, by minor as
well as major authors. Bauchau, Ekelöf and Zambrano all imagine Antigone’s voice from within the tomb, recalling Djebar’s efforts to give voice to the rural Algerian men, women and children who were buried alive in caves in the mid-nineteenth century during the French conquest of Algeria. In a haunting section of *L’amour, la fantasia*, the author commemorates the martyrdom of these Algerian tribes whom the French army literally entombed, sealing up the entrances to the caves to which they had retreated and then using fire and smoke to suffocate them as part of a ruthless campaign to crush tribal resistance.44

Significantly, Djebar’s interest in Antigone is echoed in two other Franco-Algerian works published between 1997 and 1999: Sebbar’s novel *La Seine était rouge* and Derrida’s philosophical essay on hospitality, *De l’hospitalité*. This simultaneous turn to Antigone is remarkable as it is unlikely that these writers were aware of one another’s projects. Djebar claims, for instance, that she has never read Derrida.45 While Dana sees the presence of Antigone in Franco-Algerian writing of the 1990s as a reflection of the crisis in memory and accountability brought on by the civil war in Algeria,46 Sebbar’s novel demonstrates that it is also linked to France’s belated recognition of its own violent colonial history.

Sebbar brings Antigone into *La Seine était rouge* to commemorate the October 17, 1961 massacres of Algerian demonstrators by the Parisian police. Her interest in the massacres reflects a new willingness in France to confront the colonial past. Signs of this shift include the long overdue official recognition by the French Senate that the “events in Algeria” from 1954 to 1962 had in fact constituted a war for independence, and that the French army had routinely used torture in Algeria. It also involved the public admission by the mayor of Paris, Bertrand Delanoë, that the police had brutally attacked peaceful Algerian demonstrators in Paris and other provincial cities in 1961. Under Delanoë’s leadership, a commemorative plaque was placed on the Pont de Saint-Michel in the heart of Paris.

Sebbar’s title lends a graphic and shameful image to the massacres, bearing witness to the attempts of the Parisian police to hide the consequences of their disproportionate brutality by disposing of murdered demonstrators in the river Seine. The novel’s protagonists are young second-generation North African immigrants who come to learn of the massacres through the media coverage of Maurice Papon’s trial in 1998. Although Papon was brought to trial for his participation in the deportation of French children to Nazi death camps under Vichy, his criminal responsibility as prefect of the Paris Police
during the October 1961 massacres also came under scrutiny. Although he was never held legally accountable for the incident, a government report released in 1999 acknowledged that he had given the mandate for inappropriately brutal tactics to suppress what by all accounts were peaceful demonstrations, resulting in the deaths of at least forty-eight Algerians at the hands of the police (the unofficial figure is significantly higher).

Upon learning of the massacres, the protagonists of Sebbar’s novel collect testimonies from witnesses of the October 1961 massacres, and then create documentary film, graffiti, and theatre to raise awareness in their communities. Omer projects a new version of the play *Antigone*, in a symbolic attempt to restore dignity to those who were dumped into the river: “C’est l’histoire d’une fille qui creuse la tombe de ses frères la nuit, sur la colline, elle s’acharne, la terre est dure, des soldats surveillent les corps, des frères jumeaux, exécutés. L’armée a exposé les cadavres sur la place du village…” (Sebbar, 1999, 125). [“It’s the story of a girl who digs the grave of her brothers at night on a hillside; she struggles at it, the earth is hard, soldiers guard the bodies of her twin brothers who were executed. The army exposed their corpses in the village square...”]

Both *Les nuits de Strasbourg* and *La Seine était rouge* imagine new productions of *Antigone*, but neither play actually comes to fruition. *La Seine était rouge* ends just as Omer offers Amal the title role in his still unwritten play. It is uncertain whether she will accept the part of Antigone, or whether she will insist on commemorating this history on her own terms. In *Les nuits de Strasbourg*, the murder of the play’s director, Jacqueline, just before opening night prevents the play from being performed as planned. The actress who was to play the title role surprises the assembled audience by abandoning the script and improvising an impassioned monologue. Still wearing the costume of Antigone, she affirms the integral place of North Africans in Strasbourg’s history. Ultimately, Djebbar and Sebbar both evoke the story of Antigone in order to address the experience of North African immigrants in France—to expose the violence of this history and to insist on its centrality to French twentieth-century history. The fact that the play is deferred or interrupted in each novel suggests the need for new forms of mourning and remembrance.

Taking a different approach, Derrida (2000, 93) positions Antigone as the exemplary figure of the foreigner. In his reading, Antigone has been exiled on three counts: first, when she willingly leaves her native city of Thebes alongside Oedipus, offering herself as her father’s companion and guide in
exile; second, when she gives up her maternal language; and finally, when the state refuses her access to her father’s grave in order to guarantee the future prosperity of Thebes. In Derrida’s (2000, 111) terms, Antigone is “without a tomb, without a determinable place, without monument, without a localizable and circumscribed place of mourning, without a stopping point [arrêt],” and thus obliged to mourn mourning itself. By situating a canonical heroine such as Antigone in the place of the marginalized foreigner and refugee, Derrida deconstructs the binary relationship between the West and the “other.”

At the same time, Antigone’s impossible mourning resonates all too well for Algerians: the devastating violence of the War for Independence and the Civil War of the 1990s displaced many Algerians internally and sent thousands into exile. Historians of Algeria have identified the ghettoization of memory as a major obstacle to working through the turbulent history of France and Algeria, deploring the fractured way in which each community holds on to their own particular narrative of the past, making national reconciliation difficult (Stora and Harbi, 2005). In Les nuits de Strasbourg, the protagonists use dialogue to knit together the fractures between their different histories. Sebbar’s protagonists deeply resent the fact that their parents and grandparents never told them about the massacres of 1961; they never saw their elders grieve, and feel obliged to mourn in their place. They engage the entire community in the process. While contrapuntal narratives such as these represent an important effort to bring disparate perspectives into dialogue, Djebar and Sebbar both emphasize the importance of collective projects, particularly theater and documentary film, as strategies to encourage mourning and healing in the public sphere.

Several Franco-Algerian artists have subsequently taken up related projects. In 2002, the young Beur novelist, Faïza Guène, produced a seventeen-minute documentary on the massacres of October 17, 1961. Like the projects imagined in Sebbar’s novel, Guène’s film features oral testimonies by workers, demonstrators, journalists, photographers, and organizers who witnessed the police violence against demonstrators. As Guène remarks, “Mes parents, ils ont connu la guerre en Algérie, Octobre 1961 à Paris. Ils ne veulent pas faire de bruit. Mais nous, on est né ici, on ne se tait pas” [“My parents experienced the Algerian War and October 1961 in Paris. They don’t want to make any noise. But we were born here and we will not keep quiet.”]. At the Théâtre du Grabuge in Lyon, Franco-Algerian director Geraldine Bénichou took a more poetic route, to produce an intriguing, dramatic adaptation of Henri Bauchau’s novel, Le cri d’Antigone [Antigone’s Scream] in 2004. The
play features two female performers, Magali Bonat in the role of Antigone, and Kabyle singer Salah Gaoua, and intersperses Arabic and Kabyle songs between Antigone’s verses to stage a contrapuntal, feminine protest. The production toured throughout France and Algeria between 2004 and 2006, bringing issues of mourning, memory, and accountability into the public forum on both sides of the Mediterranean.

Conclusions

Djebar clearly shares Said’s commitment to challenging the canon, bringing to the fore different, marginalized voices, and confronting the complications and connections between the most disparate historical narratives. Several critics, however, have questioned not only whether Djebar truly establishes equality between the voices in her fiction, and furthermore, whether equality is a desirable quality in postcolonial writing given the need to correct a long history of domination and effacement. Al-Nakib (2005, 272) destabilizes the very notion of equality by arguing that counterpoint profoundly reconfigures the terms of every relationship and undermines the very notion of hierarchy: “French is undeniably the colonizer’s language; however, in counterpoint with an Arabic that has denied women use of the first-person pronoun, it embodies the possibility of freedom even as it remains a tool of oppression.” In Les nuits de Strasbourg, it is impossible to assess the equality of voices at any given moment. There is no permanently dominant perspective, nor a permanently subordinate one, but always an oscillation as different subject positions interact, contaminate, deterriorialize, and transform one another. It is precisely this performative, interactive, non-hierarchical dynamic that makes counterpoint a valuable conceptual model for thinking about reconciliation. Musicologists have attributed the impact of counterpoint to the fact that “hearing counterpoint entail[s] being in the music, perceiving the relations between the strands, in effect being surrounded by the music […] Counterpoint allow[s] no safe distance from the compositional materials” (Painter, 2001, 203). Likewise, Les nuits de Strasbourg presents multiple conflicting experiences together with all their contradictions and entanglements.

To return to Said’s plea for a contrapuntal reevaluation of Israeli and Palestinian history, it is not a question of which history should be privileged, or whether the two histories carry “equal” claims. On the contrary, Said
argues that the two histories must be considered as inseparably interrelated to one another. In *Les nuits de Strasbourg*, Djebar takes on the traumatic legacy of colonialism and violence on a transnational scale. Staging encounters between historically divergent experiences within the cosmopolitan city of Strasbourg, the novel undermines any one group’s monopoly on victimhood, and models a contrapuntal engagement with others. Through its audacious formal experimentation, temporal displacements, revisionist approach to history, and contrapuntal commitments, the novel places significant demands on the reader. To “hear” all the voices in such a multilayered text—and to attend to what their interaction and juxtaposition produces anew—requires an active and compassionate approach to reading, the kind of worldly, secular criticism that Said modeled on musical counterpoint.

If Said’s own contrapuntal readings remain caught up in the binary structure of relations between the center and the periphery, it falls upon writers and critics today to think counterpuntally on multiple planes and in multiple directions. As a methodology, counterpoint allows us bring new perspectives into dialogue and to uncover new understandings of how diverse histories are imbricated in one another, as Djebar illustrates in writing Alsace and Algeria into relation. As such, counterpoint provides an important tool for the ethical and worldly practice of comparative literature.