From its first publication in *Black Literature Forum* in 1991, through and beyond its reprinting in Robert O’Meally’s edited volume *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture* in 1998, Scott DeVeaux’s “Constructing the Jazz Tradition” remains one of the most influential essays in academic jazz studies.¹ So frequently do jazz studies scholars jumpstart their journal articles, book introductions, and dissertations with gestures toward DeVeaux’s analysis of the jazz tradition as an interested narrative—rather than an objective account of a linear jazz past—that one could characterize much current work in new jazz studies under the rubric “Deconstructing the Jazz Tradition.”

The key insight that scholars took from this essay was that the familiar account of jazz history as a logical march from one style to the next, forged by a procession of great men (and I do mean men), is of fairly recent vintage and achieved its hegemony at a particular moment and for specific reasons. This article challenged many of us to rethink the jazz history we thought we knew, one we prided ourselves in being able to recount in detail. For some of us already grappling with marginalized jazz topics, this essay suggested scholarly alternatives to the frustrating exercise of what I call “historical overdub”—or trying to pound our devalued jazz topics into the principal narrative that constructs itself, after all, by excluding them.

For my own work on all-woman bands, DeVeaux’s essay bridged jazz studies and feminist historiography. I became convinced that it was
not enough to prove that women’s bands deserved a place in the canon. Rather, my study could contribute to a broader deconstruction of a monolithic narrative that elbowed out other understandings of what jazz had meant to people, who played it, who listened to it, who struggled and survived to it.

Although these may have been startling insights in jazz studies at the time, by 1991 many fields had been questioning canon formation as historiographical method—precisely because of its utility in consolidating power for dominant groups. Black studies, ethnic studies, and women’s studies, for instance, had entered the U.S. academy in the 1960s and 1970s as parts of broader social movements that critiqued canon formation as one register of injustice among many that excluded people of color, poor people, women, gays, and lesbians. Judith Tick has compared American music scholarship and feminist historiography during this period, pointing out that both fields: (1) began as “outsider” fields to “conventional” disciplines, (2) not only critiqued the exclusions in the canonical work in the insider fields but questioned the very concept of the canon, (3) saw a need for, and produced, “foundational” studies to counter the historical exclusions and to make possible new kinds of scholarship, (4) were “receptive to social history and sociological interpretation, and finally (5) were open to “vernacular forms of cultural expressiveness.”

In fact, by the dawn of new jazz studies in the late 1980s, four book-length works documenting women’s participation in jazz history had been published that share these affinities. As early as 1975 a graduate student named Susan Cavin had written about the absence of attention to women’s participation in Congo Square drumming in New Orleans despite their presence in the primary sources used by jazz historians. Her article not only conveyed this evidence of women drummers but also documented jazz historians’ “benign neglect” of what she called “the sex variable” that had enabled this canonical prejazz moment to appear to have an all-male cast. Though published in the Journal of Jazz Studies, this article did not make much of a dent in jazz studies at large, but did inspire Sally Placksin and Linda Dahl, authors of American Women in Jazz and Stormy Weather, respectively, and D. Antoinette Handy, whose Black Women in American Bands and Orchestras must be located in a context of knowledge production about African American women’s history in black studies, as well as in women’s studies.

All of these women-in-jazz books challenged jazz canon formation, provided foundational research that enabled new kinds of jazz scholarship, and located their historical subjects in social and cultural contexts.
rather than in parades of isolated geniuses. They also held out a wider net for areas of “vernacular expressive culture” that had included women but that had been defined as “not jazz” by jazz historiography (areas that included family bands, circus bands, all-woman bands, vaudeville, etc.)

In other words, this literature could have identified and challenged the jazz tradition narrative if it hadn’t managed to fly under the radar of jazz studies scholars who were not explicitly interested in women in jazz. Excluded from the narrative that DeVeaux would later identify as “something of an official history” and excluded again from works in new jazz studies that critiqued this official history, narratives about women as jazz instrumentalists appeared to be taking shape as “something of a special interest”—perceived as supplemental jazz histories primarily by, for, and about women. Although I was taking jazz classes in the music department and women’s history classes in the women’s studies department at the same time at San Francisco State in the 1980s, I never encountered the women-in-jazz literature in courses like Survey of Jazz, but rather in History of African American Women, which is also where I first learned about all-woman big bands of the 1930s and 1940s and started research on my book Swing Shift: “All-Girl” Bands of the 1940s.

In 1991 two articles appeared that helped me to navigate the dissonance between the hidden histories of women in jazz and the exciting new work in interdisciplinary jazz studies. One is, of course, DeVeaux’s essay, which, though not explicitly concerned with women or gender, identified and historicized the specific canon formation that carried jazz into the discourses of “high art” and “American culture” at the same time that women’s studies and black studies were emerging from social movements that critiqued canon formation as a technology of exclusion, hierarchy, and power.

The other article is Elsa Barkley Brown’s “Polyrhythms and Improvisation: Lessons for Women’s History,” published in the History Workshop Journal. Barkley Brown used jazz as a metaphor for the kinds of historiography that she thought would be useful for writing histories that did not construct parades of “great men,” but instead approached history as “everyone talking at once. Multiple rhythms played simultaneously. The events and people we write about did not occur in isolation but in dialogue with a myriad of other people and events.” It became clear to me that most jazz histories were not this kind of narrative—though the women-in-jazz histories, by necessity, often were—and that
other jazz histories might better account for women musicians, and other forgotten historical actors, if they took Barkley Brown’s cue to adopt jazz as a model as well as a topic.

Similarly, DeVeaux’s “Constructing the Jazz Tradition” provided an important analytic of power that helped me, and other jazz scholars, to understand why certain artists, musics, and histories had been overshadowed, why the straight line of one genius/one style leading to another prevailed as a dominant narrative. It also helped us to see how knowledge of marginalized jazz topics could interrupt the familiar cadences of the jazz tradition and help us to hear other jazz histories, approaches, analyses, voices, perspectives, and questions.

So, what were the interests behind constructing the jazz tradition as a principal narrative? According to DeVeaux’s essay, a primary motivation stemmed from those working to pave the way for the grand entrance of jazz into mainstream institutional respectability. Many of us have become rather adept at identifying these moves in the narratives and policies of powerful institutions and media such as the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra and Ken Burns’s PBS documentary Jazz. But we also need to be attentive to DeVeaux’s foregrounding of colleges and universities in his analysis of the relationship between narrating jazz history as linear and institution building. “Constructing the Jazz Tradition,” after all, was a process that academics did not just describe, but in which they participated, and that enabled some of them to find institutional homes—sometimes known as jobs—from which to study, teach, and write about jazz.

The turn to “Deconstructing the Jazz Tradition” also marks a significant moment in the institutionalization of jazz in academia. The process of “Constructing the Jazz Tradition” enabled the academic careers of those who helped build this successful thoroughfare from the margins of mainstream society to the margins of music departments—but it has also produced and enabled careers of those of us bent on digging it up. Just as the jazz tradition narrative coalesced in a particular moment of the institutionalization of jazz, so has the critical response to it that we sometimes call academic jazz studies, interdisciplinary jazz studies, or new jazz studies. As has been noted by Mark Tucker, Robert O’Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, Farah Jasmine Griffin, and others, the past fifteen years has seen the spread of academic jazz studies beyond the band rooms, bebop combos, and jazz appreciation classes that are the legacy of the jazz tradition, to its current array of emanations from lecture halls.
and seminars from a variety of nonmusic departments, where participants theorize anticanonical figures such as Sun Ra and study topics like race, gender, nationalism, and politics.9

We might mark this shift in 1988, with the appearance of the first jazz panel at the Modern Language Association. Featuring Krin Gabbard, Mike Jarrett, William Kenney, and Kathy Ogren, this panel helped to launch a watershed moment of new jazz studies publishing, with the anthology *Jazz in Mind: Essays on the History and Meanings of Jazz* and the volumes edited by Krin Gabbard: *Jazz among the Discourses* and *Representing Jazz*. None of these volumes made use of the women-in-jazz literature, nor did they acknowledge women jazz instrumentalists; there was very little, though some, gender analysis within their covers, but they did develop critical approaches that would prove useful for such work.10

The mid-1990s also saw the founding of interdisciplinary jazz studies conferences, such as the Leeds International Jazz Conference and the Guelph Jazz Festival and Colloquium, both founded in 1994, and new interdisciplinary academic programs such as the Center for Jazz Studies at Columbia (which grew out of the Jazz Study Group founded in 1995 by Robert O’Meally). Incidentally, 1995 also marks the year that Cobi Narita, founder of Universal Jazz Coalition, saw the necessity of establishing an organization called International Women in Jazz, which would mitigate against continuing exclusions of women jazz musicians from jazz practice, opportunities, and discourse.

This period also marks a migration of jazz history publishing from trade to academic presses, and a shift in who writes these histories, from critics and journalists to professors. This new wave of jazz studies academics has taken up the call to critically interrogate the official narrative, to deconstruct the binaries on which it established itself as whole (art/commerce, pure/contaminated, etc.), to interrupt its confidence, expose its exclusions, and insist on its historical particularity.

Many of us who participated in this shift, myself included, conceived our work as politically engaged, analyzing jazz not for its autonomous greatness, but, as Ajay Heble put it, for its usefulness in finding ways to contest “the kinds of objectifications, misrepresentations, and institutional disparagements that impede struggles for human agency.”11 Yet as someone who received tenure, thanks largely to these shifts, I’m also thinking about how some of us have benefited, or may eventually benefit, professionally from these institutional changes. Like those who shaped the jazz tradition paradigm, those of us who critiqued it not
only described something as it happened but helped to shape it, through
our teaching, our writing, our publishing, our institution building. And
we still do. It seems an excellent time to reflect on the possibilities of jazz
studies after the jazz tradition, but layered inside are a number of intel-
lectual, institutional, and ethical concerns. We had the jazz tradition as a
canon; now we have it as an outmoded idea to repudiate. What shall we
do for an encore?

In asking, what is “jazz” in the new jazz studies, I am not asking the
old form of the question that would find eager definitions in the jazz
tradition paradigm (jazz is improvisation; it must swing; it is noncom-
mercial; it is played on these instruments and not these, and so on—all
of which have been debunked at one time or another in both old and
new jazz studies). New jazz studies has done very well in appreciating
and highlighting the blurriness of jazz categories, so I’m not expecting
coherent parameters. But, for that very reason, I am interested in ex-
ploring what kind of category new jazz studies constitutes as its object
of study.

Is jazz a genre, a culture, a discourse? Without the jazz tradition as
stable ground, what do we teach in jazz studies classes? If there is no
stable subject or object of study, is jazz studies in crisis, or is it develop-
ing exciting, new directions—theories and methods—as is sometimes
argued about other fields such as women’s studies, black studies, and
American studies? Does new jazz studies pursue a “subjectless subject,”
as Ann Cacoullos has observed of both women’s studies and American
studies? (By the way, she meant this as a good factor—“conceptual and
linguistic discomfort” as “an emancipatory alternative.”)12 If jazz stud-
ies is shifting from the study of knowable objects to that of “subjectless
subjects,” or subjects in the process of becoming, what is its future, and,
well, is there one?

To what extent has new jazz studies diverged from the jazz tradition
narrative? To what extent does new jazz studies continue to reify the
jazz tradition as an object of study, even as the new jazz studies vocifer-
ously rejects old constructs? Are we really deconstructing the binaries
we say we are, for example, or do substantial numbers of us still prefer
jazz to be more art than commerce, more pure than contaminated (what-
ever that means to us), more populist than popular?13 As Catherine
Parsonage put it so succinctly, the “popularity of jazz . . . is still an
unpopular problem” in jazz studies, despite calls for incorporating
commerce in our analysis. I am not aware of a Kenny G jazz studies dis-
sertation yet; despite Robert Walser’s infamous chiding that jazz studies
should not simply denounce Kenny G as beyond the boundaries of jazz artistry, but study the meanings of his massive success.

I live with the embarrassment that the first three or four times I publicly raised this question I had not realized that Christopher Washburne had published an outstanding chapter on Kenny G that raised these exact questions. I think I missed it because the title of the collection that presented it didn’t sound like jazz to me. Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate was a collection that I knew about but hadn’t bothered to pick up. Did my subconscious whisper, “I’m in jazz studies, therefore I have no need for a book about ‘bad music’? I mean, it’s not like I’m in popular music studies.” In other words, does new jazz studies have fewer police at the gates of what counts as jazz, or do we simply have a new generation of police with different taste?

If the construction of the jazz tradition in the postwar years was, as DeVeaux suggests, “both symptom and cause” of the acceptance of jazz in music appreciation courses in colleges and universities, does it follow that the turn toward deconstructing the jazz tradition bears a coconstitutive relationship with the creation of new institutional strongholds of academic jazz studies outside the music departments and throughout the humanities? In other words, what are the institutional politics of constructing jazz studies as new? For instance, while there are new musicologists in new jazz studies, I think it is fair to say that there still exist the great chasms between jazz studies in nonmusic departments and in music departments that Mark Tucker lamented in 1998. What can we do to ensure that constructing new jazz studies means more than a trophy in an academic turf war between humanities and music?

I am also concerned with wanting to make sure that new jazz studies means more than claiming the powerbase of jazz interpretation away from journalists, musicians, collectors, and fans, who frequently, though not always, of course, have less institutional support for their love of this music than do many academics. Institutionalizing jazz studies in ways that narrowly define what counts as knowledge and power seems antithetical to the intellectual projects many of us are working on.

Finally, what kinds of narratives do we want to tell in new jazz studies? As we skillfully unsettle earlier definitions of jazz as an object of study, what narrative strategies are available to us and what is it that we hope to accomplish through their telling? As any decent deconstructionist will quickly tell you (well, maybe not quickly), this is not a method that offers a way out. The useful insight of deconstructionists, according to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, is the understanding that, “when a
narrative is constructed, something is left out. When an end is defined, other ends are rejected, and one might not know what those ends are.” But, at the same time, “we cannot but narrate.” In other words, exposing error in received narratives does not exempt us from making them, nor does it make it possible for us to make them error free. Yet to narrate with an awareness of its limits, or what Spivak describes as “a radical acceptance of vulnerability,” does offer an alternative to insisting on a particular version as the objective truth.17

So what kinds of narratives are up to the task of incorporating the insights gleaned from critiquing the old ones, as DeVeaux himself asked at the end of his 1991 essay? This important question is far less often cited than the exposure of the jazz tradition as an official history (though Washburne productively engaged this part in his outstanding Bad Music article on Kenny G) and deserves revisiting: “The narratives we have inherited to describe the history of jazz retain the patterns of outmoded forms of thought, especially the assumption that the progress of jazz as art necessitates increased distance from the popular. If we, as historians, critics, and educators, are to adapt to these new realities, we must be willing to construct new narratives to explain them.”18

I’d liken this project to trying to capture something that we value precisely because it can’t be contained. As specialists, we may rejoice in our clever attempts to invent porous bottles—narrative strategies that are multivocal and “relentlessly critical” and that refuse to hold our “subjectless subjects.”19 But while these experiments in leaky vessels may stimulate us as scholars, to what do we serve our students who may never have tried jazz before taking our course?

GENDER, RACE, AND JAZZ

Well, here’s what I’ve been doing. In the first week of my undergraduate American Studies course, Gender, Race, and Jazz, I assign a jazz history text that takes the jazz tradition for granted. In the second week, I walk students through DeVeaux’s “Constructing the Jazz Tradition,” which some of them get right away and others find difficult. I have to say that it doesn’t take long for most to become adept at identifying the parade of geniuses and styles described in the essay as a recurring way of crafting a kind of story but that passes itself off as the objective Jazz Truth. Inevitably, someone points out other instances in popular culture, news reportage, or high school and college textbooks where a dominant narrative is presented that excludes other possibilities. Students do not
have to have prior knowledge of jazz, deconstruction, historiography, or theories about narrative to appreciate this insight. Usually, we are able to come up with an example of canon formation about which students are already critical.

And then I tell them that the rest of the class is called “Deconstructing the Jazz Tradition” and that they will not only learn about jazz in this class but develop some tools for analyzing culture as a place where people struggle over what matters to them. We then spend the next thirteen weeks analyzing jazz narratives for struggles over gender, race, class, sexuality, and nation. We explore narratives about jazz for their boundaries and binaries and analyze how people seem to be using jazz to make a range of meanings, often meanings in conflict with other meanings. And, yes, I assign Christopher Washburne’s “Does Kenny G Play Bad Jazz? A Case Study,” which does a great job of plunging us into the questions.

Like Alan Stanbridge, I use Ken Burns’s PBS documentary Jazz “not simply as an objective resource, but rather as a cultural text which is, itself part of the discursive construction of jazz history.”20 I also encourage students to notice where else in culture they encounter narratives about jazz. I bring in examples culled from casting a wide cultural net. One of my favorites is a Sponge Bob Square Pants cartoon episode titled “Grandma’s Kisses,” in which Patrick the starfish teaches Sponge Bob how to be a man: “Puff out your chest. Now say ‘tax exemption.’ Now develop a taste for free-form jazz.”21 I use these kinds of popular culture references to jazz not to teach students the elements of jazz or jazz history but to stimulate critical readings of how jazz signifies in specific times and places of cultural life, including their own. Sponge Bob may seem out of his element in a course on jazz and American culture, but “Grandma’s Kisses” is one of the best openings for discussions of jazz as a gendered discourse that I’ve found.

Throughout the course, I teach a variety of theories of gender and race and ask students to analyze competing notions of these categories as they play out in representations of jazz. I use my knowledge of women in jazz not only to supplement their historical knowledge but to get them to think critically about canon formation, narrative construction, and the multiple levels at which meanings compete.

One strategy I like to use is to present a series of conflicting narratives about a single figure, such as Lil Hardin Armstrong. Her contributions to jazz history are narrated very differently by, say, Geoff Ward, for whom she is remarkable only as Louis Armstrong’s ambitious wife:
“Armstrong had grown unhappy at home. He didn’t much like being a sideman in his wife’s band and was embarrassed when his fellow musicians called him ‘Henny’ (for henpecked),” and by Linda Dahl, for whom she is an important woman in jazz: “The best known of these early jazz-women, and one of the hardiest survivors, was Lil Hardin Armstrong, whose career began in and centered around Chicago, in company with famous expatriate New Orleans players.” Sometimes I have them divide into groups and produce different kinds of narratives from the same packets of evidence: Lil Hardin Armstrong’s contributions to jazz history, for example, narrated by the “great man” history group, the “exceptional woman” group, the “women-in-jazz” group, and so on.

I have them go out and listen to music and analyze what kinds of stories are being told through the ways the music is presented. I assign them a wide variety of music to listen to, picked by me, that I describe as having been defined as jazz either in its day or in retrospect, and I also assign them each week to write about something they listened to on their own that is either marketed as jazz or that sounds like jazz to them. And if they ask me, “Is Radiohead jazz?” “Is Norah Jones jazz?” or “Is the music on the Food Network jazz?” I say, “This isn’t about me, or Mark Gridley—this is about what you hear as jazz, what you think of as jazz. This is about analyzing where you think you learned to hear jazz in the things you hear as jazz. What are the elements that make something sound like jazz, and what kinds of stories do you think are being told about jazz, or through jazz, in these sounds and the ways they are presented? This is about documenting what gets called jazz in the cultural spheres you frequent.”

This raises what I’ve come to refer to as the Jazzercise dilemma, and I am deeply grateful to feminist musicologists Suzanne Cusick and Annie Randall for the imaginary Jazzercise Panel they have been half seriously planning for the American Musicological Society. In retaliation for conservative policies at the society about what constitutes music topics worthy of study, epitomized, I am told, by a paper titled “What Is Isorhythm?,” Cusick and Randall began imagining aloud a panel called “What Is Jazzercise?” When I heard about it, I jumped on board with an imaginary paper of my own, called “Where Is the Jazz in Jazzercise?” But then, the question arises of why the Jazzercise panel is a joke. I can easily see Jazzercise as a topic in American studies, women’s studies, popular music studies, but probably not in jazz studies, new or old.

The Jazzercise dilemma really brings me back to the question: to what extent is new jazz studies a continuation of the jazz tradition? To
what extent do we continue to reify that which we critique? I mean, it might be really helpful to know more about “Where is the jazz in Jazzercise?” The moves come from, I imagine, jazz dance, named after, as Brenda Dixon Gottschild points out, white appropriations of black dance aesthetics, all but forgotten in modern dance history, which sees itself as color-blind. So maybe Jazzercise is a jazz studies project. Maybe we need to know more about Jazzercise and other Jazzerthings that trade on the cultural capital of jazz, and the gamut of associations of jazz with the body, sex, Otherness, modernity, pleasure, primitivism, and race.

If you’re reading this and asking, “Where is the jazz in this paper?” then you are proving my point that new jazz studies is not completely wrenched from the jazz tradition, nor from what I think Scott DeVeaux means by his sense of the “core,” as opposed to the “Core and Boundaries,” of jazz. Is jazz studies completely open to everything jazz means to all people in all instances? I call this dilemma, “When Sponge Bob leaps in, does Lester Leap Out?,” and it chills me to the bone. As a cultural studies person, I agree with Stuart Hall in the “deadly seriousness” of popular culture as one of the sites where “struggle for and against culture of the powerful is engaged.” But as someone with particular hopes for the potential of jazz as critical practice, as black music, as bearing better democratic models than, say, television, I am ambivalent about having my students leave my class more attuned to noticing the place of jazz in constructing the “lifestyle” sold by Starbucks and Pottery Barn than the lives of jazz musicians.

On the other hand, I am in agreement with the authors of the introduction to *Uptown Conversations* that we need to know not only about *lives of great musicians* but about what “their images, including mistaken conceptions of who they were, tell us about cultures that mythologized them.” It is not enough to insist on the inclusion of Lil Hardin Armstrong into the jazz canon. This is what George Lipsitz has dubbed the “Blue Öyster Cult” problem, wherein the critique of the canon digresses into the noisy longing for one’s own favorites to appear on the chart, in the documentary, or in the textbooks, with the other Giants of Rock (but in this case, of course, jazz). Where is Blue Öyster Cult? Where is Lil Hardin Armstrong? We need not only to study those who are missing from the canon but to understand the desires for particular narratives that exclude them.

Maybe looking at the associations of jazz with particular kinds of manliness in Sponge Bob, what Ingrid Monson might identify as a spoof of “The Problem with White Hipness” *does* tell us something about
meanings associated with jazz that have affected the lives of working jazz musicians.29 Also, we need to bear in mind how evacuating the “popular” in old jazz studies often served to discount black musical practices and large segments of women’s participation as jazz musicians. In a recent essay, Salim Washington deconstructs the binary avant-garde/mainstream and shows how it serves to “render invisible . . . certain black social and aesthetic practices” even in a discourse that acknowledges that “jazz is an African American creation” and “that most of its innovators have been black.”30 The “all-girl” bands I wrote about were considered not real bands but novelty bands, even though the musicians in them considered themselves real.

Distinguishing real jazz from the popular, in other words, makes it easy to ignore artists, audiences, performance contexts, and discursive formations that may tell us a great deal about jazz histories and cultures. Another danger of distinguishing jazz studies too completely from popular music studies is that we may find ourselves out of the loop of conversations attempting to develop tools up to this very task, including Lawrence Grossberg’s now ancient (by pop standards) conception of the object of rock music scholarship as “rock formation” rather than rock itself.31

Jazz as an Unstable Object

Jazz studies entered academia by insisting that jazz is an autonomous art form, and then produced scholars who asked, “What is this thing called jazz?” In this respect, we are in good company; following women’s studies, black studies, and American studies, for example, which also built academic homes by insisting on particularity in the face of exclusion; then used those home bases to explore issues of difference.

In women’s studies, for the past couple of decades, several questions have arisen: What is the category ‘woman’? What kind of work does it do? What about differences among women? What about cross-cultural and historical studies that show “woman” to be constructed differently in various times and places and social groups? What about all the little babies who are born who do not clearly fit on either side of the male/female binary? Some programs have been renamed—gender studies, gender and sexuality studies—and some have kept the name of women’s studies while interrogating the category of women.32

Questions in black studies correspond to those found in women’s studies: Who is black? What is black if racial categories are never pure,
never authentic, always mixed, in flux, and contested? What about black histories and identities that don’t correspond to particular notions of U.S. blackness that often function as hegemonic in global diasporic contexts? Blackness did not disappear as a significant analytic even as program names shifted to African and African American studies, Africana studies, and African diaspora studies. Lately, blackness has received renewed emphasis even as it is reconfigured in frameworks such as global blackness studies and transnational blackness in department names, conference programs, and organizing themes of anthologies. Studies of mixed-race identity are also sites of critical interrogations of blackness as an organizing principle. Yet despite these contestations, and because of the paradoxes of race that propel these inquiries, the concept of blackness has not diminished in importance.33

In American studies, where I teach currently, students no longer study the United States by describing life in America or even by identifying American exceptionalism—the so-called frontier spirit, for example—but are trained to critically theorize notions of America and their operations; to locate national memories in histories of conquest, imperialism, and colonialism; to view U.S. borders not as natural results of manifest destiny but as contested, interested, violent, and movable; and to consider the United States in a global context. We train students to consider how ideas about America make indigenous nations within and overlapping U.S. national borders invisible, for example, and to study how colonialist discourse operates within U.S. international relations and justifies past and present global actions. Transnational approaches to theorizing America have transformed, invigorated, and improved the ability of the field to respond to urgent questions but have not obliterated America as an object of study.34

In jazz studies, as one can see quickly by reading recent titles of books, articles, and conference papers, many of us are not content to shore up a cohesive singular narrative about jazz, but we have been asking about the musics that were called jazz then but are not called jazz now. What about the radically different meanings that specific jazz performances articulated for different audiences? What about the artists who refuse the label of jazz, but who are important to others as jazz artists? What about the musics that have been called jazz in the jazz tradition narrative despite having little in common musically? What about the flows among genres, including popular and money-making ones excised by the boundaries of the jazz tradition narrative? What about the transnational, transcultural musical mixing throughout the history of jazz, in-
cluding what took place earlier than jazz is said to have originated and that influenced musical forms that were called jazz as well as forms that were not, such as danzón.\(^{35}\)

As Robyn Wiegman brilliantly notes, when scholars critically analyze an object of study as unstable, they do not necessarily lose their desire for the significance of that object. Gender, as an object of study, for example, has undergone several complete overhauls in its relatively short lifespan as a conceptual tool in women’s studies, sexuality studies, gay and lesbian studies, queer theory, and gender studies—yet, Wiegman argues, gender continues to compel those who repudiate its earlier definitions and usages. Gender was once interchangeable with “women,” then became the culturally constructed superstructure of the biologically stable category “sex,” then became that which is constituted through repeated performance with no biologically stable ground to stand on, then became that by which queer theory established itself by replacing gender with sexuality as its object of study. Now gender continues to operate as the locus of meaning for scholars who rework it, even those who work against it. Queer theory, for example, observes Wiegman, did not lose its “desire for gender” but “resurrected—and reconfigured” gender as a privileged object, this time as “mobile, proliferate, transitive.”\(^{36}\)

Wiegman urges other ways of dealing with the object of study—which she sees as an object of desire—ways that shift the focus from constituting the perfect category that will do the work we want done, to learning more about “the political desires that propel its analytic pursuit altogether.” Rather than operating from a mode of repudiation, where each new cohort repudiates the assumptions of the previous one, she advocates a “thinking together” model, where scholars who come to their desire for the object at different historical moments, and from different disciplinary and interdisciplinary training, may think critically and differently together.\(^{37}\) This, in fact, is a process I hear in jazz music making that interests me the most. When I see other uses of jazz as a privileged object not consistent with my political desires, I can repudiate those other uses as bad jazz studies, or I can try to think critically together with these other approaches about our shared and different political desires for jazz.

Okay, jazz is a different kind of category than gender, race, or nation. In fact, jazz is permeated with discourses of gender, race, and nation, as many jazz studies scholars argue. But let’s entertain, for a moment, the idea that Wiegman’s insights about the “desire for gender” may be usefully applied to the construction of the object of jazz studies. What does
jazz studies want? Even as the movers and shakers of new jazz studies repudiate the canonical and discographical and metanarrative approaches of those who forged the jazz tradition, the desire for jazz must be alive and well in new jazz studies, or we wouldn’t be so driven to make it new.

Some scholars prefer to work on jazz topics from frameworks of improvised music studies, black music studies, African diasporic music studies, or vernacular music studies. Yet many of us continue to call what we do, and name the places we do it from, “jazz studies.” We are more attentive than we used to be in considering what we mean by blackness, Americanness, and gender. Perhaps we should give some more thought to what we hope to do by constituting jazz as our object of study? “Why jazz?” asks Ajay Heble in *Landing on the Wrong Note*. As Wiegman suggests in “The Desire for Gender,” “If we find ourselves repeatedly disappointed” with some of the uses of our object of study, when we see it failing to live up to our hopes, “perhaps we should stop blaming the category or its user and explore instead what it is we expect our relationship to our objects of study to do.”

Perhaps, instead of repudiating old jazz studies, or asking what is jazz in the new jazz studies, we should be asking what is our/my desire for jazz in the new jazz studies. What work do we want to do by facing this object, by constituting it as significant (dare I say, liberatory?), by encountering and grappling with the limitations of the beloved object as a category?

For Heble, the dissonance of certain kinds of jazz, the kinds he likes, offers a useful model for critical thinking. Working with Nathaniel Mackey’s concept of the “rickety, imperfect fit between word and world,” Heble writes, “Jazz has provided me with the opportunity to test and develop my own understanding of the rickety fit between theory and practice, between academic and public worlds.” For Heble, this dissonance includes the “out of tune-ness” between what academics write about jazz and “the musics and lives [they] seek to describe and interpret.” I would also include the dissonance among our various scholarly desires for jazz; the desires for jazz held by the cohorts that proceeded us (those we carry dear to our hearts and those we vigorously try to shake off); the desires that brought us to jazz studies (and how these may have changed through practice); the desires stimulated by representations of jazz in advertising and films; and the desires our students bring when they sign up for our courses.

I will close with a list of my own scholarly desires for new jazz studies, which includes many of the new directions described and implemented.
by the editors of *Uptown Conversations*. I am excited by the continued movement away from the focus on individual geniuses and toward the “immeasurably complex worlds through which they moved, and which they helped to shape.” I’m all for learning more about the desires mapped onto representations of and narratives about jazz and the connections and disconnections between them and jazz practice. I am excited by recent emphases on transnational travels, interdisciplinarity, and relationships between musical forms we are accustomed to thinking of as jazz and those that may not fit into the jazz tradition notions of what counts as jazz. I am hopeful for the insights to be gained from what O’Meally, Edwards, and Griffin have identified as “moments, meetings, gatherings, gestures, and scenes.”

I guess what I would like to add to that agenda is a call for thinking about how new jazz studies might transform itself *in practice* to keep up with these promising conceptual transformations. Much of what I’m wishing for is directly inspired by “moments, meetings, [and] gatherings.” I have had the honor and pleasure of attending the Jazz Study Group at Columbia and participating in the Guelph Jazz Festival and Colloquium (and more recently the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice research initiative at Guelph), as well as in the Interdisciplinary Jazz Studies Group I and seven colleagues from five departments formed at University of Kansas. The areas I would like to highlight are collaborating across disciplinary difference, reevaluating dissonance in critical practice over repudiation, and maintaining a relentless awareness of our work as occurring in time and space and institutions that are often powerful, yet may not contain everything we need to know. Just as jazz musicians listen beyond the boundaries that critics and historians and even the most well-meaning fans construct for them, so must we listen beyond our institutional walls. (What if, for instance, jazz studies had better listened to women’s studies in the early 1980s?)

In 1998 Mark Tucker urged the formation of “coalition(s) of scholars, journalists, critics, and musicians united in their passion for jazz and driven to understand the worlds of meaning people have found in this music.” What might that look like? What if we actually held workshops where musicologists and nonmusicologists paired off and—if we didn’t kill each other first—actually made papers together? What if, as George Lewis recently suggested, we had workshops where creative musicians, who don’t have time or institutional support to write critically about musical practice, produced papers? Or what if there was a jazz camp for nonplaying jazz studies scholars, where collective listening
and sounding and creative dissonance were valued over technical virtuosity? Nonplayers could suspend their excuses for not practicing and experience firsthand the tyranny of “right notes”—which can be quite different from what it is like for nonplayers to imagine metaphorically—and perhaps begin to sound the far cries between hitting clams and “landing on the wrong note” in the critical way described by Ajay Heble.

Working with Ajay Heble’s ideas about dissonance may help us to develop approaches to difference that do not always demand hierarchy and that may open our ears to multiple and unexpected sources. We need to better hear differences sounding at once and to listen for their connections and disconnections without rushing for resolution. And we must bear in mind that, like jazz musicians, some jazz studies scholars benefit professionally from pursuing their desires, some do not benefit from institutional support, and all pursue this work without knowing what lies ahead.

NOTES

This chapter is a revised version of the paper “Deconstructing the Jazz Tradition: The Subjectless Subject of New Jazz Studies” that I first presented at the Leeds International Jazz Conference in England on March 11, 2005. An earlier version was published in The Source: Challenging Jazz Criticism 2 (2005): 31–46, © Equinox 2005. I am grateful to Tony Whyton, Catherine Parsonage, and the participants at the Leeds conference, the Creative Music Think Tank (Vancouver Jazz Festival, June 27, 2005), and the Columbia Jazz Study Group meeting on Jazz and Desire (Center for Jazz Studies, Columbia University, October 15, 2005). I appreciate the dialogue with Robyn Wiegman, as I continued to think through this paper and my ongoing relationship with my object of study.


4. Sally Placksin, American Women in Jazz (New York: Seaview Books, 1981); Linda Dahl, Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazzwomen (New York: Limelight, 1989); D. Antoinette Handy, Black Women in American Bands and Orchestras (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 1982). Black music studies of this period is very much a part of the emergence of the field of black studies. Although he chronicles black music historiography from the


13. Interestingly, popular culture is one of the few places in U.S. definitions of race where black has been conceived as pure, and white as a contaminant, at least in the sense that a diluting agent contaminates.


16. Travis Jackson has spoken eloquently about the dual traditions of sharing and stockpiling that have taken place in both academic and nonacademic jazz knowledge production. I was particularly struck by his identification of the record collectors on both sides of this divide, and I am compelled to acknowledge the music-loving record collectors who have generously plied me with sounds and knowledge over the years. I owe much to several informal teacher and conveners of such communities of jazz affinity, but let me single out and thank David Heymann. Travis Jackson, “All the Things You Are: The Changing Face(s) of Jazz Studies” (key note address, Jazz Changes Colloquium, University of Kansas, Lawrence, March 4, 2004).


23. Thanks to Suzanne Cusick for recapping the history of the imaginary Jazzercise panel for me by e-mail message, February 6, 2005. Thanks to Suzanne and Annie Randall for letting me in on the panel planning and for permission to discuss it in this article.


31. Lawrence Grossberg, We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture (New York: Routledge, 1992).

32. Simone de Beauvoir raised the question “What is a woman?” as a feminist issue prior to the emergence of women’s studies courses, and Sojourner Truth asked it a century prior to that in the context of the U.S. woman suffrage and abolitionist movements! See de Beauvoir, The Second Sex (New York: Ban-

33. Think, for example, of Stuart Hall’s widely cited essay, “What Is This Black in Black Popular Culture?,” in Black Popular Culture, ed. Gina Dent (Seattle: Bay Ness, 1992), 21–33; or Marlon Riggs’s posthumously completed film, Black Is . . . Black Ain’t (San Francisco: California Newsreel, 1995). Many of us first became aware of the possibilities of global blackness studies through Paul Gilroy’s The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). For more recent scholarship that takes up global blackness in complex ways that do not reify, essentialize, or give up blackness as an analytical category, see, for instance, the essays collected in Kamari Maxine Clarke and Deborah Thomas, eds. Globalization and Race: Transformations in the Cultural Production of Blackness (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 2006; as well as those in Manning Marable and Vanessa Agard Jones, eds., Transnational Blackness: Navigating the Global Color Line (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). For an approach to mixed-race studies that calls for combining an analysis of blackness and mixedness rather than conceptualizing mixed (black/white) hybridity as a “third space between bifurcations,” see Naomi Pabst, “Blackness/Mixedness: Contestations over Crossing Signs,” Cultural Critique 54 (2003): 178–212. In addition, Pabst argues that “black/white interraciality and transculturalism could be fruitfully situated within a framework of black difference, a framework that is usually reserved for other mitigating factors of identity such as gender, sexuality, class, and (trans) nationality” (180).


42. Conversation with George Lewis, during a refreshment gathering at a meeting of the Jazz Study Group, March 6, 2005, Columbia University.