Quand, le cœur en fête, je fredonne un air, ce n’est pas toujours une rumba congolaise. Serait-ce alors trahir? J’exprime aussi une part substantielle de mon être quand le nègre que je suis siffle un blues, un air de jazz, une valse, des phrases d’une symphonie de Beethoven, d’un opéra de Verdi ou Les bateliers de la Volga. Au-delà du Congo, je me sens africain.1

—Henri Lopes

Twentieth-century writers have consistently sought to appropriate music’s subversive ability to transcend boundaries and transform relations. In the early 1960s, Barbadian writer George Lamming argued that Caribbean musicians had begun to reverse Christopher Columbus’s conquest of the Americas by invading and transforming European sensibilities: music “has made a most welcome invasion on the English spine. That spine is no different from my spine: but it needed, perhaps, to be fertilised by a change of rhythm” (1960, 77). In more recent years, authors have come to look to music as a means of escaping binary categories. Thus, Congolese author Henri Lopes, like Maryse Condé and others, radically dislodges music from questions of national identity in order to affiliate himself with a wide spectrum of music that encompasses folksong, the blues, Verdi, and Beethoven. This illustrates the shift from the oppositional and nationalist character of early postcolonial movements to the more complex, multilayered interrogation of nation and identity that characterizes the transnational moment.
The effort to rethink national identity and history is a common thread running through the works discussed in this book. Condé insists that a writer defines her own identity and creates her own language, that the imagination is as good an approach to history as any other. Similarly, Nancy Huston dwells on the capacity a writer has to “say I” from countless different perspectives. And yet, in Assia Djebar’s view, the Algerian woman writer takes on a particular responsibility with respect to other Algerian women; she defines this as the imperative not to speak for other women or from their place, but rather in a relation of proximity and solidarity. Coetzee cautions that fiction offers at best the illusion of embracing different subject positions; it does not fulfill our responsibility to the other as an embodied, situated subject. These authors all deploy innovative narrative forms in their efforts to foreground issues of agency, representation, and voice. As we have seen, these forms draw heavily on the musical models of polyphony, counterpoint, variation, and opera. Music thus provides authors with alternative strategies to introduce reciprocity, plurality, performance, and alterity into their writing.

The novels examined here all question the ideology of the nation—whether its official history in the case of Djebar; its literary manifestos, in the case of Condé; its values, in the case of Coetzee; or its monolingualism and genealogies, in the case of Huston. All of these novels embrace multiple languages: beyond the French or English in which they are written, they open up complex, multilingual worlds—worlds that require the active participation of our imagination. Although Condé writes Traversée de la mangrove in French, the text nonetheless asks us to imagine a multilingual soundscape in which Creole plays a significant part, particularly as the story unfolds in a rural village and presents the thoughts of working class people. Multilingualism also pervades Les nuits de Strasbourg, as the Algerian protagonist Thelja attempts to share her Arabic vernacular with her French lover. Thelja’s conversations with her childhood friend, Eve, imply a back and forth between colloquial Arabic and French, although the written text flattens out this dimension. Huston’s Les variations Goldberg consciously plays on the different vernaculars of characters, moving between Parisian French, working-class Canadian French dialects, an Irish-inflected English with the introduction of the haunting Irish folksong “Cockles and Mussels,” and the French-English Creole of a blues musician from Louisiana. Throughout the text, the underlying presence of the writer’s English disrupts the French, by de-familiarizing and deconstructing metaphors and colloquialisms. Finally, Coetzee writes Disgrace in an English that is deeply self-conscious and critical,
a maimed, incomplete English because, as Mark Sanders (2002b) observes, the author avoids the perfective verb tense. The novel puts this impoverished, tired English in relation to African languages, to animal howls, and to music; ironically, of course, the richness of these contrasts comes through the very English that the protagonist claims is inadequate.

The musical strategies these writers deploy constitute an important dimension of their transnationalism. As we have seen, they each draw on musical forms from the European Baroque, mediated by more recent literary and theoretical movements, including Russian formalism, structuralism, and postcolonialism. Of the works discussed here, only Huston’s novel and Cortázar’s novella represent full-on appropriations of a musical work, taking on Bach’s Goldberg Variations and the Musical Offering, respectively. In the other texts, music occupies a surreptitious role, but its effects are no less powerful. The concepts of polyphony and counterpoint not only influence the structure of the novels, Les nuits de Strasbourg and Traversée de la mangrove, but also allow the authors to stake out alternative responses to political, social, and historical conflict, in the case of Djebar, or to articulate a distinct literary agenda, in the case of Condé. Music exerts a prominent thematic presence in Disgrace, while also performing a formal and ethical function. It opens a space to which readers have no direct access, referencing a music that we can only apprehend in the most tenuous of ways. This forces us to recognize what lies outside our own knowledge and purview. The disruption and incongruity that opera introduces into the novel provokes reflection on the history, social relevance, and ethical implications of forms.

In Borrowed Forms, I have attempted to map out a more responsible, rigorous, and situated engagement with the music in transnational fiction and theory. On the broadest level, the readings here demonstrate that the literary, the musical and the political are inseparable, and that musical forms have wide-ranging, important applications in literature. One conclusion that emerges from these readings is that we are in need of a more nuanced, critical understanding of polyphony. It is not enough to call a text polyphonic. It is essential to identify and situate the precise narrative techniques that contribute to the illusion of polyphony, and to attend to the specific ethical, political, and aesthetic work that this “polyphony” performs. As I have sought to demonstrate through my reading of Condé, grounding polyphony musically and textually helps to avoid the essentializing and exoticizing commentaries to which narrative strategies in African and Caribbean texts have often been subjected.
Counterpoint offers an elegant conceptual model of how to bring disparate voices into relation. Whereas Said deployed counterpoint largely to challenge colonial hierarchies of power and knowledge, it now falls to critics to extend the methodology more radically to consider relations transnationally and transhistorically, across and among peripheries. As we have seen, contrapuntal criticism complements other critical approaches, particularly Michael Rothberg’s multidirectional memory (2009), Mireille Rosello’s notion of performative encounters (2005), and also (more implicitly) Sarah Nuttall’s theory of entanglement (2009), and Kimberlé Crenshaw’s intersectionality (1989); indeed, it can be productive to combine these different approaches.

Reading Huston’s *Les variations Goldberg* in relation to Glenn Gould illustrates how debates in music over the value of live performance in the middle of the twentieth-century anticipated literary debates over the creative authority of the author. Acknowledging how such musical debates shaped literary theory opens up many questions for future interdisciplinary scholarship. Finally, the consideration of J. M. Coetzee, an anglophone South African writer, in the broader context of opera studies and French theory, stages the kind of border crossing and interdisciplinarity that transnational criticism demands.

While the work of Condé, Djebar, Huston, and Coetzee spans the entire latter half of the twentieth century and bears witness to the momentous events of Algerian independence, the departmentalization of Guadeloupe and Martinique, the upheavals of May 1968, the fall of Apartheid, the Algerian Civil War, and the reunification of Europe, this inquiry has focused in particular on novels written in the 1980s and 90s. In these works, musical forms provide a means of holding together divergent voices and positions, and maintaining a tension between the national and the transnational, memory and reconciliation, presence and absence, and speech and silence.

As we might expect, younger writers are appropriating popular genres of music as they continually reinvent the novel. One of the most compelling instances of new musical writing is Chris Abani’s novel *GraceLand* (2005). Born in Nigeria, writing in Los Angeles, Abani develops a highly original narrative by combining aspects of Nigerian *juju* and *asiko* musical forms (Sereda, 2008, 35) with riffs on Elvis Presley, Bob Marley, and Tina Turner. The novel charts the journey of a young boy, Elvis, from a small Nigerian village to the Lagos slums and onward to “redemption” in the United States. Elvis’s trajectory is punctuated by repeated traumas—losing his mother to cancer, witnessing the repeated sexual abuse of his cousin, experiencing rape himself by an uncle, seeing his father slide into alcoholism and overhearing him order...
a relative’s murder, being pulled into drug sales and the traffic of human body parts, and watching the demolition of the Moroko district where he and his friends reside. His need for guidance is met intermittently—and with mixed results—by relatives, beggars and street actors, and, significantly, the lyrics of popular songs overheard on the radio, in street bars, at the movies, and in his head. His name reflects his mother’s passion for Elvis Presley, whom he tries to emulate in the street performances he gives to eke out a meager living. These performances allow him to explore and transgress racial and sexual boundaries: makeup and dance put him in touch with a part of himself that Nigerian society rejects as feminine, a side his conservative father has tried to beat out of him. The novel’s title, *GraceLand*, refers to Presley’s extravagant mansion in Memphis, Tennessee, but also recalls the album Paul Simon produced in collaboration with South African musicians Ladysmith Black Mambazo in 1987, a wildly successful, if controversial release that violated the boycott against apartheid South Africa. The title interrogates the status of the United States as a place of redemption for African refugees. Elvis does not wish to leave Nigeria and resents his compatriots for viewing America as a “Graceland” that will solve all their troubles; eventually, however, he has no alternative but emigration, as he has already been marked out by government thugs and jailed, and would have limited chances of developing himself as an artist if he remained in the country. Following Coetzee’s scrutiny of the notion of “grace” and what it entails in a secular world, Abani’s title questions the promise of redemption, grace, and refuge that the United States holds in the African imagination.

Music plays a complex role in Abani’s novel: in seeming reference to Nigeria’s booming film industry, constant musical citations permeate the reading experience like the soundtrack of a film. Thus, in the opening scene of the novel, the competing strains of different kinds of music vie for Elvis’s attention against the din of the street:

The radio played Bob Marley’s “Natural Mystic,” and he sang along, the tune familiar. “There’s a natural mystic blowing through the air / If you listen carefully now you will hear...” His voice trailed off as he realized he did not know all the words and he settled for humming to the song as he listened to the sounds of the city waking up: tin buckets scraping, the sound of babies crying, infants yelling for food and people hurrying but getting nowhere. Next door someone was playing highlife music on a radio that was not tuned properly. The faster-tempoed
highlife music distracted him from Bob Marley, irritating him. He knew the highlife tune well, “Ije Enu” by Celestine Ukwu. Abandoning Bob Marley, he sang along. [...] On the road outside, two women bickered. (Abani, 2004, 4)

Snatches of song titles and lyrics interrupt the narrative thread to convey the fragmented and overloaded sensory experience of the modern city, and the ways in which American (and here, Caribbean) culture permeate the African street. The hybrid mix of references to African, Caribbean, and American popular music marks other Nigerian novels as well, particularly Chimamanda Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), where the protagonist’s evolving musical tastes mark out her growing consciousness of her African heritage and willingness to embrace it. A relentless frequency of musical citations also characterizes Condé’s *Histoire de la femme cannibale*, in which diverse musical quotations—from Bizet’s *Carmen* to pop—signal the Guadeloupean protagonist’s transnational affiliations, her sense of being in multiple places at once. Song citations play a similar role in Fatou Diome’s *Le ventre de l’Atlantique* (2003), where the leading character Salie expresses her layered identity by belting out the lyrics to Senegalese songs while drinking tea and watching television in her Strasbourg apartment.

Popular music, as evoked in the novels above, invariably involves lyrics, unlike the instances of music considered elsewhere in the book, with the notable exception of opera. Thus, while snatches of popular music can interrupt a narrative, they do not necessarily do so as *music*, but as another kind of text, as words. Drawing on Anahid Kassabian’s (2001) observations with respect to the effect of popular music in film, allusions to popular songs in novels can forge a powerful connection with readers who are familiar with those songs, as they call on readers’ associations in the context of their own lives, and by extension, render the experiences and situations evoked in the text that much more familiar. While the citation of popular music represents an important phenomenon and suggests a fascinating direction for further study, the primary concern of this book has been with music as *form*, as an alternative model of plurality, reciprocity, and relations.

This journey began with Cortázar, whose wittily titled short story “Clone” encapsulates some of the major questions in musico-literary criticism: to what extent can a literary work mimic music? How do we read “musical” fiction? What is the relationship between Baroque forms and the transnational moment? Is the presence of these forms an indication of the continued
cultural domination of Western forms, or is this exchange more dynamic? It seems appropriate, therefore, to conclude with a brief consideration of Alejo Carpentier’s *Concierto barroco* (1974), both an extravagant illustration of the possibilities that musical forms bring to transnational fiction and a perfect bookend to Cortázar’s “Clone.”

Like the authors we have examined, Carpentier was both a prolific novelist and an important critic. Born in Cuba in 1904, he lived in Paris and traveled extensively throughout the Caribbean, Europe, Asia, and North Africa. Moreover, like Kundera, he was an accomplished musicologist: he completed an extensive study of music in Cuba in 1946, in which he explored the African influences on Cuban music and culture, and he brought multiple musical strategies into his fiction. Although Carpentier’s investment in musical form merits full consideration on its own terms, we leave off here with a fertile but fleeting encounter with *Concierto barocco*.

In Carpentier’s novella, music again functions as a means of questioning origins and influences, and provides a more dynamic and inclusive way of approaching history. The novella explodes temporal and spatial limits, moving from Mexico to Venice, from the Baroque to Louis Armstrong. The story recounts the voyage of an unnamed Mexican aristocrat to Europe. Along the way, he stops in Cuba, where he hires the services of an Afro-Cuban page, Filomeno, a freed slave who possesses not only a distinguished genealogy, but also extraordinary musical abilities. The two arrive in Venice in 1709 amidst the frenzy of Carnival celebrations, and encounter Handel, Scarlatti, and Vivaldi. The latter is so taken with the Mexican that he decides to write a New World opera on Montezuma. The New World thus “makes its grand entrance as the scene of dramatic action on the operatic stage” for the first time in history in Vivaldi’s exotic opera; the work premiered in 1733, anticipating by two years Jean-Philippe Rameau’s *Les Indes Galantes*. As the opera takes shape on the stage, however, the Mexican is outraged to see the grotesque misrepresentation of his history, the erroneous introduction of Oriental tropes like elephants to the New World, and the emasculation of important Mexican figures. Brushing aside his objections, Vivaldi upholds the principle of poetic illusion and asserts his artistic freedom to represent the Americas as he imagines them.

Meanwhile, Filomeno’s presence in Venice leads to wild, impromptu music-making sessions at the Ospidale della Pièta, bringing together Afro-Caribbean rhythms, Northern European counterpoint, and Italian virtuosity:
Prendido el frenético allegro de las setenta mujeres [...] Vivaldi arremetió en la sinfonía con fabuloso ímpetu, en juego concertante, mientras Doménico Scarlatti [...] se largó a hacer vertiginosa escalas en el clavicémbalo, en tanto que Jorge Federico Haendel se entregaba a deslumbrantes variaciones que atropellaban todas las normas del bajo continuo. [...] Pero, entre tanto, Filomeno había corrido a las cocinas, trayendo una batería de calderos de cobre, de todos tamaños, a los que empezó a golpear con cucharas, espumaderas, batidoras, rollos de amasar, tizones, palos de plumeros, con tales ocurrencias de ritmos, de síncopas, de acentos encontrados, que, por espacio de treinta y dos compases lo dejaron solo para que improvisara. (Carpentier, 2011, 74).

[Having enkindled the frenetic allegro of the sixty-six young women, Vivaldi attacked the symphony with astonishing abandon in concertante form, as Domenico Scarlatti [...] rippled off vertiginous scales on the harpsichord, and Georg Frideric Handel launched into dazzling variations that violated all the rules of figured bass. [...] But in the meantime, Filomeno had run off to the kitchen and returned with a battery of copper kettles of all sizes that he began to beat upon with spoons, skimmers, rolling pins, stirrers, feather-duster handles, and poers with such prodigies of rhythm, syncopation and complex patterns that he was given a thirty-two bar chorus all to himself. (Carpentier, tr. Zazt, 1988, 79–81)]

This unprecedented jam session between Afro-Cuban, Northern European, and Italian cultural expressions is facilitated, of course, by the radically non-hierarchical space of carnival. What is remarkable in Carpentier’s description of this scene is his emphasis on transgression and excess as constitutive of the exchange, even before Filomeno’s introduction of Afro-Caribbean rhythms. Once Filomeno enters, he reorients the exchange according to his own terms, so much so that he asserts a thirty-two-bar solo, the standard form in jazz. As eccentric as this may be in a Baroque context, the concerto incorporates it and continues on through a final da capo to its decisive final cadence.

While the novella clearly exploits the qualities of invention, accumulation, atemporality, and multiplicity inherent in the Baroque, it also draws on the particular aesthetics of the concerto, a form that originated in Venice and that relies on the principles of contrast and opposition, both of which come
into play in the scene we have just examined. In the final scene, Filomeno is magically transported to the jazz age, where he witnesses Louis Armstrong in performance. Significantly, he recognizes elements of the Baroque concerto that resurface, displaced and transformed in the jazz performance:

A “new Baroque concerto,” the jazz performance stages a play of opposition between the solo virtuoso and the instruments on stage, between musical convention and invention. As Filomeno listens in rapt attention, Armstrong’s trumpet recalls Handel’s cornetto, merging two distinct musical experiences.

Benítez-Rojo (1994, 194) argues that Carpentier’s fascination with the Baroque is symptomatic of the more general desire of Latin American writers to refer to two sources for legitimation, “both of them unattainable: Nature and the American tradition […], and European language and episteme.” Through the baroque concerto and jazz performance, Carpentier stages the tension between distinct traditions, while also envisioning the possibility of their creative fusion. He thus asserts two extremely important notions: that cultural influences are rhizomatic and flow in multiple directions, and that musical forms are never pure, but rather dynamic structures of relations.4 The novella portrays Africa and the “New World” as constitutive of Europe.
Thus, when African, Caribbean, Canadian, or Argentinian writers lay claim to “Western” “European” musical forms, these forms are already the product of dynamic, multidirectional, and multilayered cultural exchange. Moreover, when these forms are deterritorialized and deployed in literature, they are transformed once again in the process.

Carpentier’s novella thus offers another striking illustration of the vibrant influence of musical forms on twentieth-century transnational literature, and points to the creolized nature of the forms themselves. Like the works examined throughout this book, the novella deploys musical forms to pose questions of representation, history, and agency, and to counter monolithic ideologies with a commitment to pluralism and hybridity. Here again, the turn to music stems from a desire to open up the dimensions of time and space in a text, to challenge and reinvent boundaries, to reconfigure hierarchical relations, and to engage with diverse voices without subsuming them into one single dominant reading.

The challenge for readers, however, is not to be seduced by what transnational writers may wish to do through music. Rather, we must attend closely to what music actually accomplishes in specific contexts, while remaining attuned to the possibilities that music brings to literature.