

Michel Leiris and the Secret Language of Song

IT HAS BEEN A LITTLE more than five years since Nicholas Mathew and I wrote in these pages of the tendency among historians of music to seek out historical “quirks”—to center narratives on unlikely or surprising events or objects that seem to enable a quasi-ethnographic encounter with the tastes and experiences of historical listeners. We speculated that this kind of history also had the effect of placing music’s aesthetic dimension at a safe distance and wondered what would happen if musicologists began to engage more intensely with sound and, specifically, to explore “how music produces distinctive kinds of association that are the conditions of political thought and action.”¹ Hindsight suggests that our diagnosis of “quirk historicism” came at a time when the appeal of such microhistories was already fading. While our dream of new approaches to music’s aesthetic dimensions that could also illuminate its social effects has not come true, the past few years have seen a surge of energy devoted to music’s role in forging social bonds and stimulating political affect.

One manifestation of this is the vitality of recent writing on voice, much of which bypasses historical specificity to engage broader epistemological and affective questions.² To think seriously about the voice—whether speaking, singing, or screaming—is to interrogate the links between human utterances and the bodies that produce them, to think about the role of vocalization in constituting the self, and to query well-worn metaphors of

ABSTRACT Best known for his reminiscences of artistic and intellectual life in midcentury Paris and for his chronicle of the 1931 Dakar-Djibouti mission, *L’Afrique fantôme* (1934), Michel Leiris also wrote obsessively about music, turning to imperfectly recalled fragments of song and opera to evoke key moments of early childhood and to explore affective relationships. This article focuses on two episodes from Leiris’s writings to demonstrate that his highly emotional and anecdotal mode of writing about music anticipates, and quite possibly influenced, the more systematic theories of voice, sound, and language of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida. Derrida engaged directly with Leiris in his essay “Tympan” (in *The Margins of Philosophy*), which quotes at length a text by Leiris on the cognitive and relational dimensions of hearing and writing. Leiris’s experience in the 1930s and 40s developing a lexicon and grammar for the ritual language of the Dogon people of Mali, I argue, fundamentally shaped his conviction that both music and language are most communicative when they permeate and destabilize each other. *REPRESENTATIONS* 154. 2021 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 87–98. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2021.154.7.87>.

voice as the locus of enfranchisement.³ Theorizing the voice also means reckoning with the various forms of writing used to capture and describe the effects of voices past and taking a position on the Derridean question of voice and the metaphysics of presence. Does voice occupy a space before or beyond writing, as it has so often been cast in musicological accounts, or is it inescapably entwined with and bounded by writing?⁴ The two views almost stand as a metaphor for the field's conflicted attitude to history—torn between the (illusion of) close contact with listeners of the past afforded by historicism and the (equally illusory) intensity and relevance offered by more philosophically and scientifically oriented accounts of how music works on bodies, minds, markets, and publics. This essay explores an unlikely site of rapprochement between these alternatives in the writings of the French ethnographer and memoirist Michel Leiris, who repeatedly turns to half-remembered songs and distant voices in his quest to recall his childhood and (thus?) to understand himself.

Leiris may well be the most famous nobody of mid-twentieth-century France. Or, more generously, he could be described as a modestly successful figure within a circle where nearly every other member became stratospherically famous. Author of five volumes of memoirs and more than twenty other books of ethnography, fiction, and art criticism, Leiris was also a fanatical opera lover who traveled widely to see productions and kept a journal of his impressions. His memoirs bristle with reminiscences of songs heard as a child and reveries sparked by mementos of the operatic world of the Belle Époque. His tastes were not particularly elevated—he preferred Ruggero Leoncavallo to Giacomo Puccini (an opinion Claude Lévi-Strauss would ridicule) and loved opera partly because of what he perceived as its resemblance to the bullfight.⁵

Born in 1901, the young Leiris became a protégé of the poet and playwright Raymond Roussel, a family friend.⁶ After trying out various educational paths, he struck up a friendship with Georges Bataille and in 1929 was hired as editorial secretary for the surrealist journal *Documents*, within whose pages appeared many of the key texts of the movement that James Clifford has dubbed “ethnographic surrealism.”⁷ At *Documents* Leiris encountered the ethnologist Marcel Griaule, who invited him to sign on as secretary and archivist for the Dakar-Djibouti mission, which traversed Central Africa collecting art objects, musical recordings, and narratives between 1931 and 1933.⁸ Upon his return to France, Leiris audited Marcel Mauss's seminars at the Collège de France and secured a position as curator of African artifacts at the new Musée de l'Homme, where he would remain until his retirement in 1984. Through his marriage to the stepdaughter of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, art dealer to Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dalí, Leiris

became an intimate of cubist and existentialist circles. In 1944 he hosted a reading of a new theatrical work by Picasso, directed by Albert Camus, in his Paris apartment, and the following year he joined Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir on the editorial board of their new journal *Les Temps Modernes*.

One could go on adding leaves to this family album of French surrealism, existentialism, and structuralism, but where Leiris makes contact with voice is in his writings, which were as multifarious as his friendships and professional pursuits. In addition to two surrealist novels and a dozen anthropological works, he chronicled his experiences, thoughts, and feelings in a series of memoirs published over a period of thirty years. *L'Âge d'homme* (1939), an account of his sexual phobias and desires organized around psychoanalytic readings of biblical and classical archetypes, earned accolades from Maurice Blanchot and Susan Sontag and was eventually issued in the prestigious Pléiade edition.⁹ The later autobiographical texts leave behind the tightly organized academic structure of *L'Âge d'homme* to adopt instead a strategy of fragmentation, rupture, and indirection, as signaled by the titles of the four volumes grouped together as *La Règle du jeu* (*The Rules of the Game*): *Biffures* (*Scratches*, 1948), *Fourbis* (*Scraps*, 1955), *Fibrilles* (*Fibrils*, 1968), and *Frêle bruit* (*Frail Noise*, 1976).

The emphasis on scraps and traces in these titles underlines Leiris's interest in the gaps and errors in his memories, gaps that music has a unique ability to fill. Throughout the four volumes of *La Règle du jeu* Leiris looks to imperfectly remembered songs and voices as a magical, secretive language that can grant access to the past and to the inner layers of the self. Bits of song are mobilized to conjure narratives, and encounters with old photographs can evoke vague memories of voices, which in turn summon past traumas. The particular sounds of those voices are less important than the interplay between music and language in the recalled songs. Often for Leiris songs are a site of misunderstanding: words are misheard, replaced with similar-sounding (but nonsensical) words, and these moments of substitution and misprision unlock memory and understanding. In brief discussions of two examples from *La Règle du jeu*—one focused on misheard songs, the other on the ear and the act of listening—I hope to show that Leiris's rhapsodic, idiosyncratic, and intuitive approach to song was both informed by and an influence on some of the central figures thinking about music and language in mid-twentieth-century France.

Leiris begins his life story with song. In *Biffures*, the first installment of *La Règle du jeu*, the young Michel's bafflement at the world around him is conveyed through fragments of opera and popular song, always somehow garbled or misunderstood. When a family friend sings a drinking song to

her parrot, pretending to be tipsy, or when Leiris hears his older brother singing a military song, he misunderstands the lyrics, and the misapprehensions spawn unlikely images and intriguing grammatical puzzles. His brother's song about a young soldier going off to war turns into a song about an excursion to the beach, thanks to a mondegreen created by the similarity between the words "s'en allait" (to go) and "la laisse" (the beach). Similarly, the child hears the calls "Figaro, Figaro, Figaro" in the famous Gioachino Rossini aria as echoing the call of a street vendor hawking cherries ("bigarreaux"). Traversing these earliest memories, Leiris comes to the realization that (as he puts it) "the hold that songs have always had on me" is "closely related to the pun."¹⁰

The shadowy hints of meaning the child discerns in these misheard melodies parallel the psychoanalytic process by which the self is constituted through language: the garbled songs stand in for an imperfectly apprehended world, in which improbable and confusing objects and relationships are produced by the play of language.¹¹ But this mosaic of nursery songs also anticipates the Derridean theory of *différance*, according to which signification can only be generated by the distinctions between words (signifiers) or by the substitution of one word for another, since the meaning of any individual word is arbitrary. As Shane Butler has put it, "Signifiers, for Derrida and Saussure alike, and so too for Lacan, albeit in different ways, always point elsewhere; they do not call attention to themselves; they cannot 'shimmer'; they do not know how to sing."¹² The phonemes of the remembered songs mean nothing except through their endless substitutions, because speech and song severed from writing are not capable of denotation. Yet these scraps of song create vivid memories and emotions through their aural surfaces. Leiris shows us not only how signifiers *can* shimmer and sing but also how all song is made from juxtapositions of signifiers loosely linked to a signified.

The discussion of these fragmentary songs, it turns out, is merely preparing the ground for the melody Leiris really wants to discuss, a tune with great personal meaning for him. The melody he feels shy about introducing is the duet "Adieu, notre petite table" from Jules Massenet's *Manon*, which he recalls hearing not in an opera house but sung at home by his teenage sister. Although he will dwell on this melody for two and a half dense pages, Leiris does not seem much interested in the emotional texture of the scene, in which Manon bids good-bye to the domestic life she has inhabited with the Chevalier des Grieux, nor in the strikingly restrained and declamatory style of Massenet's melody, with its repeated notes and breaks in the melodic line. Instead he approaches the melody as an abstraction, obsessing over the pronunciation of the words in the opening line, especially the repetitions of the *t* sound and the silent *e*. Leaving aside the memory of his sister's singing, he listens in on Manon pronouncing

the silent *e* separating the last two *t*'s of the series of three, the last two of which seem to be merely the lurching echo of the first, over which the tongue has stumbled. *Ti-te-ta*.¹³

Leiris goes on to suggest that the unvoiced syllable *te* at the end of the word “petite” endows the word with “a sort of consistency” that “thickens and tends to metamorphose into an object” and that “clings to the noun *table*, which designates a solid body, a mass made of heavy wood whose attractive force is greater than that of the adjective *petit*, which hasn't even the particle of reality of a slight breath of air.”¹⁴ Eventually he spins off from this fantasy of the power of sound to materialize objects into a free-associative riff on the resemblance between the word “table” and the French word for prayer stool (“*tétable*”) to consider the sounds and life experiences that inhere in the words *étable*, *retable*, and *potable* (stable, altar piece, and drinkable).

Leiris's obsession with the conjuring power of the mute *e* extends a fascination with this defining feature of the French language that already stretched back several decades. Katherine Bergeron has chronicled the many fin de siècle texts that praised the phoneme, including an influential 1903 discussion by actor and singer Léon de Brémont, who annotated passages of poetry with numbers to indicate the relative emphasis the *e* should receive and even suggested that the vowel might be renamed, rhapsodizing, “Call it veiled, supple . . . attenuated, variable, feeble—anything but mute!”¹⁵ Bergeron has shown that these phonemic preoccupations and the experiments in musical declamation that accompanied them contributed to a national project aimed at standardizing the French language after 1870, but Leiris's discussion of Massenet also points to the later history of such phonetic patterns and games. His approach to language draws on the surrealist strategy of generating meaning by sequencing or substituting unlike objects or ideas (“stable” to “altar,” by way of “table”) while also adumbrating the laser-like focus on individual phonemes and assonance characteristic of structuralist readings, such as Roman Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss's famous analysis of Charles Baudelaire's *Les Chats*.¹⁶

Midway through this initial section of *Biffures* (which bears the title “Songs”), Leiris formulates a theory of language and music as a hallucinatory vision that conveys both the glamour that music can lend to language and the dangers it poses. Words that are strung together into poetic units become “pearls,” Leiris suggests. When they are immersed in waves of sound, these verbal pearls may “disperse and shatter.” In this surreal vision, the fragmentation of the word is also a form of animation. Once joined with music, words may “join their ill-assorted limbs tightly in a long, glistening loop,” causing “the nacreous globe of a jellyfish to appear here and there.”

Language that is joined with music becomes disconnected and atomized, but also acquires a new kind of life:

Reduced to shards, which captivate our eyes with the gleaming of their broken edges and the strangeness of their angles, or simply resolved into the fluidity of a line, which we follow from note to note, syllable to syllable, phrases steeped in music acquire a special sheen that separates them from ordinary language, surrounds them with a halo of magnificent isolation.¹⁷

This image of words as pearls echoes an oft-cited episode from Leiris's ethnographic travelogue *L'Afrique fantôme* (1934). In a passage detailing his efforts to learn the "secret" language of the Dogon, known only to a handful of elders and used only in ritual contexts, Leiris recounts an exchange with his Dogon translator in which he asks the translator to give him only literal word-by-word translations rather than free paraphrases of Dogon expressions. To illustrate his request Leiris lays a row of pebbles on his desk, indicating that each one represents a word in the Dogon language; he then picks up each pebble and replaces it with another, intended to stand for the corresponding French words. According to Leiris, the translator immediately began to move the pebbles around to indicate the relationships among people and actions they might undertake in relation to each other, driving Leiris to proclaim that he had "confused the word with the thing, the sign with the thing signified."¹⁸ In his role as lexicographer, seeking to master the structures of the Dogon language, Leiris cleaves to a rigidly Saussurean view of signification; but when he turns to words and songs to probe his own psyche Leiris regards language much as does his translator, seeing it as enhanced by utterances in which the pebbles (or pearls) are dissolved, shattered, transmuted.

The alterations to individual consonant and vowel sounds that fascinate Leiris—from "Figaro" to "bigarreaux," or from "étable" to "potable"—effect a musicalization of language in which the power to evoke vivid memories arises more from the subtle shades of inflection than from the semantic dimension.¹⁹ Here, too, Leiris's view was formed partly by his research on the ritual language of the Dogon, which allows for the replacement of any vowel with another vowel, creating chains of related words that recall the wordplay of his childhood songs.²⁰ The resemblance suggests that music like "Adieu, notre petite table"—and perhaps opera generally—had for Leiris the status of a secret or ritual language, fully grasped only by initiates and capable of magical operations. In the Parisian apartment, as in the West African village, language attains ritual power through subtle alterations of inflection, and substitutions of vowels and consonants can transform everyday language into a carrier of secret meaning.

Throughout his extended memoir-opus, Leiris frequently contemplates old photographs. In one crucial passage, he rifles through a box of publicity photos of his aunt, an opera singer who has begun to invade his thoughts as he lies in the hospital recuperating from a suicide attempt by barbiturate overdose. Another photograph, encountered in an old issue of a music journal Leiris finds at his sister's house, prompts a lengthy discussion of the significance of spiral patterns in nature and the built environment. Describing a picture of the contralto Lucy Arbelle costumed as Perséphone in Massenet's 1909 opera *Ariane*, he explains that the coiled ornaments that adorn the singer's ears in the photograph were a subliminal inspiration for the meditation on the figure of Persephone in the first volume of *La Règle de jeu*.²¹ An intimate of Massenet's in his final years, Arbelle created the lead roles in six of his operas and (according to the composer's memoirs) was responsible for suggesting the hybrid speaking and singing style he employed in the late song cycle *Expressions lyriques*.²²

This rumination on cycles and change is constructed as a poem that explores the formal design of the spiral, which Leiris treats as emblematic of Persephone's seasonal peregrinations between earth and underworld. The list includes spiral patterns found in nature and in the built environment, with an emphasis on its appearance in human anatomy and writing:

The acanthus leaf one copies in school when one is first struggling to hold a charcoal pencil,
 the stem of a convolvulus or other climbing plant,
 the helicoid inscribed on a snail shell,
 the windings of the small and large intestines,

 the marbling on the edges of certain bound books,
 the ironwork with "modern-style" curves at the metro entrances,
 the intertwining of the embroidered monograms on sheets and pillowcases,
 the spit curl pasted to the grease on the cheekbone of a prostitute from the old days
 of Casque d'Or,

 the flow of blood,
 the conch of an ear, . . .²³

If the attraction to linguistic play and the metaphors of language as a row of pebbles and a "nacreous jellyfish" have already suggested that much in Leiris's writing anticipated both structuralist and poststructuralist views of language, the connection becomes explicit with the Perséphone poem, which appears in its entirety in the introductory chapter of Derrida's *The Margins of Philosophy*, a collection of essays that address the figural language and rhetorical strategies of philosophical writing. The book's opening chapter ("Tympan") centers on the tympanum as a metaphor for a philosophical

discourse that is alert to its own conventions and in genuine dialogue with its other. The typographical layout of “Tympan” juxtaposes Leiris’s poetic exploration of spirals, running vertically down the right-hand side of each page, with Derrida’s more straightforward exposition of the issues on the left. Yet the contrast is not complete: Derrida also occasionally adopts flamboyant imagery reminiscent of Leiris, as when he characterizes the tympanum with a series of metaphors—as “the muffled drum, the *tympanon*, the cloth stretched taut in order to take its beating, to amortize impressions, to make the *types* (*typoi*) resonate”—or when he pauses in a footnote to quote Antonin Artaud on hearing or Bataille on labyrinths.²⁴

For Derrida the tympanum symbolizes the space of contact between inside and outside, and between self and other. His exploration of the structure of the ear also considers the “labyrinth” of canals and passages in the inner and outer ear and dwells on the fact that the tympanum is positioned obliquely within the ear, which he sees as a figure for the kind of listening and thinking he espouses:

The tympanum squints. Consequently, to luxate the philosophical ear, to set the *loxós* [slant] within *logos* to work, is to avoid frontal and symmetrical protest, opposition in all the forms of *anti*.²⁵

The Ur-antagonist here is G. W. F. Hegel, whose historical and philosophical project begins from sensory experience and privileges hearing, but who ultimately insists on the sublimation of sensory experience into knowledge and mastery. In the essays that follow “Tympan,” Derrida approaches philosophy by way of its unacknowledged linguistic and rhetorical devices, its assumptions and its speech acts, in a bid to open the discourse to voices and perspectives it has traditionally excluded.²⁶ As an instance of topics usually “left at the margins,” Derrida mentions the horn (cornet) of the Bambara people, an instrument that he says functions as a phallus in their symbolic system, while the auditory canal is figured as a vagina.²⁷ No source is cited, but Derrida’s knowledge of Dogon and Bambara organology could only have come—although perhaps indirectly—from Leiris’s work on the Dogon or that of Leiris’s colleague André Schaeffner.

What is Derrida’s footnoted reference to the horn of the Bambara, if not a quirk? The same could be said of the photograph of Lucy Arbelle, with her coiled earpieces and her complicated relationship to Massenet. Even Leiris himself might be described as a quirk, in the sense that positioning him at the center of this story lends historical specificity to ideas about language, meaning, and voice that we often regard as universal. Approaching Derrida by way of Leiris, I would argue, calls for revisions to the genealogy of those ideas, and especially of the role played by specific experiences of speech,

sound, and music in their development. The passing allusion to the Bambara horn in Derrida's footnote, taken together with the characteristically marginal-yet-central place of Leiris in the "Tympan" chapter as a whole, suggests that Derrida's dismantling of phonocentrism derives not only from the frequently invoked distinction between alphabetic and phonetic writing but may also be founded on the midcentury project of translating and analyzing African languages that was part of contemporary colonial expeditions. Leiris's beliefs that voice and melody were keys to understanding the past, and that both music and language were most powerful when they were destabilizing each other, prefigure ideas that would be explored in more disciplined terms by Barthes, Derrida, and others. These insights were prompted for Leiris by specific voices and songs, and his cultural frame of reference is not modern but nostalgic, even decadent—popular songs, arias by Massenet, gramophone recordings, and celebrity memorabilia. More than just a hinge between the gossipy fin de siècle salon culture and the (probably no less gossipy) laboratories of midcentury French thought, Leiris shows how concrete experiences of music and sound can activate new understandings of the interactions between language and meaning, sound and memory.

The occasion on which Lévi-Strauss made fun of Leiris's operatic taste was a review of Leiris's collection of notes on operas and performances, published posthumously under the title *Operratiques* in 1990. Beside taking issue with his enthusiasm for Leoncavallo, Lévi-Strauss complained that Leiris was too interested in plot and did not devote enough time to analyzing details of the operatic score. The criticism is on target: *Operratiques* is not one of Leiris's better books, and it seems surprising that Lévi-Strauss would bother to engage with Leiris's heavily Freudian readings of plots and his rhapsodic comments on performances. What is interesting about this ungenerous review is the glimpse it offers of an intriguing alternate reality, one in which French writing about music might have taken its cue from Leiris's eccentric enthusiasms rather than the structuralist model espoused by Lévi-Strauss. The two paths are already on view in Lévi-Strauss's most musical book, *Le Cru et le cuit* (1964). While the text employs musical tools for aggressively structuralist ends—famously adapting the format of the score for the paradigmatic analysis of myths and labeling each section as a musical form (fugue, invention, theme and variations, symphony)—the book's dedication page reaches for an idea of music beyond matrices and systems. "À la musique," it reads, and below those words appear two staves of music from Emmanuel Chabrier's 1890 choral ode of the same name. The split personality behind this gesture is perhaps a symptom of the strong and unified modernist party line, in which so many leading thinkers (including Apollinaire, André Breton, and Sartre) asserted that music had no meaning

and should therefore be sidelined in discussions of aesthetics and the politics of art. When music intruded into this realm, it was either in the form of incidental entertainment or as sudden wordless explosions into the text, as in the Lévi-Strauss dedication or the single page of music that appears, with only the gnomic caption “graphic bliss: before painting, music,” at the center of the autobiographical *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*.²⁸ The vicissitudes of Leiris’s career suggest a more sensory and more pragmatic view of music, one that was never authorized or fully absorbed into the mainstream of intellectual history, but that has nevertheless left its marks.

Notes

1. Nicholas Mathew and Mary Ann Smart, “Elephants in the Music Room: The Future of Quirk Historicism,” *Representations* 132 (2015): 73. I would like to thank Susan Bay, Karen Henson, Edmund Mendelssohn, and Martyna Włodarczyk for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.
2. Nicholas Mathew and Martha Feldman make this point in their introduction to this issue; see their “Music Histories from the Edge: An Introduction.”
3. These approaches have been explored in Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul Kottman (Stanford, 2005); Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, 2006); and Steven Connor, *Beyond Words: Sobs, Hums, Stutters and Other Vocalizations* (London, 2014), to mention just a few of the many recent studies of voice.
4. Among the many insightful commentaries on the Derridean conceptions of speech and voice, see especially Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*; Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (Oxford, 2014); Anna Maria Ochoa, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Durham, NC, 2014); and Martha Feldman and Judith T. Zeitlin, “The Clamor of Voices,” in *The Voice as Something More: Essays toward Materiality*, ed. Martha Feldman and Judith T. Zeitlin (Chicago, 2019), 3–33.
5. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Regarder, écouter, lire* (Paris, 1993); translated as *Look, Listen, Read*, trans. Brian C. J. Singer (New York, 1997), 115–210. For discussions of this clash, see Jean Jamin, “Sous-Entendu: Leiris, Lévi-Strauss, et l’opéra,” *Critique* 620–21 (1999): 26–41; and Vlado Kotnik, *Opera as Anthropology: Anthropologists in Lyrical Settings* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2016), 107–10 and 133–40.
6. Raymond Roussel was an important influence on several significant aesthetic movements in twentieth-century France, including surrealism, the OuLiPo movement, and the Nouveau Roman. See Mark Ford, *Raymond Roussel and the Republic of Dreams* (Ithaca, 2000).
7. James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Surrealism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23, no. 4 (1981): 539–64. See also James Clifford, “Tell about Your Trip: Michel Leiris,” in his *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA, 1988).

8. On the French fascination with West African artifacts in the 1930s, see Tamara Levitz, “The Aestheticization of Ethnicity: Imagining the Dogon at the Musée du quai Branly,” *Musical Quarterly* 89 (2008): 600–642.
9. For a feminist critique of Leiris focused on *L'Âge d'homme*, see Marianna Torgovnick, “The Many Obsessions of Michel Leiris,” in her *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago, 1990), 105–18; and the response by Marjorie Perloff, “Tolerance and Taboo: Modernist Primitivisms and Postmodernist Pieties,” in *Poetry on and off the Page: Essays for Emergent Occasions* (Evanston, 1998), 34–50.
10. Michel Leiris, *Scratches: The Rules of the Game, Volume 1*, trans. Lydia Davis (Baltimore, 1991), 11–12.
11. The emphasis on fragmentary language and song across this opening section of the memoir draws on some of the same principles laid out in Roman Jakobson’s discussion of “babble”; Roman Jakobson, *Kindersprache: Aphasie, und allgemeine Lautgesetze* (1941), cited in Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Echolalias: On the Forgetting of Language* (New York, 2002), 9–12. For a discussion of the psychoanalytic dimension of Leiris’s play with phonemes, see Seàn Hand, “The Sound and the Fury: Language in Leiris,” *Paragraph* 7 (1986): 102–20, esp. 105–8. See also Seàn Hand, *Writing the Self* (Cambridge, 2002), and Seàn Hand, *Alter Ego: The Critical Writings of Michel Leiris* (London, 2017).
12. Shane Butler, “Is Voice a Myth? A Rereading of Ovid,” in Feldman and Zeitlin, *The Voice as Something More*, 181.
13. Leiris, *Scratches*, 14.
14. *Ibid.*, 14–15.
15. Katherine Bergeron, *Voice Lessons: French Mélodie in the Belle Époque* (Oxford, 2009), 204.
16. Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss, “*Les Chats de Charles Baudelaire*,” *L’Homme* 2, no. 1 (1962): 5–21.
17. Leiris, *Scratches*, 12.
18. Michel Leiris, *Phantom Africa*, trans. Brent Hayes Edwards (Chicago, 2017), 195. Andrew Apter cites a very similar passage from the preface to Leiris’s book on the language of the Dogon, in which Leiris noted that when he worked with his informant to correct his transcriptions, the informant would “never review ‘point par point’ the same text, but instead would produce a new text—‘analogue, certes, mais non pas identique’—as if to underscore the deconstructive joke that every decoding is simultaneously a recoding”; Michel Leiris, *La Langue secrète des Dogons de Sanga (Soudan français)* (Paris, 1948), xv; cited in Andrew Apter, “Griaule’s Legacy: Rethinking ‘la parole claire’ in Dogon Studies,” *Cahiers d’études africaines* 45, no. 177 (2005): 105.
19. This notion of a powerful secret language of sound in some respects anticipates Roland Barthes’s concept of “the grain of the voice”: twenty years later Barthes would celebrate Charles Panzéra’s delivery of vowel sounds, including “the virtually electronic purity of the French ü,” as a weapon against “the tyranny of signification”; Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice,” in *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley, 1991), 270–72.
20. Leiris, *La Langue secrète des Dogons*, 392–98. The book’s discussion of grammar includes a discussion of elision, the same principle to which Leiris devotes so much attention in his consideration of the silent *e* in Jules Massenet. Early French ethnographic work on the Dogon has been challenged, most substantially by Walter Van Beek, “Dogon Restudied: A Field Evaluation of the Work of Marcel Griaule,” *Current Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (1991): 139–67. Van Beek refutes

- many of Griaule's assertions about Dogon culture and mythology but gives greater credence to Leiris's work. In his own field-based study, Apter ("Griaule's Legacy," 103–12) affirms some of Griaule's claims about secret knowledge and both supports and extends Leiris's account of the Dogon language.
21. The discussion of the photograph, which Leiris identifies as appearing in a 1906 issue of the journal *Musica* "devoted to Massenet," appears in the second volume of *The Rules of the Game*, Michel Leiris, *Scraps: The Rules of the Game, Volume 2*, trans. Lydia Davis (Baltimore, 1997), 13–14. The meditation on spirals inspired by the photograph is in the previous volume, Leiris, *Scratches*, 71–86.
 22. The history of Massenet's connection with Lucy Arbell is fraught and somewhat mysterious. He made her a gift of several of his autograph scores and apparently promised her the right to premiere the lead roles in two operas that had not yet been premiered at the time of his death in 1914. When the heirs challenged Arbell's claim, she lodged a successful civil suit and secured her right to create the roles. See Jules Massenet, *Mes Souvenirs, 1848–1912* (Paris, 1912), 240 and 272, and Emma Higgins, "The Mezzo-Soprano Onstage and Offstage: A Cultural History of the Voice-Type, Singers, and Roles in the French Third Republic (1870–1918)," PhD diss., Maynooth University, Ireland, 2015, 268–79.
 23. Leiris, *Scratches*, 71–72, translation modified.
 24. Jacques Derrida, *The Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, 1982), xii; originally published as *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris, 1972). The book includes the influential essays "La différance" and "Signature événement contexte," both of which had already appeared in English translation.
 25. *Ibid.*, xv. The verb "luxate" appears in the original French as "luxer," an unusual locution that has connotations of dislocation and repositioning.
 26. As Christopher Norris puts it, the essays in the volume "make a point of being marginal to everything that has hitherto counted as 'serious' philosophical discourse. Typically they approach their subject-text by latching onto metaphors, footnotes, passing analogies or turns of argument which philosophers would regard as scarcely meriting such detailed attention"; Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (Cambridge, MA, 1987), 80.
 27. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, xivn6.
 28. The handwritten page of music is signed "Roland Barthes, 1939," but it is not identified or commented on anywhere in the book. Biographical and archival research has revealed that it is an excerpt from a song, "En regardant ces belles fleurs," with text by Charles d'Orléans. On Barthes as composer, see Claude Coste et Sylvie Douche, ed., *Barthes et la musique* (Rennes, 2018).