

“Nobody knows what color I am”: Time, Music, and Race in Kris Defoort’s *The Time of Our Singing* (2020)

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In 2020, Belgian composer Kris Defoort (b.1959) completed his fourth opera, *The Time of Our Singing*, based on the homonymous novel by Richard Powers (2003). This article examines how Defoort’s *The Time of Our Singing* contributes to decolonialising opera by adopting Homi K. Bhabha’s postcolonial concept of “third space”. After identifying the three central themes in Powers’s novel, the contribution analyses how their adaptation in Defoort’s opera contributes to the construction of the opera as such a third space. An examination of the opera’s reception and the Belgian racial context from shows how these elements shaped the interaction between Defoort’s composition and the world beyond the opera stage.

They can’t come after me. Nobody knows what color I am. I am nobody. I even couldn’t get myself arrested. Tell her, Joey. Tell her I’ve been here. ... Tell her nobody’s done. Everyone is going somewhere else. Next time. Next time.¹

Thus sound the final words stammered by Jonah Strom at the end of Kris Defoort’s opera *The Time of Our Singing*. Famous opera and early music singer Jonah, his pianist brother Joey (with whom he is having the telephone conversation), and their younger sister Ruth (the “her” to whom he refers) are the racially mixed children of the German Jew David Strom and the African American Christian Delia Daley.² In his last moments, however, Jonah claims that “nobody knows what color” he is. He “is nobody”, despite having “been there” – “there” being the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles which form the backdrop for his last moments, and the racial struggle for which they are a *pars pro toto*.³ How does a famous singer of mixed race but known in the world as “Black”, who has just *participated* in racial riots rather than being a victim of them, come to such an aporia regarding his perceived colour?⁴ Can this scene, and the opera as a whole, be interpreted from a postcolonial perspective?⁵

- 1 Kris Defoort and Peter Van Kraaij, *The Time of Our Singing*, [Libretto] (Brussels: De Munt/La Monnaie, 2021): 56–7. The corresponding passage is Richard Powers, *The Time of Our Singing* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003), 618–9.
- 2 The present article favours the use of the terms “mixed” and “mixed race” over “multiracial”, based on the understanding of the former term as applicable to individuals and the latter applicable to groups, communities, and societies; see G. Reginald Daniel, “Editor’s Note,” *Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014): 4–5, <https://doi.org/10.5070/c811021379>; and Zarine L. Rocha and Peter J. Aspinall, “Introduction: Measuring Mixedness Around the World,” in *The Palgrave International Handbook of Mixed Racial and Ethnic Classification* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 11–12.
- 3 A brief commentary on this scene in the novel is offered by Marcus Greil, “2003. Richard Powers: The Time of Our Singing,” in *A New Literary History of America*, ed. Marcus Greil and Werner Sollors (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 1038–9.
- 4 In accordance with this Journal’s editorial policy, the word “Black” is consistently spelled with a capital “B”.
- 5 I understand “postcolonial” as referring to postcolonial theory, in the sense defined by Jessica S. Baker: “Postcolonial theory, as an academic discipline, can be defined as a branch of contemporary social theory that interrogates the political and cultural impact of European conquest on colonized societies and the scope and characteristics of responses to colonization [...], a body of thought that seeks to acknowledge, resist, and trace the legacies of colonization”; see Jessica Swanson Baker, “Postcoloniality and Decoloniality,” in *Grove Music Online*, April 23, 2025, <https://www.oxford-musiconline.com/grovemusic/display/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/>

By means of an examination of the novel on which the opera is based – Richard Powers’ novel *The Time of Our Singing* (2003) – and of its adaptation into an opera libretto and score, this article proposes to examine how race and racial identity are represented in Defoort’s opera.⁶ After briefly outlining three of the central themes in Powers’s novel, I analyse how each is adapted in Van Kraaij’s and Defoort’s operatic version; I rely on Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of “third space” to gain a postcolonial perspective on the elaboration of these themes. Rather than placing the work in a broader historical perspective, my approach focuses on the immediate cultural and social context in which the opera emerged and was received, by examining the opera’s reception in the press and by contextualising the opera within the racial climate in Belgium.

Homi K. Bhabha’s “third space”

In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi K. Bhabha introduces the concept of the third space; even though he does not provide an elaborate theoretical underpinning, the concept is of central importance to Bhabha’s understanding of cultural identity. He sees the third space as an intermediary site where elements from different cultures encounter, overlap, and interact. Within this hybrid, liminal space, meaning and identity are not fixed but continually negotiated, translated, and reconfigured, leading to the emergence of new and hybrid cultural forms. Bhabha thus challenges rigid, essentialist conceptions of cultural identity. Identity is shaped not by stable cultural origins, but through dynamic processes of reinterpretation and exchange:

It is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, that we begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or “purity” of cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity. [...] It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew.⁷

Bhabha presents this third space as the place where a truly international culture originates:

It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or post-colonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory – where I have led you – may reveal that the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s *hybridity*. To that end we should remember that it is the “inter”

omo-9781561592630-e-90000369225?rkey=jKN1GH&result=1. Since one cannot “postcolonise” but only “decolonise”, I use the latter only when a grammatically correct verb is needed. A thorough discussion of the field is offered in Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Thinking through the Decolonial Turn: Post-continental Interventions in Theory, Philosophy, and Critique—An Introduction,” *Transmodernity. Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1, no. 2 (2011): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.5070/t412011805>; Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Decoloniality at Large: Towards a Trans-Americas and Global Transmodern Paradigm (Introduction to Second Special Issue of “Thinking through the Decolonial Turn”),” *Transmodernity. Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1, no. 3 (2012): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.5070/t413012876>; and María Lugones and Patrick M. Crowley, “Introduction,” in *Decolonial Thinking. Resistant Meanings and Communal Other-Sense*, ed. María Lugones and Patrick M. Crowley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2025).

6 In this contribution, the word “race” is used on the understanding that it is a social construct, but not a biological reality. See Frank B. Livingstone and Theodosius Dobzhansky, “On the Non-Existence of Human Races,” *Current Anthropology* 3, no. 3 (June 1962): 279–81, <https://doi.org/10.1086/200290>; “AAPA Statement on the Biological Aspects of Race,” *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 101, no. 4 (December 1996): 569–70, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajpa.1331010408>; Lynn B. Jorde and Stephen P. Wooding, “Genetic variation, classification, and ‘race,’” *Nature Genetics* 36, no. 11 (suppl.) (November 2004): 28–33, <https://doi.org/10.1038/ng1435>; S.O.Y. Keita, R.A. Kittles, C.D.M. Royal, et al., “Conceptualizing human variation,” *Nature Genetics* 36, no. 11 (suppl.) (November 2004): 17–20, <https://doi.org/10.1038/ng1455>; and Jenny Reardon, “Post World–War II Expert Discourses on Race,” in *Race to the Finish: Identity and Governance in an Age of Genomics* (Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), 17–44.

7 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994), 37

– the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture.⁸

In her study of racialised ornament, Gurminder Kaur Bhogal was one of the first to apply Bhabha's third space concept to music, as "a way to overcome the self/other binary in moving toward a space that invites intercultural mingling."⁹ As will become clear in the discussion of Defoort's *The Time of Our Singing*, also opera can be considered as a cultural form in Bhabha's sense, as a postcolonial cultural statement marked by an inherent hybridity, in which, moreover, the protagonists strive to overcome a similar "self-other binary". While still resorting under the genre of opera and its genre-specific conventions, Defoort's score explicitly draws on a wide variety of musical and linguistic ingredients, from baroque arias and romantic chamber music to jazz, rap, and improvisation; essentially spoken and sung in English but with one passage in a made-up language based on Japanese and Arabic. Defoort's *The Time of Our Singing* thereby forms a meeting place in the Bhabhaian sense, a third space where "white", "classical" music and opera and "Black" jazz, improvisation, and rap encounter and negotiate a new inter-national equilibrium.

Bhabha's conceptual framework is even more relevant with regard to Defoort's opera, when the chronological breadth and variation of its musical elements, ranging from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century, is taken into account. Indeed, Bhabha points out that it is essentially the temporal component of the third space that constitutes its impact:

The implication [...] for cultural analysis that I want to emphasize is its temporal dimension. [...] The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process [...] properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force [...]. In other words, the disruptive temporality of enunciation displaces the narrative of the Western nation [...] as being written in homogeneous, serial time.¹⁰

As we will see, the disruptive treatment of time in the opera written by Defoort and his librettist Peter Van Kraaij is realised by musical means; they take the place of literary mechanisms used for this disruption in the novel that formed the opera's point of departure. The novel does not only provide the opera with its narrative, but also with its pervasive themes.

The novel and its themes

Richard Powers's *The Time of Our Singing* was published in 2003 and has since then received ample critical and academic attention.¹¹ The title of the novel refers, in the first place, to the happy moments when the family Strom sings together, moments that constitute the family's core experience of safety, unity, and creativity. Furthermore, the individual terms, "time" and "singing" – and music in the larger sense – constitute two of the principal themes in the novel.

⁸ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 38; italics original.

⁹ Gurminder Kaur Bhogal, "Racialized Ornament in the Exotic Musical Imagination: Reflections on Framing and Decoloniality," in *Open Access Musicology: Volume Two*, ed. Louis Epstein and Daniel Barolsky (Ann Arbor: Lever Press, 2023), 103, <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.12714424>. A comparable "us/them" dichotomy in a musicological context has been signalled by Kofi Agawu, in his important essay "Representing African Music," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 2 (Winter 1992): 259–61.

¹⁰ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 36–7.

¹¹ Two substantial press articles are Emma Brockes, "Magic Powers: an Interview with Richard Powers," *The Guardian*, March 14, 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/mar/14/fiction.emmabrockes>; and Daniel Mendelsohn, "A Dance to the Music of Time," *The New York Times*, January 26, 2003. Brief studies of the novel are Greil, "The Time of Our Singing," and David Yaffe, *Fascinating Rhythm: Reading Jazz in American Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 51–9. On Richard Powers in general, see *Intersections: Essays on Richard Powers*, ed. Stephen J. Burn and Peter Dempsey (Dallas, TX: Dalkey Archive Press, 2008); and Joseph Dewey, *Understanding Richard Powers* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2002).

The theme of “time” takes multiple meanings in Powers’s novel. Not only is there musical time, but David Strom also studies physical or scientific time, especially within the context of Einstein’s relativity theory. David Strom is therefore constantly and painfully aware of the non-linearity and the relativity of time: “*Now* is nothing but a very clever lie”, he explains to his sons.¹² This relativity, which amounts to the coexistence of various temporal layers, is translated into the novel’s structure by its continuous shifts between several layers of time: these correspond to the various generations, the one of Delia and David, their ancestors, and their children.¹³

The theme of “music” in the novel is at least as all-encompassing: it is the habitat in which the story’s characters live, or indeed the *range* of habitats from Renaissance polyphony to spirituals, jazz, contemporary music, and everything in between.¹⁴ Powers’s text is riddled by musical references. Apart from the numerous actual compositions mentioned in the novel, the structure of the novel is shaped by musical elements as well. Beside a few exceptions, the thirty-three chapter titles of the novel are either dates and date ranges or references to music.¹⁵ The music-related chapter titles refer to operas by Humperdinck (*Hänsel und Gretel*), Purcell (*Dido and Aeneas*), Monteverdi (*L’Orfeo*), Verdi or Rossini (*Otello*), and Mozart (*Don Giovanni*), or to compositions such as Orff’s *Carmina Burana* (“In trutina”), Mahler’s *Songs of a Wayfarer*, Wagner’s *Meistersinger*, and the spiritual *Deep River*.¹⁶

An important chapter title (30) is *The Visitation*, referring not only to an earlier chapter in the novel (23) but also to the opera mentioned there, Gunther Schuller’s *The Visitation*. Schuller was one of the proponents of the so-called “Third Stream” trend of the 1960s and 1970s, striving at a innovative combination of contemporary music and modern jazz.¹⁷ Schuller’s *The Visitation*, inspired by a motive from Franz Kafka’s novel *Der Prozess*, was premiered in Hamburg on 12 October 1966. The opera’s theme and date of creation fit the novel’s narrative seamlessly. More importantly, it gives Powers an opportunity to enhance Jonah’s psychological profile, by creating

12 Powers, *The Time of Our Singing*, 151.

13 On “time” in Powers’s novel, see Aura Heydenreich, “Closed Timelike Curves. Gödel’s Solution for Einstein’s Field Equations in the General Theory of Relativity and Bach’s “The Musical Offering” as Configuration Models for Narrative Identity Constructions in Richard Powers’s “The Time of Our Singing,” in *Narrated Communities, Narrated Realities. Narration as Cognitive Processing and Cultural Practice*, ed. Hermann Blume, Christoph Leitzgeb, and Michael Rössner, Internationale Forschungen zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft 183 (Leiden: Brill, 2015): 153–70, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004184121>; Christopher John Hill, “Richard Powers’s *The Time of Our Singing*: Narrative Knots,” *The Explicator* 73, no. 3 (2015): 218–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00144940.2015.1065221>; Doro Wiese, “Writing Sound, Hearing Race, Singing Time: Richard Powers’s *The Time of Our Singing*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 59, no. 5 (2018): 547–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00111619.2018.1444578>.

14 On “music” in Powers’s novel, see Nathalie Avignon, “Orphée face aux Bacchantes. Mutilation du chanteur dans trois romans contemporains,” *Littératures* 66 (November 2012), 153–183: <https://doi.org/10.4000/litteratures.197>; Heydenreich, “Closed Timelike Curves;” Yulia Kozyrakis, “Sightless Sound: Music and Racial Self-Fashioning in Richard Powers’s *The Time of Our Singing*,” in *Ideas of Order, Narrative Patterns in the Novels of Richard Powers*, ed. Antje Kley and Jan D. Kucharzewski (Heidelberg: Winter 2012): 175–95; A. Elisabeth Reichel, “Fictionalising Music/Musicalising Fiction: The Integrative Function of Music in Richard Powers’s *The Time of Our Singing*,” *SoundEffects* 4, no. 1 (2014): 145–60; Wiese, “Writing Sound.”

15 Among the latter category, I count also the eight chapter titles that begin with “My brother as” (Aeneas, Orpheus, Otello, Faust, etc). Chapters in the English edition of Powers’s novel are not numbered; they are in some of the translations. I have numbered them here for the ease of reference.

16 Powers’s novel does not mention explicitly that this spiritual was frequently performed and recorded by Marian Anderson. Marian Anderson, *Oh Lord, What a Morning. An Autobiography* (New York: Viking Press, 1956), 55, 176, 257, 278 mentions her first recording of the song, and performances in Russia and Japan; Kira Thurman, “Performing Lieder, Hearing Race: Debating Blackness, Whiteness, and German Identity in Interwar Central Europe,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 72, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 845, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jams.2019.72.3.825>, shows a recital program of October 10, 1930 in Berlin that includes the song. Anderson recorded the song various times, in November 1923 (with orchestra; Victor 19227–A), in 1938 (with piano; Victor 2032–A), and in 1939 (with piano, His Master’s Voice, DA 1676); The Online Discographical Project,” Steven Abrams, accessed February 19, 2024, <https://www.78discography.com/>.

17 Gunther Schuller and Tom Greenland, “Third Stream,” in *Grove Music Online*, October 16, 2013, <https://www-oxford-musiconline-com/grovemusic/display/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002252527>. Defoort does not associate with this trend, but considers it today as a historical style among others; Lieven Van Ael, “Speelvreugde en communicatie. Nieuw werk van Kris Defoort,” *Contra*. 3, no. 2 (2003): 44.

a situation in which Jonah refuses the lead role in the opera, because he does not wish to be type-cast as a “Negro”.¹⁸ For the same reason, it is significant that the passage has been retained by Defoort and Van Kraaij.

A third theme, “race”, is not implied in the novel’s title but deeply embedded in the narrative’s core and its characters.¹⁹ Its protagonists represent the various socially constructed categories of individuals as being “Black”, “white”, and “mixed”: Delia Daley is a Black, Christian African American; David Strom is a white, Jewish German; their children are mixed.²⁰ The novel narrates how each of them tries to come to terms with their racial heritage in a multiracial society, against the backdrop of the American Civil Rights Movement in the United States.

From the structural viewpoint of the chapters and their titles, race and racial differences appear to stand exactly at the centre of Powers’s novel. Among the book’s thirty-three chapter titles that do not refer to dates or to music, there are only two exceptions: the chapter which is placed in the middle of the novel (16, “Not exactly one of us”), and the final chapter (33, “Thee”). In chapter 16, Delia tells her parents that David, the man she loves, is white. Powers thus places the tension between the love of a Black woman for a white man, the hesitation of society (embodied by Delia’s parents) to accept this union, and all the consequences it will generate for their offspring, at the heart of his novel. The final chapter contains a “replay”, with variations, of the passage where the Black woman Delia and white man David meet, brought together by a lost “colored boy”.²¹

Critics have seen race not only at the centre of his novel, but also at a meta-level, at the centre of Powers’s action of writing about the Black – and mixed – racial experience as a white man:

The best black novel to appear in America since “Beloved” has just been written by a white man. ... Richard Powers has fulfilled Martin Luther King’s dream of a nation in which authors “will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their books.” Or he’s added another chapter to the nightmare of black experience in which everything of value – including their themes, their struggles, and their history – is appropriated by whites.²²

Powers was not the first to whom such judgments would befall. Richard Crawford has pointed out that George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* (1925) was easy to criticise on grounds of authenticity and its stereotypical depictions of Blackness.²³ The context in which Defoort’s work operates is

18 Powers, *The Time of Our Singing*, 389–94.

19 On “race” in Powers’s novel, see Anne-Catherine Bascoul, “De la (re)présentation du corps en crise identitaire à l’identité du corps (re)présenté dans “The Time of Our Singing” de Richard Powers,” in *Corps en crise, crise(s) du corps 5ème Journée des Doctorants*, (Reims: Université de Reims, 2017), <https://hal.science/hal-01504244>; and Marilyn Charles, “Race and Recognition: The Time of Our Singing,” *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 76 (2016): 140–60, <https://doi.org/10.1057/ajp.2016.7>; Kozyrak, “Sightless Sound,” Wiese, “Writing Sound.”

20 For a clarification of the terminology used in the present article, see footnotes 2, 5, and 6.

21 Powers, *The Time of Our Singing*, 223, 627; see the analysis of Hill, “Narrative Knots,” 219–21.

22 Ron Charles, “Ebony and Ivory: A Symphony of Race Relations in the Notes of a Single Biracial Family,” *Christian Science Monitor*, January 23, 2003, 15, <https://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0123/p15s02-bogn.html>. *Beloved* is a novel by Toni Morrison (1987).

23 Richard Crawford, “Porgy and Bess,” in *Grove Music Online*, 2002, <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com/grovemusic/display/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-5000004106>. See also Richard Crawford, “Gershwin’s Reputation: A Note on ‘Porgy and Bess,’” *The Musical Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (April 1979): 257–64; Richard Crawford, “Where Did Porgy and Bess Come From?,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 36, no. 4 (Spring 2006): 697–734; Charles Hamm, “Towards a New Reading of Gershwin,” in *Putting Popular Music in its Place* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 306–24, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511895500.014>; John Rockwell, “1935, October 10: A Controversial Opera Premieres on Broadway. Porgy and Bess,” in *A New Literary History of America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 700–5; Naomi André, “Immigration and the Great Migration: Porgy and Bess in the Harlem Renaissance,” *American Music Review* 45, no. 1 (Fall 2015): 18–21. In the last two decades, many scholars have intensely studied the “whiteness”, “blackness”, or “Jewishness” of *Porgy and Bess*. See principally Ray Allen, “An American Folk Opera? Triangulating Folkness, Blackness, and Americanness in Gershwin and Heyward’s ‘Porgy and Bess,’” *The Journal of American Folklore* 117, no. 465 (Summer 2004): 243–61; Ray Allen and George P. Cunningham, “Cultural Uplift and Double-Consciousness: African American Responses to the 1935 Opera ‘Porgy and Bess,’” *The Musical Quarterly* 88, no. 3 (Autumn 2005): 342–69; Daphne A. Brooks, “‘A Woman Is a Sometime Thing’: (Re)Covering Black Womanhood

obviously a very different one; yet we will see how it, too, encountered criticisms of its authenticity comparable to some of the comments on Powers’s novel, on which the opera is based. Before turning to the opera’s reception, however, Defoort’s construction of the opera as a third space should be addressed.

Constructing the opera, building a third space

The Belgian composer Kris Defoort has been associated with the “Flemish wave” of inventive and provocative stage productions.²⁴ Since 2001, he has written several works for the music theatre and four operas; *The Time of Our Singing* is Defoort’s most recent, completed in April 2020. It was commissioned by the Brussels opera De Munt/La Monnaie and the LOD music theatre in Ghent; the production was realised by La Monnaie, LOD, and the Theatre of St. Gallen. The adaptation of Richard Powers’s novel into an opera libretto was in the hands of the Belgian author Peter Van Kraaij (b.1961).²⁵ After being postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, *The Time of Our Singing* premiered in Brussels on 14 September 2021, conducted by Kwamé Ryan and directed by Ted Huffman; its first performance in St. Gallen took place on 26 February 2023. The production garnered international attention and won the International Opera Awards’ World Premiere Award 2022.²⁶ In October 2024, the production returned to Brussels and a recording was issued.²⁷

Defoort’s *The Time of Our Singing* shares several features with his earlier operas: all are based on novels, rather than on theatrical plays, and portray situations of dominance or exploitation.²⁸ Defoort’s first opera, *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (2001) was based on the novel by Roddy Doyle (1996) and tells the story of a woman and her abusive lover, from whom she cannot tear herself away. *The House of the Sleeping Beauties* (2009), after Yasunari Kawabata’s novel (1961), describes a system of “soft” prostitution that leads to the death of a young girl. The “circus opera” *Daral Shaga* (2017) is based on Laurent Gaudé’s adaptation of his own novel *Eldorado* (2006) and portrays exiled refugees undergoing contemporary forms of exploitation and exclusion. Defoort’s fourth opera, *The Time of Our Singing*, centres on the issue of racial inequalities experienced by African Americans, particularly in the world of classical music and that of opera itself.

in *Porgy and Bess*,” *Daedalus* 150, no. 1 (Winter 2021): 98–117; Ari Katorza, “It Ain’t Necessarily So: Gershwin, Whiteness, Altruism and the Distortion of American Jews’ Music History,” *Jewish Culture and History* 21, no. 4 (2020): 323–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1462169X.2020.1836830>; Annie Kim, “Bess Disembodied: Camilla Williams’s (Re)Sounding Black Womanhood in *Porgy and Bess*,” *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 26 (2022): 25–44, <https://doi.org/10.1353/wam.2022.0001>; Kai West, “Buckra: Whiteness and *Porgy and Bess*,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 75, no. 2 (2022): 319–77, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jams.2022.75.2.319>; Jeffrey Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues. African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2001). On the impact of racial casting and its concomitant legal issues, see also Douglas Carl Abrams, “Racist Casting, Interracial Attraction and Primitivism,” in *Missionaries in the Golden Age of Hollywood*, Palgrave Studies in the History of the Media (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 17–43, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-19164-0_2; Zoltan S. Novak, “*Porgy and Bess* return to Budapest: can an “unwritten” condition of the copyright holder be breached?,” *Journal of Intellectual Property Law & Practice* 13, no. 10 (2018): 772–3, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jiplp/jpy124>; Olufunmilayo B. Arewa, “Copyright on Catfish Row: Musical Borrowing, *Porgy and Bess*, and Unfair Use,” *Rutgers Law Journal* 37 (Winter 2006): 277–353; Alexandra Ivanoff, ““*Porgy and Bess*” with a White Cast Stirs Controversy,” *The New York Times*, January 30, 2018.

24 See for example Marta Isaacsson, “O velho monge em um concerto teatral,” *ARJ – Art Research Journal: Revista de Pesquisa em Artes* 3, no. 1 (January/June 2016): 171–2, <https://doi.org/10.36025/arj.v3i1.8511>, about Defoort’s music theatre production with actor Josse De Pauw, *An Old Monk* (2011).

25 *The Time of Our Singing* is not Powers’s only novel to inspire composers to write an opera: recently, Tod Machover based an opera on *The Overstory*; see Thomas May, “Translating the Music of Trees into the Sounds of Opera,” *The New York Times*, March 6, 2023.

26 “2022 Winners,” International Opera Awards, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://operaawards.org/archive/2022>.

27 The recording was published on the label Fuga Libera, FUG837.

28 Bernard Focroulle, “L’univers musical de Kris Defoort, du jazz à l’opéra/De muzikale wereld van Kris Defoort, van jazz tot opera,” in *The Time of Our Singing. Kris Defoort*, ed. Marie Mergeay (Brussels: De Munt/La Monnaie, 2021), 88–9.

The three themes of Powers’s novel – time, music, and race – obviously transpire in Van Kraaij’s and Defoort’s opera. Because the change of medium from novel to opera evidently required several substantial changes, we must examine whether and to what extent the themes are affected. The following section studies how the adaptation impacts each of the three themes and their interrelationships, and how they create a third space enabling inter-cultural and inter-personal encounters in a Bhabhaian sense.

“Time”, the first theme, is inherent to the medium of opera, which is a time-bound art form like music and theatre. When an opera is based on a literary form such as a novel, in which the reader can return to earlier chapters or browse forward to later passages, significant changes are necessary, *a fortiori* when its structure plays with multiple interwoven chronological layers. Van Kraaij’s principal intervention was to retell the novel’s narrative in chronological order from 1939 to 1992. The chronological starting point of both novel (chapter 4) and opera (scene 1) is Marian Anderson’s concert at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington on 9 April 1939.²⁹ The opera ends, as mentioned before, during the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles (29 April–3 May 1992). An overview is given in Table 1.

Act	Scene	Scene title	Historical events referenced	Opera events
		Overture		
I	1	Easter 1939	9 April 1939, Marian Anderson’s concert at Lincoln Memorial	9 April 1939, Delia Daley and David Strom meet
	2	Nest	1940, outbreak of WW II	9 April 1940, marriage of Delia and David 1941, birth of Jonah Strom 1942, birth of Joseph (“Joey”) Strom
	3	The World is Ending	1–2 August 1943, Harlem riots 6 and 9 August 1945, atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki	Two letters: Delia’s father William questions David’s implication in constructing the A-bomb Delia’s mother, Nettie Ellen, refuses to take care of the boys once Ruth is born
	4	The School of Life		1945, birth of Ruth The family sings together in the game of “Crazed Quotations”
	5	The School of Music		Fall 1952–1953, Jonah and Joey attend Academy of Music 1955, death of Delia Daley
II	6	Ashes to Ashes		Ruth refuses to believe Delia’s death was an accident

Table 1. Structure of *The Time of Our Singing* (Defoort and Van Kraaij, 2020, continued).

²⁹ For ease of reference, only scene numbers are given, since the scenes are numbered throughout. Marian Anderson’s voice is not heard in the opera; in Huffman’s staging, images of the concert at Lincoln Memorial are projected. Anderson’s own account of the events is in Anderson, *Oh Lord, What a Morning*, 184–96. About the importance of Anderson as a Black (opera) singer, see e.g., Nina Sun Eidsheim, “Marian Anderson and “Sonic Blackness” in American Opera,” *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (September 2011): 641–71, and the work of Kira Thurman, especially “Performing Lieder, Hearing Race,” and *Singing Like Germans: Black Musicians in the Land of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021).

Act	Scene	Scene title	Historical events referenced	Opera events
	7	Resuming Life		Jonah and Joey rehearse for a competition, America’s Next Voice
	8	Bliss		December 1961, Jonah wins America’s Next Voice
	9	An Education		Lisette Soer, a lyric soprano and Jonah’s teacher, seduces him
	10	Christmas 1962		25 December 1962, Christmas dinner at the Daleys
	11	One Day	28 August 1963, Martin Luther King speaks at the March for Jobs and Freedom in Washington	Lisette tells Jonah about her abortion
	12	Watts Recorded	11–16 August 1965, Watts riots in Los Angeles	Jonah is recording in Los Angeles; Joey reads a positive review about the concert in Carnegie Hall Jonah is hurt during the riots
	13	Ruth and Robert	15 October 1966, founding of the Black Panther Party	Ruth hands police reports about Delia’s death to Joey Ruth and Robert join the Black Panthers
	14	A Way Out	4 April 1968, murder of Martin Luther King	Jonah refuses to be typecast as “the Negro”, and leaves to Europe to pursue a career there
III	15	Intensive Care		1971, death of David Strom
	16	Depression		Joey empties David’s apartment Death of Robert Rider
	17	Philadelphia		30 June 1984, remaining family members re-establish contact Joey decides to teach at Ruth’s school
	18	Deep River		1985 Death of William Daley 1986 Ruth’s school opens in Oakland; Jonah decides to visit
	19	Our Singing		The school choir, with Ruth and Joey, performs for Jonah
	19b	Interlude Mark Turner		Interlude with saxophone solo
	20	Right Back Dead in the Middle of It	29 April–3 May 1992, Rodney King riots in Los Angeles	1 May 1992, death of Jonah Strom during the riots in Los Angeles

Table 1. Structure of *The Time of Our Singing* (Defoort and Van Kraaij, 2020, continued).

After Jonah's last words ("Next time"), a sound of sizzling air is heard, produced by the musicians of the orchestra.³⁰ This effect can be heard as wind (possibly symbolizing the passing of time), but also as human breath. An informed audience today may connect these breathing sounds to the death of George Floyd, whose last words "I can't breathe" were mediated globally immediately after his death on 25 May 2020, even though the dates and events projected on the onstage screen end with the death of Jonah Strom on 1 May 1992 and Kris Defoort concluded the composition of his opera in April 2020. Such an interpretation would imply that the opera has a longer timeline than the book and denounces forms of discrimination that continue until today.³¹

The straightening out of the chronology in the opera impact our understanding of the opera. While the chronological progress, theoretically, could have been used to suggest a form of positive evolution in antiracism in the society in which the Strom family lives, the opera does not imply such progress. On the contrary, some of the characters wonder why nothing changes. The song Jonah selects for the competition America's Next Voice (scenes 7–8) takes its text from a John Dowland song (the music is Defoort's): "Time stands still with gazing on her face, stand still and gaze for minutes, hours, and years to give her place. ... All other things shall change, but she remains the same."³² When Ruth describes to her family the incident that caused the death of her husband Robert (scene 16), the refrain she repeats three times is "It's so old, Joey. So, so old", suggesting that in the relationships between Black and white nothing ever changes.

Ted Huffman's staging in the Brussels and St. Gallen productions strongly contributed to this sensation of stasis. His *Personenregie* provides that all characters remain present on stage throughout the opera, even those who at given points in the narrative were not yet born (Ruth, her sons) or have already died (Delia, later David and Robert). The still-unborn and the already-deceased watch as the living go about their business. They even interact with them through silent gestures: Delia encourages Joey during his competition performance (scene 7) or hands the microphone to Ruth (scene 17); twice, the interaction takes on a musical guise through Delia's vocalising (scenes 8, 17). Even though the libretto spans more than half a century's time, Huffman's staging gives it a strong sense of non-evolution; it relativises both time and the evolution of the racial relationship between its characters and the outside world.

As appears from the standstill the opera characters experience, Van Kraaij's rearrangement of the novel's chronology does not reinstate a sense of "progressing" time; Huffman's staging reinforces this sense of stasis. Van Kraaij and Huffman on the contrary undercut this experience of progress and provide a first instance where the viewer's experience of continuously evolving time is undermined. Or in the terms of Bhabha's third space: in Van Kraaij's and Defoort's treatment of the "time" theme, the experience of "homogeneous, serial time" is suspended.³³

"Music", the second theme of the novel, reinforces this experience of time's stasis despite its passing and thus contributes to the non-linearity of the time experience in the third space. The "music" theme is embodied directly by Defoort's music, which is unhesitatingly "postmodern" in that it fluently integrates elements from diverse origins, cultures, and styles, without obscuring the individual origins of each element.³⁴

30 The score instructs the wind players to produce "blowing wind", at first through their instruments (bars III.841ff), a few bars later without instruments (b. III.846ff); from bar III.849 onwards, the instruction for almost all winds and strings (except piccolo and violin I) reads "free blowing, everybody independent and irregular."

31 I thank Lena van der Hoven (University of Bern) for this suggestion.

32 Not coincidentally, these verses figure on the very first page of the novel, the opening scene of which describes the seconds immediately after Jonah finished his performance; Powers, *The Time of Our Singing*, 3–4.

33 All subsequent references to Bhabha and his concept of third space are to the three quotations given at the beginning of this article; their references are given in footnotes 7, 8, and 10.

34 Cf. Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Winter 1991): 336–57.

Defoort’s musical language draws upon early (baroque) and contemporary music, jazz, and rap. Defoort is intimately familiar with this wide range of styles: he was initially trained as a professional recorder player before he turned to contemporary music, composition, and jazz; he has worked as a jazz pianist and improviser over the past forty years.³⁵ The vocal parts combine singing with both spoken text and *Sprechgesang*; as they did in *The Woman who Walked into Doors* and *The House of Sleeping Beauties*. In addition to the singers and the youth choir, three extras are seen on stage: Ruth’s husband Robert Rider, and Kwame and Little Robert, Ruth’s sons.

The line-up of the orchestra, much as in *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*, reflects the wealth of resources from which Defoort draws. It combines a chamber orchestra with a small jazz ensemble, to which an upright piano with its own pianist on stage is added. The ensemble in the orchestra pit consists of a jazz quartet (tenor sax, piano, drums, electric bass) and a chamber orchestra (1.0.1.0 – 1.1.0.1 – 3.3.3.2.1, piano, celesta, large percussion set).³⁶

Even though an in-depth analysis of Defoort’s score is not the purpose of this article, two major elements of his musical language merit some comment. The first is improvisation: Defoort encourages his performers to improvise – collectively and individually – and thus enhances their agency and provides a place and time for an expression of their individuality. In a recent study, Megan Steigerwald Ille describes how the integration of improvisation in the production *Sweet Land* (opera company The Industry, 2020) not only allowed for a freer expression of the identity of the performers – for some it was a *conditio sine qua non* to take part in the production – but also provided, through the rehearsal and production process, an alternative to the implied hierarchical structure of “colorist settler opera.”³⁷ Defoort does not go so far as to implement improvisation on a structural level of his opera, although improvisation is consistently built in into the score.

The principal moments of collective improvisation are scene 4, where the Strom family improvises on chord progressions from the first theme of the *Andante con moto* of Schubert’s Second Piano Trio, and scene 19, in which the youth choir, directed by Joey (baritone) starts singing *Music for a while* but then departs on an improvisation on a simple chord scheme (D–B^b–C–D). When Jonah (tenor), Ruth, and Joey join in, the scene turns into a collective jam session.³⁸ The choir here sings phrases in a non-existent language, the syllables are a “remix” of the Arabic and Japanese translations of the novel’s steadily recurring phrase “Bird and fish can fall in love, but where will they build their nest?”.³⁹ In the newly constructed text, a few existing words remain recognisable, such as the Japanese “tori”, “to” (bird, and), and the Arabic “al tayr” and “al samaka” (the bird, the fish).

35 Jeroen Vanacker and Klaas Coulembier, “Defoort, Kris,” Matrix. New Music Centre, 2006, <https://matrix-new-music.be/en/publications/flemish-composers-database/defoort-kris/>.

36 Flute doubling piccolo and bass flute, clarinet doubling Eb clarinet and bass clarinet, bassoon doubling contrabassoon. The percussion sets consist of Percussion I: vibraphone, marimba, glockenspiel, crotales, timpani, large tam-tam, large suspended cymbal, big thunderplate, triangle, and woodblock; Percussion II: jazz drum set, large tam-tam, large suspended sizzle cymbal, large suspended cymbal, splash cymbal, metal chimes, snare drum, rain stick, temple blocks, and walkie talkie; Percussion III: glockenspiel, crotales, large tam-tam, large suspended sizzle cymbal, large suspended cymbal, metal chimes, grosse caisse, snare drum, low conga, and temple blocks.

37 Megan Steigerwald Ille, *Opera for Everyone. The Industry’s Experiments with American Opera in the Digital Age* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2024), 177–91, <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.12081134>.

38 While Defoort wrote the scene for a complete youth chorus, Covid regulations in 2021 did not allow to have the complete chorus on stage. Instead, only three young singers were on stage during the premiere, while gradually a recording of the full chorus was mixed into the performance; see Serge Martin, “Kris Defoort: la musique, passion d’une vie,” *Le Soir*, September 7, 2021, <https://www.lesoir.be/393463/article/2021-09-07/kris-defoort-la-musique-passion-dune-vie>; Alma Torretta, “Alla Monnaie: The Time of Our Singing. Successo per la nuova opera di Kris Defoort,” *Giornale della Musica*, September 28, 2021, <https://www.giornaledellamusica.it/recensioni/alla-monnaie-time-our-singing>. During both the St. Gallen production (2023) and the Brussels reprise (October 2024), a mixed chorus performed on stage, as prescribed in the score; Charles Uzor, “Welche Lieder wird die neue Zeit bringen?,” *Saiten*, March 27, 2023, <https://www.saiten.ch/welche-lieder-wird-die-neue-zeit-bringen>.

39 In the opera, the phrase occurs in scenes 2, 15, and 19.

Defoort also leaves ample room for individual improvisation: most notable are the frequent improvisatory interventions of the tenor saxophone, the “voice” of Jonah’s loneliness, a part specifically composed for Defoort’s long-time musical companion Mark Turner. The “Turner sax” makes its presence known from the overture to the end of the opera. In resuming of the musical material from the overture in scene 19b, entitled “Interlude Mark Turner”, it musically connects the beginning and the end of the opera. Whether the improvisations are collective or individual, performed as a concertante solo or within the ensemble, Defoort employs a variety of techniques and notations to co-ordinate the improvisation with its surroundings, ranging from free improvisation *senza misura* (overture, scene 19b) over the use of cells repeated in a free or a specified order (e.g., scene 6), to *gruppetti* in the style of Berio (e.g., scenes 3 and 9).⁴⁰

The second salient ingredient is the abundant integration of citations and quotations. “Citation” is understood here in the stylistic sense, as the borrowing from or paraphrasing of a specific style, such as blues, jazz, or rap. “Quotation” refers to the literal use of a musical phrase or chord progression from an existing composition. Defoort selects quotations freely, but far from exclusively, from those of Powers’s novel; an overview is given in Table 2.

Scene	Quotation	Quotation source	Sung by	Text in the opera
Overture	<i>Erbarme dich</i>	Bach, aria from <i>St Matthew Passion</i> (BWV 244)	[saxophone, orchestra]	[instrumental]
1	<i>God Save the Queen</i>	British national anthem	Delia, David, Jonah, Joey	“This is the place the voice creates: ‘Of thee I sing’”
1 (end)	<i>Bist du bei mir</i>	Stölzel, aria from <i>Diomedes</i> (BWV 508) ⁴¹	Delia	“I checked to see if he can carry the chords for me;” Aria text, vv. 1–2
3	<i>O Ewigkeit</i>	Bach, Chorale from cantata <i>O Ewigkeit du Donnerwort</i> (BWV 20)	Jonah, Joey	Chorale, selected vv.
4	<i>Andante con moto</i>	Schubert, second movement from Piano Trio No. 2, op.100 (D 929)	Delia, David, Jonah, Joey, Ruth	[textless improvisation]
7+8	<i>Time stands still</i>	Dowland, song <i>Time stands still</i>	Jonah	Song, vv. 1–3
9 (end)	<i>Someday my prince will come</i>	Churchill and Morey, <i>Someday my prince will come</i> ⁴²	Lisette	“Can you take me home with you someday?”
12	<i>Music for a while</i>	Purcell, aria from incidental music <i>Oedipus</i> (Z 583)	[orchestra]	[instrumental]

Table 2. Selected musical quotations in *The Time of Our Singing* (Defoort and Van Kraaij, 2020, continued).

40 Cf. David Menent Olivert, “Estudio analítico descriptivo y aplicación didáctica de las Secuencias de Luciano Berio,” (PhD diss., University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 2013).

41 *Bist du bei mir* is an aria from the opera *Diomedes* (1718) by Gottfried Heinrich Stölzel. It was included by Anna Magdalena Bach, Johann Sebastian’s second spouse, in an arrangement for voice and basso continuo as no. 25 of her *Notenbüchlein* (Notebook). Only in 2009 was the composition identified as Stölzel’s; Axel Fischer and Matthias Kornemann, eds., *The Archive of the Sing-Akademie zu Berlin: Catalogue* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 67, 249–50, and 687–8.

42 The song was composed by Frank Churchill (music) and Larry Morey (lyrics) for the Disney movie *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), in which the song was performed by Adriana Caselotti.

Scene	Quotation	Quotation source	Sung by	Text in the opera
14	<i>Nessun dorma</i>	Puccini, aria from <i>Turandot</i>	Jonah	“But I refuse to be typecast before I’ve sung a single opera role”
15	<i>Erbarme dich</i>	Bach, aria from <i>St Matthew Passion</i> (BWV 244)	David	“There’s another wavelength ev’ry place you point your telescope”
17	<i>Erbarme dich</i>	Bach, aria from <i>St Matthew Passion</i> (BWV 244)	Joey	“He said to tell you there’s another wavelength every-place you point your telescope”
19	<i>Music for a while</i>	Purcell, aria from incidental music <i>Oedipus</i> (Z 583)	Youth chorus	Song, vv.1–2
20	<i>Erbarme dich</i>	Bach, aria from <i>St Matthew Passion</i> (BWV 244)	Jonah, saxophone, orchestra	“Everyone is going somewhere else”

Table 2. Selected musical quotations in *The Time of Our Singing* (Defoort and Van Kraaij, 2020, continued).

Defoort’s citations and quotations serve two purposes. First, they help to fleshen out some of the characters musically by giving them a stylistic musical identity. The singing style of Delia (soprano) is coloured by blues and improvisation, although she participates in the full range of styles and singing techniques mentioned earlier, and is also given the *Bist du bei mir* quotation. The melodic lines in the part of Lisette Soer (mezzosoprano, scenes 9 and 11), are riddled with scales, reminiscent of vocal warm-ups and exercises. The score instruction (scene 11) reads “improvise with voice exercises: ‘Aaah’.” Both her counterpart Jonah (tenor) and the orchestra participate in the scales” exercises. The few notes she quotes from Snow White’s song, spurred by the word “someday”, lend the scene a caricatured irony.

The character that receives the most emphatic musical characterisation is certainly Ruth, whose part offers an elaborate citation of rap style, casting her as belonging to originally Black hip-hop culture.⁴³ Ruth’s voice type is given in the score as “Soul/R&B singer.” Her entry in scene 4 clearly sets her apart from the preceding scenes. The contrast comes mainly from the musical style and her fashion of performing the lyrics, less their content: Ruth is a feisty lady, but not a “bad bitch” – the persona often incarnated by female rappers, as Michael Oware recently stated.⁴⁴ Her freestyling does not end at the boundaries of her solos: more than for any other role, Defoort prescribes improvised episodes for her part when she is taking part in ensembles.⁴⁵

43 David Toop, Charise Cheney, and Loren Kajikawa, “Rap,” in *Grove Music Online*, July 10, 2012, <https://www-oxfordmusic-online-com/grovemusic/display/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002225387>; Alphonso Simpson Jr., “African American Music: The Ties That Bind,” in *African American Studies*, ed. Jeanette R. Davidson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 276–8.

44 Matthew Oware, “Bad Bitches?,” in *Got Something to Say. Gender, Race, and Social Consciousness in Rap Music* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 79–114. See also Cheryl Lynette Keyes, “Empowering Self, Making Choices, Creating Spaces: Black Female Identity via Rap Music Performance,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 113, no. 449 (Summer 2000): 255–69, <https://doi.org/10.2307/542102>; and Cheryl Lynette Keyes, “Daughters of the Blues: Women, Race, and Class Representation in Rap Music Performance”, in *Rap Music and Street Consciousness* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 186–209.

45 E.g., scene 4. At the very end of the novel, also Ruth’s youngest son Little Robert is rapping: “‘The bird and the fish can make a bish. The fish and the bird can make a fird.’ He chants the words, raps them, a cantering, desperate rhythm.” Powers, *The Time of Our Singing*, 630–1. Reflections on this passage are offered by Hill, “Narrative Knots,” 220. In the opera, Little Robert’s role is silent.

The second purpose of the citations and quotations, considered as a whole, is the representation of time. As they state in interviews, Defoort and Van Kraaij consider the “time” dimension represented in the music of the opera.⁴⁶ Through the use of citations and quotations, Defoort indeed creates a coexistence of musical elements from heterogeneous geographical origins and historical periods. In a metaphorical sense, the present – the moment of “now” that according to David Strom is a clever lie – is only the coincidence of several temporal layers that depends on the point of observation. In the context of the theory of relativity, physicists know this as the “relativity of simultaneity”: whether the occurrence of several individual events is viewed as simultaneous depends on the standpoint of the observer.⁴⁷ Or, conversely, one might say that Defoort’s music suspends time by creating a sense of synchrony: the present in which several historical styles coexist, temporarily cancels history.

In addition to creating a sense of standstill and synchronicity, Defoort includes a number of moments where time is suggested to be cyclic, through recurring musical events. The saxophone solo during the overture and the repetition of the same melodic material during the “Mark Turner Interlude” (scene 19b) was mentioned earlier. Jonah gets injured during the Watts riots for the first time, an event which repeats itself during the Rodney King riots. The first time he goes outside out of curiosity, the second time because he wants to engage in action but dies (scenes 12 and 20).⁴⁸ A motif of a descending sixth ($c^2 - c^2 - c^2 - e^1$) is heard repeatedly when Delia acts out the conversation about her meeting with David; the same motif is heard again much later, when Kwame tells his mother Ruth “you’re so white, mum” (scenes 1 and 18). Descending half-tone motifs are heard when characters die: at the death of Delia (“Your mother is dead”, scene 5), David (“You must tell her. Next time”, scene 15), and Jonah (“Next time”, scene 20). Recurrent events and their concomitant musical materials suggest that the time does not always (or not only) stand still but also repeats itself.

The continuously shifting layers of time in Powers’s novel thus seem to be represented by Defoort’s continuously shifting musical style in which various times and places coexist. Whereas the non-linearity in the novel is situated on a structural level (the forward and backward time leaps between the chapters), the third space experience for the listener is created by the non-linearity of the music – variously shaped as stasis, cyclicity or synchronicity.

The third theme, “race” and the relationships between the characters and the multiracial society they live in, is equally affected by various modifications of the storyline. They thus also affect the Bhabha’s element of “inter”, interpersonal and international interaction, the “in-between” that makes up the essential hybridity of any culture, which becomes visible in the third space.

Viewers familiar with the novel may remark how the narrator differs from the novel. The story is not told by Joey as the main narrator in Powers’s novel, but by all characters. In the opening scene, for example, Delia and David describe how they walk towards the Lincoln Memorial, where Marian Anderson holds her concert on Easter Sunday 1939, while also Joey and Jonah describe their parents approaching and meeting each other. Defoort and Van Kraaij thus create a certain distance between the narrators and the narrative in which they participate in *The Time of Our Singing*. A similar search for narrative distance is also found in Defoort’s other operas, where it is achieved by different means: the favoured procedure in *The Woman who Walked into Doors*

46 E.g., Kris Defoort and Peter Van Kraaij, “Une oeuvre polyphonique/Meerstemmigheid en gelaagdheid,” in *The Time of Our Singing*. Kris Defoort, ed. Marie Mergeay (Brussels: De Munt/La Monnaie, 2021), 31, 41.

47 Thomas Strohm, “Relativity of Simultaneity,” in *Special Relativity for the Enthusiast* (Cham: Springer, 2023), 97–125, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-21924-5_7.

48 Defoort and Van Kraaij, *The Time of Our Singing*, [Libretto], 55: “I went out, Mule, in the middle of this. Looking for what I was supposed to do”.

and in *The House of Sleeping Beauties* is the duplication of several of the principal characters into singers and actors.⁴⁹ Here, however, the sole narrator of the novel is quadrupled into four.

The most prominent change in the narrative happens in scene 17, in which Joey decides not to join Jonah when he embarks upon his European early-music career, but to teach in Oakland at the school founded by Ruth. In the novel, Joey first joins Jonah’s early music ensemble Voces Antiquae in Europe and only later joins Ruth at the school she has founded.

This intervention is consequential, because it impacts the balance between the protagonists, and specifically that between the three siblings. When considering their life choices and career paths, Jonah’s choice to be a classical singer comes closest to choosing a “white” career.⁵⁰ Yet inevitably, he is incessantly reminded of his mixed identity, and never fully belongs to Black or white communities. Whereas the “white” element in his career is most visible, Jonah remains in both the opera and the novel a psychologically well-developed character, who refuses to be type-cast as “the Negro” in Schuller’s *The Visitation* before having sung any other roles. Ruth, on the other hand, leads a life engaged in Black activism: she joins the Black Panthers, marries Robert, a Black Panther, and founds a school for Black children. Since she is the sibling that is most actively searching to reconnect with her Black origins, she is, significantly, often phonetically nicknamed “Root” or “Rootie”. Joey steadily balances between his older brother and his younger sister: for the longer part of his musical career, he remains Jonah’s accompanist, while towards its end he joins Ruth’s school for Black children as a teacher. Defoort and Van Kraaij may have shifted the storyline for pragmatic purposes, yet Joey’s refusal to follow Jonah to Europe subtly but noticeably modifies the balance between the sibling protagonists.⁵¹ Ever the mediator between the more white-oriented Jonah and the Black-oriented Ruth, Joey’s siding with Ruth through his leap towards the Black community takes a more prominent place in the opera because it also implies his choice *not* to pursue Jonah’s “whiter” path.

A third modification is related to the selection of characters for the opera. The only white characters are David (baritone) and Lisette Soer (mezzo), who in scene 9 seduces Jonah. In scene 11, when Jonah proposes her to marry him, thinking she is pregnant, she makes it clear to him that she has his child aborted.⁵² Among the secondary and tertiary characters who were cut from the novel, two stand out. The mother of Delia, Nettie Ellen Alexander, is present in the opera only indirectly through the mouth of Delia when she narrates the dialogue with her parents and when she reads her mothers’ reply to her letter, announcing the birth of Ruth (scenes 1 and 3).⁵³ The second is Teresa Wierzbicki, Joey’s Polish girlfriend, who plays an important role in Joey’s development as an independent personality. She is almost entirely left out in the opera, except for a brief mention of “this Polish girl” in scene 15, when during their final conversation David asks Joey whether “he is seeing anyone.”⁵⁴

By thus reducing the number of characters to the strictly necessary, Van Kraaij and Defoort achieve a noticeable balance in the narrative: two Black characters (Delia and her father William), two white characters (David and Lisette), and three mixed characters (Jonah, Joey, and

49 Furthermore, in *The House of Sleeping Beauties*, a four-voice female chorus represents the sleeping young girls.

50 For the perceptions and the realities of classical singing as a white versus Black field of performance, see Nina Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); furthermore Eidsheim, “Marian Anderson and “Sonic Blackness,” and Kira Thurman, “Performing Lieder, Hearing Race,” and *Singing Like Germans*.

51 Defoort and Van Kraaij, “Une oeuvre polyphonique,” 31, 41.

52 Powers, *The Time of Our Singing*, 239–382.

53 The letter passage in the novel is Powers, *The Time of Our Singing*, 488–9. This passage explains that Ruth was named after the Biblical prophetess; Delia’s mother quotes from the book Ruth (1:16–17) in her letter.

54 Defoort and Van Kraaij, *The Time of Our Singing*, [Libretto], 41. Teresa’s relationships with Joey develops in the novel between chapters 25 and 31 (Powers, *The Time of Our Singing*, 439–588).

Ruth). In addition, there are the three (Black) extras Robert, Kwame and Little Robert, who are on stage throughout, and the (multiracial) youth choir which only appears in scene 19.⁵⁵

Van Kraaij and Defoort's opera carefully proportions the themes "time", "music", and "race". Their approach to the first and the second artfully realises an experience of non-linear time for the opera's audience. The non-linearity is shaped variously as cyclicity, as synchronicity, or as standstill or stasis—the latter sensation further amplified by Huffman's staging of the opera. Their handling of the "race" theme results in a balanced proportion between the characters and their respective racial identifications, enabling equally balanced inter-personal encounters. Through this conscientious remodelling of the novel's three central themes, the opera builds a third space in which the non-linearity of time and the "inter-"element can be experienced by the opera's audience.

Third space in action: the opera's interaction with the outside world

To fully interpret *The Time of Our Singing* as a cultural statement as meant by Bhabha, we need to understand how its third space interacts with the world outside the opera building. We need to examine briefly how the world outside received the opera following its premiere. Moreover, as any cultural product written by a Belgian composer, the opera at least partly reflects the context in which it originated. This means that the racial context in which its author operates needs to be considered: i.e., not the narrative of the opera taking place in the United States, but the contemporary racial situation in Belgium, where Defoort lives and where he composed the opera.

The third space created in Defoort's opera naturally elicited a response from the world surrounding it. The opera's performances received substantial press coverage. The most relevant segment of the opera's reception is where – apart from the usual summaries, statements about American racial history, opinions about the music, libretto, staging, and performance – critics took note of the relevance of the opera to the racial debate in and beyond Europe.

The most prominently recurring topic is the possibility of a performance of the opera in the United States where its narrative is set. As Defoort mentioned in the programme of the Brussels production, the original American co-producing partner dropped out of the project because the artistic team was deemed "too white". Unsurprisingly, this judgment was picked up by some of the press coverage of the premiere, and opera critics pointed out the opera's topicality and relevance to US audiences.⁵⁶ The Belgian theatre critic Johan Thielemans criticised the co-producer's withdrawal:

La Monnaie had hoped that this opera – dealing with quintessential American problems – would also find its way to the USA. It will not, because the producer on the other side of the ocean thinks it is inappropriate that so many white people are responsible for this project, which makes the opera unacceptable to him. That kind of pettiness from castrating moralists will probably blow over, after an urgent examination of conscience. An opera that tries to talk honestly about building bridges ironically finds no bridge to cross the pond.⁵⁷

55 Defoort and Van Kraaij, *The Time of Our Singing*, [Libretto], 53: "kids from all different backgrounds."

56 Defoort and Van Kraaij, "Une oeuvre polyphonique," 36–7, 46; Koen Van Boxem, "Muziek als balsem tegen racisme," *De Tijd*, September 16, 2021, <https://tijd.be/cultuur/podiumkunsten/muziek-als-balsem-tegen-racisme/10332546>; Stéphane Renard, "L'opéra 'The Time of Our Singing' ne laisse pas indemne," *L'Echo*, September 15, 2021, <https://lecho.be/culture/scenes/l-opera-the-time-of-our-singing-ne-laisse-pas-indemne/10332525.html>; Yeri Han, "The Time of Our Singing," *Das Opernglas* 44, May 2023, 70–71; Nicolas Blanmont, "Kris Defoort. Un quatrième opéra pour Bruxelles," *Opera Magazine*, September 2021, 20.

57 Johan Thielemans, "Een gezongen geschiedenis van racisme in de VS," *Pzazz*, September 20, 2021, <https://www.pzazz.theater/nl/recensies/muziektheater/een-gezongen-geschiedenis>. The translation is mine.

Similar comments emerged after an online streaming (Operavision.eu, 24 September 2021) and after the Swiss premiere in 2023. Leonard Turnevicius wrote:

However, with race relations, Black Lives Matter, police brutality and the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor still topical and fresh from yesterday’s headlines, Defoort’s *The Time of Our Singing* just may find itself on the stages of bolder American opera houses sooner rather than later.⁵⁸

One year later Matthew Gurewitsch still wondered:

American audiences have yet to discover the opera *The Time of Our Singing*, adapted from an American novel by two Belgians. While the creative triumvirate – Richard Powers (author), Peter Kraaij (libretto), and Kris Defoort (music) – is all-male and white, their sweeping interracial family saga stands as the richest operatic treatment of #BLM [Black Lives Matter] themes yet to emerge. Will American audiences ever see it?⁵⁹

It is remarkable that the opera’s reception focuses so strongly on the “topic” of the narrative and its perceived contrast to the team of white creators, even when the majority of the characters on stage are Black or mixed. Moreover, it overlooks almost entirely the European racial context of the opera’s creators. Here again, Homi K. Bhabha’s third space concept reminds us that its “productive capacities [...] have a colonial or postcolonial provenance”. If any culture, according to Bhabha, is essentially hybrid, so must be the Belgian culture.

Belgium has indeed always been a culturally and ethnically diverse country. The country’s diversity stems from the historical presence of French-, Dutch-, and German-speaking communities and was further shaped by its colonial history and by several immigration movements after WWII, such as the influx of populations of Italian (1945–1960s), Moroccan and Turkish origin (1960s–1970s), and of Congolese, Rwandese, and Burundian refugees (1990s–2020).⁶⁰

Today, racial perceptions in Belgium seem to balance between colour-blindness and growing colour-awareness.⁶¹ In spite of this ethnic and racial diversity, however, race remains to a certain extent invisible in the Belgian administration and in the public sphere.⁶² Administrative documents do not use ethnic labels, and Belgian law even prohibits the collection of data on ethnic origins, causing “race and ethnicity classifications [to] remain taboo subjects in federal Belgium.”⁶³

58 Leonard Turnevicius, “La Monnaie’s “topical” *The Time of Our Singing*,” *OperaCanada*, September 30, 2021, <https://operacanada.ca/la-monnaies-topical-the-time-of-our-singing>.

59 Matthew Gurewitsch, “*The Time of Our Singing*, by Kris Defoort,” *Air Mail*, March 19, 2023, <https://airmail.news/arts-intel/events/the-time-of-our-singing-by-kris-defoort-1>.

60 Belgium’s only colony between 1885 and 1960 was Congo; between 1916 and 1962, Belgium also governed the mandate territory Rwanda–Urundi (called Rwanda–Burundi from 1961 onwards). The influx from the 1990s onwards happened in the aftermath of conflicts in the region of the former colony and mandate territories. See Zeinab Badawi, *An African History of Africa: From the Dawn of Humanity to Independence* (London: WH Allen, 2024), 405–17, 450–52; and Nadia Fadil and Marco Martiniello, “Racisme et antiracisme en Belgique,” *Fédéralisme Régionalisme* 20, 2020, <https://pop-ups.uliege.be/1374-3864/index.php?id=2030>.

61 On the medieval roots of the concept of “race” and racism, see Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). For compelling evidence for the presence of African citizens in the fifteenth-century Low Countries, see Hendrik Callewier, “Een zwarte man uit het land van Pape Jan. Ethiopische bezoekers en het veranderende wereldbeeld in de Bourgondische Nederlanden,” *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 138, no. 3 (2025): 215–30, <https://doi.org/10.5117/tvg2025.3.002.call>. “Colour blindness” has been described as a “strategy to avoid talking about race or acknowledge racial difference to appear unbiased in social interactions”; see Emma-Lee Amponsah, “Feelings of white supremacy and black inferiority amongst black-white couples in Belgium and the Netherlands,” *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies* 20, no. 2 (June 2017): 165–81, <https://doi.org/10.5117/tvgn2017.2.ampo>, and the literature mentioned there.

62 Amponsah, “Feelings of white supremacy;” Sarah Demart, “Congolese Migration to Belgium and Postcolonial Perspectives,” *African Diaspora* 6, no. 1 (2013): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18725457-12341239>.

63 Laura Odasso, “Controversial Approaches to Measuring Mixed-Race in Belgium: The (In)Visibility of the Mixed-Race Population,” in *The Palgrave International Handbook of Mixed Racial and Ethnic Classification*, ed. Zarine L. Rocha and Peter J. Aspinall (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 288–90.

Similarly, “mixedness” is a category that seems absent from public life.⁶⁴ Laura Odasso has concluded that “the mixed-race population is a non-existent administrative and statistical category. Nevertheless, over time, Belgium has shifted in its position regarding the mixed-race population. Despite more recent attention being paid to nationality and origin (attributed through ancestry analysis), history suggests that race very much mattered.”⁶⁵ The shifting position of the Belgian administration and the public debate remarked by Odasso is felt on various levels. The debate about racial terminology in current Dutch usage is gaining momentum, and there is a renewed debate on Belgium’s colonial memory and post-colonial racism.⁶⁶ This complexity translates into simultaneous but opposed tendencies: an increasing sensibility towards multiculturalism on the one hand, and a reinforced rejection of multiculturalism on the other, an ambivalence observed in many European countries.⁶⁷

This juxtaposition and ambivalence between colour blindness and colour consciousness appears on the foreground of Defoort’s opera: it is the daily struggle in the life of the opera’s characters, both between the family members and the outside world and within the mixed family. Against the background of the Belgian context and reception, Jonah’s last words in the opera – cited at the beginning of this article – take on a different importance. “Nobody knows what color I am” might be heard – also – against this Belgian background.

In conclusion, it bears repeating that Kris Defoort and Peter Van Kraaij, through a carefully crafted remodelling of “time”, “music”, and “race”, the three themes of Powers’s novel, have created a third space where an intercultural musical encounter is made possible, thanks to the means they employ to create a suspension of homogeneous, serial time as well as balanced conditions for interpersonal and intercultural encounters as described by Bhabha. The undoubted culmination point of third space-representation in the opera is the collective improvisation in scene 19, aptly titled “Our Singing”. As we have seen above, the choir of Ruth’s and Joey’s pupils, singing for Jonah, start singing Purcell’s *Music for a while* but before long erupt in a collective improvisation where jazzy, classical, and modern elements meet – encouraged and guided by each of the three siblings relying on their respective racial orientations and experiences. While asserting their agency through improvisation, the characters on stage not only recombine stylistic elements from different epochs into new music and thus – again, in Bhabha’s words – “appropriate,

64 While other countries sometimes have astonishingly elaborate categorisations and handbooks to classify and describe people of various degrees of mixedness, administrative documents in Belgium do not use ethnic labels, nor is there any systematic classification or measurement of mixed-race nationals of foreign origin. For colour categories in Latin America, see Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Black in Latin America* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 223–32; for a handbook, see Rocha and Aspinall, *The Palgrave Handbook*.

65 Odasso, “Controversial Approaches,” 288–90.

66 For example, in the work of Sibö Rugwiza Kanobana; e.g., in his “A Black Perspective on the Language of Race in Dutch,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 31, no. 2 (2021): 271–4, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jola.12325>. For the links between Belgium’s colonial past and the racialisation of the Dutch-speaking community, see Sibö Rugwiza Kanobana, “How the Flemings Became White: Race, Language, and Colonialism in the Making of Flanders,” *Dutch Crossing* 46, no. 3 (2022): 259–73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03096564.2022.2144606>; Odasso, “Controversial Approaches,” 292; Florence Gillet, “Contrepoint. L’histoire coloniale en débat: examen d’une Belgique en repentir,” *Mouvements* 51, no. 3 (2007): 70–7.

67 Fadil and Martiniello, “Racisme et antiracisme;” an example is a case study about the motivations for choosing multicultural schools, which, though well-intended, is not without ambivalence, according to Cedric Goossens *et al.*, “Blowing Hot and Cold about Diversity: White Middle-Class Gentrifiers and Ethnically Mixed Schooling in Belgium,” *Whiteness and Education* 3, no. 1 (2018): 32–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23793406.2018.1445479>. Gloria Wekker observed similar pattern in The Netherlands, and other situations of “racial blindness” or “race-muteness” have been studied in countries such as Germany, Italy, and Slovenia. See Gloria D. Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Guno Jones and Betty de Hart, “(Not) Measuring Mixedness in the Netherlands,” in Rocha and Aspinall, *The Palgrave International Handbook*, 367–87; Philipp Jugert *et al.*, “Researching Race–Ethnicity in Race–Mute Europe,” *Infant and Child Development* 31, no. 1 (January/February 2021): e2260, <https://doi.org/10.1002/icd.2260>, and several studies in Rocha and Aspinall, *The Palgrave International Handbook*. On the European scale of the phenomenon and the absence of Critical Race Theory in Europe, see Mathias Moschel, “Color Blindness or Total Blindness? The Absence of Critical Race Theory in Europe,” *Rutgers Race and Law Review* 9, no. 1 (2007): 57–128.

rehistoricize and read anew” “the same signs”, they also actively represent Bhabha’s third space on stage – they make it a reality.

What happens in this penultimate scene is representative of the entire opera: Defoort has effectively created a third space in which the complexities of racial identity can be enunciated, and has made an artistic product that makes the characters’ difficulties, ambiguities, and hopes palpable and audible. Defoort’s decision to tackle a racial topic contributes to the postcolonial and colour-conscious debate. Moreover, by creating a third space in which the tension between colour blindness and consciousness is “translated” – I quote Bhabha’s words – into a musical dialogue and intercultural exchange, Defoort “rehistoricizes and reads anew” his chosen musical elements (“signs”) “of postcolonial provenance” that make up the substance of this dialogue. The opera thus becomes an “articulation of culture’s hybridity” – more precisely, the hybridity of a Belgian and a European culture.⁶⁸

68 A previous, abridged version of this paper was presented as a lecture in the series “Campus Opéra” at the Université Catholique de Louvain (Louvain-la-Neuve) on October 18, 2024; I thank Brigitte Van Wymeersch and Delphine Clarinval for their kind invitation. I wish to acknowledge the kind assistance of Peter de Caluwe, Marie-Caroline Lefin, Marie Mergeay, and Adèle Moreau (De Munt/La Monnaie, Brussels), Johannes Hunziker and Caroline Damaschke (Konzert und Theater St. Gallen) in providing essential documentation and press coverage of the productions in Brussels and St. Gallen. Thank you to the two anonymous peer reviewers for many helpful suggestions, as well as to Lena van der Hoven and Helena Langewitz (University of Bern) for their patient and meticulous follow-up of this article. I thank Kris Defoort for his interest in and encouragement of this project, for providing answers to my questions, and for two long conversations about his opera (February 20 and March 7, 2024). A final word of thanks to Marie-Caroline, for her incessant enthusiasm and colourful encouragements: this article is dedicated to her.

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