“Jazz studies is transnational these days,” Rashida Braggs writes in her book on African American musicians in post-Second World War Paris, “there is no limit to the places that scholars have located and investigated the music.” Braggs continues, arguing that the “battle” to promote transnational stories “has largely been fought and gloriously continues” (2016, xi). It is easy to concur with part of Braggs’s statement, for there has been a marked growth in jazz scholarship covering new and different “places” that had long been ignored. Some scholars, however, seek to qualify Braggs’s optimism. Catherine Tackley and Tony Whyton agree that “the study of jazz in international settings has blossomed over the past ten years to the point where researchers from around the world can now draw on research into how the music works within specific national settings” (2012, 109). They acknowledge the importance of this scholarship but suggest that there is a distinction between work on jazz in “specific national settings” and research that engages with jazz “as a transnational practice” (ibid.). In particular, they argue that a transnational or global approach—one that differs from merely shifting the geographic focus of jazz studies—enables scholars “to resist American exceptionalist readings of jazz history,” a reading that has long dominated jazz historiography (2010, 94).

To put this another way, Tackley and Whyton suggest that much of what has come to be considered part of a new transnational jazz studies does not actually challenge American exceptionalism. Writing a history of jazz in a location outside the United States of America (US) might call attention to the historic myopia of jazz scholarship and offer a valuable contribution about the ways in which jazz developed in particular settings. As scholars involved in world history make clear, however, changing a geographic lens does not necessarily disrupt dominant narratives. As Micole Siegel argues in an article on the pedagogy of world history, “too many world history courses . . . simply add non-European regions without changing the story, producing a Western Civil[ization] with ‘add-ons’” (2004, 432–433). Tackley, Whyton, and others suggest that what falls into the transnational jazz camp too often produces, in effect, an official history of jazz with “add-ons,” one that expands the canon without challenging it. Despite its valuable contributions, the transnational turn in jazz studies often remains trapped by an American exceptionalist narrative, albeit one that has expanded to encompass the entire globe.

Jazz studies is not alone in turning to the transnational to critique exceptionalist historiography. American studies has also embarked upon a transnational turn as part of a dramatic shift toward an anti- or post-exceptionalist field of study, a shift that began in the early 1990s and accelerated in the years after 2001. Unlike jazz studies, however, much of the transnational turn
in American studies has been marked by a focus on a specific method to disrupt the discourse of exceptionalism, namely the study of empire. Employing empire and the imperial “as a way of seeing,” to borrow Paul Kramer’s phrase, has transformed American studies in its attempt to move away from exceptional readings of US history (2011, 1350). In this chapter, I offer a brief overview of the ways in which empire has informed the transnational turns of both American studies and jazz studies. I suggest that one possible method for jazz scholars “to resist American exceptionalist readings of jazz history” is to follow the model of American studies and place empire at the center of transnational histories of jazz.

Transnational American Studies

The transnational turn in jazz studies echoes similar trends in a number of other fields of study, including American studies. According to Donald Pease, a prominent historian of American studies, a “transnational turn has effected the most significant reimagining of the field of American studies since its inception” (2015, 39). Of particular interest to jazz scholars are the ways in which this shift toward the transnational emerged as a method to imagine an anti- or post-exceptional American studies. I seek to highlight a few main trends of the transnational turn in American studies, paying special attention to the emergence of empire as a lens through which to pursue an anti-exceptional study of the US.

American studies emerged in the years after the Second World War, a period when scholars imagined the US as an exceptional, anti-imperial nation. Daniel Rodgers has examined how American historians in the 1940s came to believe that the “universal laws” of history that had brought about the implosion of Europe did not apply to the US. They concluded that the US was not merely different from European nations; rather, it was an exceptional nation (1998, 21–40). Scholars of the 1940s noted that one important dimension of this exception was that socialism had only spread throughout Europe and the Soviet Union, not the US. Thus, as the US gained in global influence in the early years of the Cold War, American scholars framed the US in stark contrast to the Soviet Union, the other emerging superpower. This contrast was not merely about socialism, however, but imperialism. In the decades immediately after the Second World War, Jan Radway writes, “public debate was structured by the perceived opposition between the aggressive empire of the Soviet Union and the supposedly disinterested, democratic republic of the United States” (2002, 47–48). Thus, scholars exploring the supposedly exceptional nature of the US in this era were, according to Pease, “grounded in an anti-imperialist ethos” (2010, 63). In an approach that would inform scholarship over subsequent decades, early American studies scholars “retroactively” reinterpreted American history according to the concerns of the present, shaping an anti-imperial history of American exceptionalism extending back to the nation’s founding (ibid.).

The shape of American studies began to change when anti-imperial American exceptionalism lost its foil with the Soviet Union’s dissolution in 1991. In the following years, American scholars increasingly voiced new critiques of the logic of exceptionalism, in part by presenting the US as an imperial power. The most famous single work that signaled this shift was Amy Kaplan and Pease’s (1993) edited volume Cultures of United States Imperialism. Kaplan’s germinal opening essay, “Left Alone With America: The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture,” set the stage for a new direction in American studies (1993, 3–21). Kaplan argued that American exceptionalism had been maintained by willfully erasing any traces of empire from US history. She identified, in particular, three “absences” relating to this topic: 1) “the absence of culture from the history of US imperialism”; 2) “the absence of empire from the study of American culture”; and 3) “the absence of the United States from the postcolonial study of imperialism” (ibid, 11).

Kaplan’s call was specific to scholars of the US, but Cultures of United States Imperialism should also be situated alongside broader transnational and imperial turns in other disciplines and fields of
study. By the 1990s, scholars from multiple disciplines were increasingly imagining their research in ways that rejected traditionally bounded studies. One dimension of this broader inquiry was a return of sorts to empire, a topic that had been previously popular before the Second World War. The return to empire, though, was not merely a re-spatializing project. Rather, “the new imperial studies,” as it has been called, also drew heavily upon the contributions of postcolonial theory to re-assess the uneven and ambiguous qualities of the colonial process. Ann Stoler identifies two main dimensions to the new imperial studies: “the premise that colonizing bodies and minds was a sustained, systemic, and incomplete political project in colonial regions and in Europe” (2002, 10).

The significance of the “new imperial studies” to American studies grew after the attacks on September 11, 2001. To justify the US invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, the Bush administration returned to an exceptionalist narrative of US empire, one in which they once again depicted the US as a disinterested, benevolent state in opposition to an evil empire. In response, as Micole Siegel argues, American studies’ embrace of the “transnational method” in this era should be considered part of political project intended “to critique US nationalism in the era of US imperialism” (2009, xv). In the years after 2001, many have analyzed imperial relations between the US, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and Philippines in part to provide broader context for contemporary US politics. Indeed, the imperial dimension of the transnational turn has become one of the most important tools for a new anti- or post-exceptional American studies.

Much of the work on empire in American studies remedies Kaplan’s “absences” and addresses the two areas that Stoler identified as critical for the “new imperial studies.” There has been a particularly robust push toward exploring how US empire has transformed life within the borders of the US. This work has examined subjects from interior decorating to popular music, for example, showing how Tin Pan Alley songs about the Philippine war brought debates about imperial conquest into American living rooms (Hoganson 2007; Rydell 2013). One dimension of this approach has been to propose new frames through which to imagine the US in relation to the world, whether by depicting cities as nodes within broader imperial circuits or by proposing new alignments such as the “transpacific” (Shu and Pease 2015). Another direction has been to dispute the myth of the US as an exceptional (non-)empire by comparing it to European empires (Go 2011).

The imperial has become a critical dimension of the transnational turn in American studies, but the influence of exceptionalism has proven difficult to escape. Pease, Brian Edwards, and Dilip Gaonkar have argued that even Kaplan’s canonical essay “Left Alone With America” “unwittingly reinstalls exceptionalism,” a charge they level against other works of transnational American studies (Edwards and Gaonkar 2010, 9; Pease 2010.) Given the history of American studies as a field of study, one born from a discourse of American exceptionalism, Pease wonders how or if “there can be an American studies after American exceptionalism” (2010, 58). While the debate about the successes of the transnational and imperial turns in American studies is still ongoing, the ways in which empire has come to the fore as a tool for analysis offer a useful model for considering American exceptionalist narratives in the historiography of jazz.

Transnational Histories of Jazz

If Kaplan’s (1993) essay and post-9/11 critiques of US neocolonialism were key catalysts for the transnational turn in American studies, Ken Burns’s 2001 documentary Jazz played a similar role for scholars of jazz. Amid the subsequent debates about jazz historiography sparked by the film, E. Taylor Atkins pointed out in 2003 that the film—like much of jazz scholarship—was myopically focused on the US. Atkins proposed a focus on the global and the transnational as a methodology to disrupt the “parochial parameters and implicit nationalism” of jazz studies, especially the “premise of American exceptionalism” that shaped much of jazz discourse (2003, xi, xvii). He called for new global histories of jazz to dispute the idea that jazz is “the product and reflection of
a uniquely American national experience” (ibid., xxvii). In short, Atkins saw the transnational as a way to craft fundamentally new narratives of jazz history.

In practice, however, global histories of jazz often appear to be driven by other agendas. As Atkins notes, even many of the contributors to his volume Jazz Planet work to demonstrate how non-Americans should fit into “the jazz master narrative,” or “the pantheon” (ibid., xxi). Transnational jazz studies appear, in this case, not so much as a way to critique the “pantheon” but rather as a way to make room for new members. The notion that transnational approaches can be used to focus attention on previously ignored musicians is widespread and takes several forms. For example, Carol Muller has argued that there is “an ethical imperative to strive for greater inclusiveness in the writing of jazz history” (2011, xviii). In many cases, however, the push toward “inclusiveness” has often required universalizing assumptions about particular values, such as musicians’ “search for individual musical identities” that result in accounts replicating a master narrative (Atkins 2003, xxiv).

Making the jazz canon more inclusive in this manner has its uses, but it does not inherently challenge American exceptionalism. As Philip Bohlman and Goffredo Plastino argue, expanding the jazz canon ends up perpetuating a particular “order of history,” one based on the values of American exceptionalism. They suggest that much of transnational jazz scholarship is simply following a familiar model: “After silence or marginalization (as in the case of free jazz and of fusion) the canon is widened to include the marginalized scenes or genres or histories, but the inclusion respects the usual scheme” (2016, 8–9). The underlying narrative—and the logic of that narrative—does not change merely by adding to it or expanding its borders. Expanding the canon by showing how musicians make jazz in different locales can certainly be valuable and important, but such scholarship may not always demonstrate the disruptive promise of transnational jazz.

What I am suggesting, then, is that empire might be a useful tool to pursue a more transformative transnational turn in jazz studies. To be clear, empire has not been absent from jazz scholarship, but it most commonly appears in studies about jazz as a medium for anti-imperialist sentiment. While this subject has provided fascinating insight into the intersections of jazz, politics, and race, it has also supported the notion that jazz is primarily a music of colonial resistance and decolonization, a concept that reinforces what Andy Fry calls a “utopian impulse . . . sometimes witnessed in writings on global jazz” (2014, 19). Using empire to resist this utopian impulse can allow jazz scholars to contribute to the growing body of work offering more ambivalent assessments about music and empire. This scholarship reminds us to listen for the “noisy” processes of colonialism and to consider how new forms of musical labor, performance practices, and theories of sound can act as a “colonizing force” (Radano and Olaniyan 2016, 2). In the following paragraphs, I highlight several ways in which scholars have already begun to examine jazz as an ambivalent imperial form.

One productive approach toward making the imperial a frame for understanding jazz history has been to explore how empire has informed the logic of jazz historiography. Timothy Brennan, for example, critiques narratives that present jazz as “officially (and only)” an American form as “an imperial brag” that denies the “pan-American character” of jazz (2008, 217, 231). The writing of jazz history itself, he contends, can be a violent act of imperialism when it ignores musical influences from outside the US. These histories are not merely confined to the written page. In his study of Guy Warren/Ghanaba, Steven Feld shows how Warren struggled in 1950s New York in part because American musicians considered African music only as a distant resource based in the past, not as a cultural form of equal value to jazz (Feld 2012, 53–85). For Warren, conceptions of jazz that privileged the US and marked other regions and musical cultures as inferior were reinforcing America’s position as a global power. We could consider jazz historiography as imperial, too, in the tendency to transplant US-based ideas about race and music to the rest of the world. The common claim that jazz has been “a symbol of hope for exploited underclasses across the
“globe” because it is improvisatory and rooted in African American traditions assumes a problem-
atically singular interpretation of the racial—and musical—character of jazz (Bakkum 2013, 52).
We need to interrogate how the act of writing transnational stories can, as Brennan suggests, be
an imperial act imposing particular ideas about musical meaning or racial formation.

Another approach for a jazz history shaped by empire is to examine the circulation of music
and musicians in relation to larger imperial processes. Mapping the structures through which peo-
ple, goods, and ideas moved between and across colonial borders can help scholars move beyond
the frame of the nation-state to identify new routes and reasons for the movement of jazz. These
imperial circuits also commonly crossed colonial borders and connected cities and scenes that are
often presented as disconnected from one another (Schenker 2016). Examining the ways in which
military, economic, and political infrastructures of imperial powers have informed the travels of
jazz also contributes to a focus on what Travis Jackson describes as “the play of power and inequality
in the development and dissemination of jazz” (2016, 382). Jazz did not travel along colonial
routes on its own as an autonomous form. Nor was it accepted solely because of its aesthetic appeal.
Rather, the movements of jazz were informed by shifts in global labor, military actions, and the
global expansion of the popular music industry. As Brennan argues with the case of James Reese
Europe’s triumph in Europe, it was not uncommon for jazz to travel “at the point of a rifle” (2008,
230). Situating the spread of jazz to diverse locales as part of the political and economic expan-
sions of imperial ambition critiques a vision of an “America global” that, as Edwards and Gaonkar
argue, “is often agentless” (2010, 28). By examining the movement of jazz between colonies,
former colonies, and metropoles, we can map routes for the movements of jazz beyond national
borders and emphasize the various agents involved in jazz’s circulation.

One more approach toward an imperial study of transnational jazz echoes American studies by
re-situating US jazz in relation to the rest of the globe. Nicholas Gebhardt, for example, proposes
reimagining New Orleans music in relation to broader Caribbean and Latin American history in
a way that “refigures jazz from the perspective of the world” (2012, 195). Gebhardt’s proposition
is similar to works that consider cities such as New York, San Francisco, and Paris as colonial cities
in order to think anew about how imperial ideologies and policies inform the politics of jazz per-
formance and reception within familiar sites of jazz scholarship (Ngô, 2014). Some of this research
also refocuses US jazz history toward the Pacific as a way to call attention to how the black/white
racial binary of jazz needs to be considered in relation to immigration policies resulting from US
imperial actions. Finally, bringing the world into the US can also provide us new ways to listen
for audible but ignored markers of colonial legacies, as John Troutman demonstrates in his study
of the Hawaiian steel guitar (2016). The approach of re-situating US jazz in relation to the world
through the lens of empire is particularly useful because it demonstrates how a transnational study
of jazz need not rely upon unexplored or unusual locations. Rather, it shows how transnationalism
is a methodology of seeing and hearing the world.

The Imperial Gift of Jazz

A turn toward empire in jazz studies does not represent an arbitrary move, for the imperial has
shaped the global circulation of jazz and informed how we talk about its global history. A brief
examination of the common trope claiming jazz as “America’s gift to the world” makes this clear.
The depiction of jazz as an offering from a benevolent nation can be traced back to at least 1927,
when the Australian composer and arranger Percy Grainger remarked “America has given a great
gift to the world in perfecting jazz as it has” (“Sharps and Flats” 1927, 258). Grainger’s notion has
been repeated over the decades and is commonplace today. The idea that global jazz is the result
of gift-giving is obviously related to a parallel claim promoted by figures from W.E.B. Du Bois
to Paul Whiteman to Archie Shepp to consider black music, from slave songs to jazz, as gifts from

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African Americans to the US (Du Bois 1903; Whiteman and McBride 1974, 4; Kofsky 1970, 9; Radano 2003, 278–286). When jazz is recast as America’s gift to the world, however, the nature of the gift changes.

In the US, the discourse of American cultural forms circulating globally as gifts is intimately linked with imperial ambition. When Grainger made his remark in 1927, Americans and Europeans regularly framed imperial conquest as an act of gift-giving to the uncivilized, non-white populations of the world. Soon after the US sailed into Manila Bay in 1898, for example, President McKinley cast the project of colonizing the archipelago as an act of “benevolent assimilation” that would charitably transform the Philippines from a state of savagery into a model of US-style democracy (Rafael 2000). A 1902 report from the US Congress explained the basic premise of McKinley’s claim: “In carrying to the people of these islands the gift of civil liberty and free institutions the United States can not be termed an oppressor” (“The Filipino Campaign” 1902, 6583).

The importance of casting empire as a gift from an altruistic nation is critical for maintaining the myth of American exceptionalism for it masks ulterior motives and recasts violence as the result of illogical refusal to accept whatever the US kindly offers.

During the 1920s, jazz was often viewed as a distinctly imperial gift, a benign agent for US global dominance. While the American journalist Burnet Hershey famously argued in 1922 that jazz “follows the flag,” arriving only after military conquest and economic expansion generated new audiences, others gave jazz greater agency (8). In 1925, Hershey’s fellow New York Times reporter P. W. Wilson argued that jazz was among the cultural forms enabling the emergence of an exceptional American empire. Wilson described the process of US imperial domination as one conducted not through violence but through the stealthy spread of American products such as “ice cream . . ., automobiles . . ., jazz bands, revues and funnies.” Similar to other Americans who believed in the power of cultural and consumer diplomacy, Wilson imagined that the circulation of American products would soon lead to a moment when “the world wakes up to discover itself absorbed, soul, mind and body, by the United States” (1925, SM7).

While Wilson’s view of a singular reception to US products was clearly reductive, many recipients of America’s gift of jazz and empire feared that his vision would come true. Similar to Wilson, they saw American products, from chewing gum to jazz, as agents of a US imperial project, or as one Filipino writer put it in a Manila magazine, of “American civilization’s conquest of other cultures” (“The World Gone Yankee” 1929, 4). For Filipinos, this was not merely a matter of conquest in a cultural sphere separate from politics. In 1923, Jorge Bocobo, the dean of the University of the Philippines, argued that the spread of jazz throughout the archipelago was threatening the future of an independent Philippine nation. During a blistering critique of American imperialism, Bocobo argued that the presence of American cultural forms, including “that intensely barbaric and primitive conglomeration of jarring and nerve-shattering sounds known as jazz,” was dangerous to the Philippine independence movement (1923, 8). Bocobo’s description of jazz may seem to echo widespread global criticism of jazz as a symptom of broader social and economic changes, but his condemnation of the music was not simply on aesthetic or moral grounds. Instead, he saw the growing ubiquity of jazz in the Philippines as a direct attack on his compatriots’ ability to preserve the “native virtues” and cultural practices that demonstrated the vitality of a Filipino race (ibid.). It was an attack that threatened to prove that Filipinos were unfit for self-rule.

Bocobo urged Filipinos to reject the gift of jazz. He did not view America’s supposed benevolence as a gift, something that David Graeber defines as “an act of pure generosity with no expectation of return” (2001, 161). Bocobo, Wilson, and others like them, recognized that the US expected that the spread of jazz would result in some sort of reciprocal action or goodwill. Why else, then, would the State Department later create its Jazz Ambassadors program during the Cold War? The effectiveness of jazz as a tool for promoting American interests might be limited, but
viewing jazz as a gift to the world ignores the broader forces behind its circulation and perpetuates the exceptionalist discourse of US imperial benevolence.

It might be uncomfortable for scholars with a deep love of jazz as a musical form to examine its broader circulation through the lens of empire. As Jairo Moreno points out, “music seems eminently suited for an imperial deafness . . . the music sounds good, and it feels even better” (2016, 145, emphasis in original). Yet listening to jazz history for—and with—empire can allow us to hear new narrative forms and different ways that jazz has been made meaningful throughout the world. More critically, as the imperial turn in American studies has shown, empire can be an important tool for scholars to pursue what Tackley and Whyton argue is a central goal of transnational jazz studies, namely, “to resist American exceptionalist readings of jazz history” (2010, 94). I do not mean to suggest that empire is the only way to achieve this goal. But attempting to see the world through an imperial lens has already transformed American studies and contributed to an emerging anti-exceptionalist field of study. Listening to the world with an ear for empire could also provide an important method to fulfill one of the main promises of transnational jazz studies.

Note

1. As was common practice, no author is listed for this article.

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