

## Bitter-sweet Big Apple - Jazz Age review article

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**Reviewer:** Christian O'Connell

In 2009, when Jay-Z and Alicia Keys' 'Empire State of Mind' dominated the charts and the airwaves, the chorus phrase 'concrete jungle where dreams are made up, there's nothing you can't do' conjured images of New York's iconic skyline as well as its promise, embodying the sentiment that no other American – if not world - city captures the imagination quite like New York. Indeed, popular culture is saturated with references to the city as the subject of numerous hit films, novels, poems and songs. New York has also, understandably, been the focus of historians, cultural critics, sociologists, geographers and political scientists. Whether through its rapid expansion into the 20th century's most iconic metropolis, its rise to financial capital of the world, as the destination for European immigrants and testing ground for a 'melting pot', or for its popular culture, the city has been as a centre of gravity, often acting as a lens through which to learn about America. This is particularly the case when one considers the 1920s, the period termed famously as the 'Jazz Age' by F. Scott Fitzgerald. This era continues to fascinate and intrigue scholars as well as artists, musicians and writers. Tales of prohibition, bootleggers, flappers, speakeasies, skyscrapers, mobsters, jazz and racial intermixture prove impossible to resist. While continued scholarship on the city is needed and welcome, with this awe and fascination comes the danger of romanticism and nostalgia. Two new but very different books on New York, Donald Miller's *Supreme City* and Fiona Ngô's *Imperial Blues* demonstrate that its history is a strikingly fertile ground for new scholarship, but also reveal the city's ability to dazzle and sometimes blur the focus of even the keenest minds.

At more than 700 pages in length, Miller's book is an impressive enterprise. It is reminiscent of Ann Douglas' *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (1) not only in terms of size, but also in its approach. Miller divides his account of the city into five main parts made up of chapter-length narratives

which consider politics, crime, infrastructure, architecture, nightlife, music, fashion, theatre, sport, broadcasting, media, literature and more. While these are the broad themes, the emphasis is on the individuals that shaped the city, some of which include the flamboyant mayor Jimmy Walker; crime bosses Frank Costello, Owney Madden; architects and developers Fred French, Irwin Chanin and Emery Roth; nightlife figures such as 'Texas' Guinan and Broadway producer Florenz Ziegfeld; cosmetics tycoons Helena Rubenstein and Elizabeth Arden; sports heroes, the 'sluggers' Jack Dempsey and Babe Ruth; broadcasters David Sarnoff and William Paley; maverick publishers like Horace Liveright and Joseph Medill Patterson; jazz-era figurehead musicians such as Duke Ellington; and many, many more. The interweaving of characters from various facets of New York life is particularly effective in demonstrating that the 1920s era was a 'Jazz Age' on every level. However, rather than being a Jazz Age community, Manhattan is a sum of its visionary, entrepreneurial and most determined individuals.

These protagonists represent and personify Jazz Age New York, the energy, the boldness – which often becomes recklessness – the will to achieve and to think big. Indeed, Miller argues, '[n]o other decade in the life of that city was more exuberantly alive or enduringly creative', and for Miller it is in the lives, experiences and determination of these characters that the story lies. Jimmy Walker, the flamboyant yet flawed mayor of the city between 1926 and 1932 is the starting point, and to some extent the hero of the narrative. Challenging predominant views of Walker as a 'publicity hound', Miller embraces the extravagant side of the mayor's character, the lack of financial discipline, the adultery, the links to Broadway as well as organised crime and suggests that despite these failings, he presided over a huge expansion of public works and building, meaning he oversaw the emergence of New York as the world's largest and most creative city. Essentially, Walker was flawed and fallible, but New Yorkers loved him because he got things done. Many of Miller's characters are examined in this light. The criminal activities of William Dwyer, Owney Madden and Frank Costello during prohibition for instance, seem to be forgiven for their evocation of the city's spirit that refused to succumb to the will of the federal government, and helped to get prohibition repealed with the 21st Amendment. Many of the characters, particularly the criminals, share an almost Gatsby-esque quality, an ability to rise to prominence much like the city's iconic skyscrapers. Indeed, Fitzgerald's characters have a haunting quality in Miller's narrative, with quotes from Nick Carraway often shadowing the movements of the era.

Miller's biographical approach makes his manuscript extremely interesting as it is possible to gain a real insight into the thoughts, feelings and ambitions of the individuals concerned. In addition, the links and relations between some of these seemingly distant protagonists strengthen the importance of examining the city's history from a range of perspectives, although the significance of the interwoven nature of politics, crime, entertainment and popular culture could have been explored far more explicitly. This is exacerbated by biographical emphasis of each chapter, which makes the book episodic, and disjointed. For Miller however, the links between these different themes are self-evident, as the emphasis on biography is particularly useful in highlighting the fact Jazz Age New York was the destination that allowed the fulfilment of the American Dream. This is especially true for migrants. Owney Madden's arrival to 'Hell's Kitchen' as a young boy from England is a narrative of rags-to-riches, as is that of Emery Roth, developer of the Ritz Tower who arrived from Hungary 'aged thirteen with only seven dollars in his pocket'; Irwin Chanin also had his roots in Eastern Europe, eventually returning to the USA as a teenager, beginning his rise to architectural grandeur and prominence with just \$200 and a 'crazy idea'; and Helena Rubenstein became a multi-millionaire from cosmetics having lived 'on the margins of poverty in the Jewish quarter of Krakow'. Miller's focus on the lives and experiences of these individuals develops the predominant theory that New York was not only a destination, but it was also imagined and lived as the city in which possibility knew no bounds and dreams could be realized, and this is what Miller intends when he states that New York was 'an empire city'. This is a theme repeated in each chapter of the book, and applies to fashion, media, journalism, publishing, music, entertainment and sport. Even the prize-fighter Jack Dempsey and baseball legend Babe Ruth's famous comeback are examples of this undying will to succeed.

Overall however, there is the sense that something is omitted from this narrative that largely focuses on ambition, success and achievement (at least up until the 1929 stock market crash). Miller largely ignores the

role of ordinary New Yorkers, which somehow suggests that they were silent and passive passengers in the energy of the age, carried along by the achievements of great visionaries. Going slightly further, Midtown Manhattan seems to be an area largely devoid of ethnic or racial tension, despite some murmurings of discontent in 'Hell's Kitchen'. There are some obvious missed opportunities to comment on the accommodation of Irish, Italian, Eastern European, Catholics, Protestants and Jews. An example comes from one of the rare instances in the book which looks at the experiences of a community. Miller tells of the experiences of Mohawks that were part of the building workforce, but unfortunately, does not examine the relationship of this group to other workers, with the consequence that they blend almost seamlessly into the city and appear as somewhat of a novelty. Also missing is any significant reference to the Harlem Renaissance, or its relationship to Manhattan or American modernism in the 1920s, as well as perceptions of race. Indeed, Miller's sole focus on Duke Ellington is too narrow in this respect, particularly as he seems reluctant to explore how the musician 'broke the color line', and how significant this was for the culture and life of the city. Perhaps Miller feels that the contributions of David Levering Lewis and Nathan Huggins on Harlem, among many others, do not need any further explorations. In any case, in a study of this magnitude the interconnectedness of black, white and what Douglas would refer to as 'mongrel' culture is too important to avoid.

One issue in Miller's biographical narratives stands out above all others, and that is the way the stories end. Indeed, the 1929 stock market crash was not a death knell to all of the protagonists of *Supreme City*, but as in many other histories, it signalled a turning point, often for the worst. Miller rightly treats the onset of the Great Depression as the end of the story for the city in this period. However, if the object was to demonstrate how New York 'gave birth to modern America', then the question that needs to be asked is to what extent it also gave birth to the worst recession of the 20th century. If the individuals that make up *Supreme City* were visionaries that sometimes broke the rules to achieve greatness and success, then those same qualities surely allowed the men of Wall Street to recklessly bring down the Jazz Age. The achievements of some fascinating New Yorkers in the 1920s are rightfully acknowledged and admired here, but may also be the cause for forgiving their most devastating mistakes. Given the events and changes wrought by the 1930s, it is insufficient to suggest, as Miller does in the closing pages, that '[i]t was all rather crazy, rather splendid'.

In *Supreme City*, New York was an 'empire city' as its magnitude, its spirit and creativity during the 1920s attracted the bodies and minds of the Western world. Fiona Ngô approaches Jazz Age New York from a radically different perspective. So while Miller focuses on the achievements of individuals, such as nightclub hostess 'Texas' Guinan's ability to 'stay hot' to ensure the success of her clubs, Ngô would be more interested in the constructions of meaning which determined 'hotness' and why. Indeed, Ngô is not moved by the romanticism of the era, nor is she as interested in its main characters or their achievements. Instead, the city itself, the way it is lived and its movements – essentially, its geography – are indicative of the construction of racial, gender and sexual identities. However, the main drive behind her thesis is that the lived experience of the city in the Jazz Age is a reflection of empire. Thus, the negotiation of spatial and racial boundaries in the city, and movements across those physical and imagined borders occur under the hegemonic domain of 'imperial logic'. In other words, the formation of identity or 'subject positions' as well as 'others' are governed by the ideology of colonial superiority and colonized inferiority:

Jazz Age New York city ... was constructed through an imperial logic that governed immigration and integration but also engendered modernist and avant-garde movements in politics and arts ... linked by New Yorker's material and immaterial encounters with the sounds and signs of outposts of empire and other faraway lands.

In Ngô's interpretation of empire, however, the crossing of spatial boundaries is more than just the encounters of black and white, but an intermingling of signs, symbols and meanings borrowed and recycled from a number of imperial 'outposts', including the Caribbean, Asia, Latin America, as well the Africa and the American South. Thus, the idea of what constitutes blackness is much more complicated in Jazz Age New York.

In order to demonstrate this, Ngô's examines a range of texts including jazz, dance halls, literature, art and even police reports. Firstly, she examines jazz as a series of 'contact zones', both in terms of spaces and bodies where ideas of race, gender and sexuality collided, and where these collisions were both admired and scrutinized by moral arbiters and transgressors. Indeed, dance halls were akin to frontier outposts. She examines the Harlem Renaissance writer and painter Richard Bruce Nugent, and his manipulation of oriental as well as African signs to produce imperial 'objects'. This work demonstrates the constructed nature of the categories defining race and gender. Essentially, the mixture of signs from imperial spaces, such as in Nugent's 'Drawings for Mulattoes', or Wallace Thurman's 'Infants of the Spring' reveals that the play with a multitude of symbols is used to create a new and multifaceted 'queer black aesthetic'. For Ngô, this practice essentially collapses the physical space between the United States and its colonial spaces. The city is empire. Harlem is another major contact zone where the imperial symbols are negotiated and in turn, subject positions towards race, gender and sexuality are formed. For instance, the adoption of oriental signs, such as Arab and Islamic dance repertoires, were a means for performers to normalize the other and use it to formulate a new 'feminine subjecthood'. In turn, the sites of these performances were the subject of identity formation through police and vice reports, where the acceptable and unacceptable were defined (Ngô, pp. 130–1). Another interesting case study in this respect is the discussion on the use of symbols following the archaeological discoveries in Egypt analysed in the songs such as 'In Old Tutankhamen's Day' which, Ngô argues 'bound together colonial fantasy and racial minstrelsy, oriental signifiers and U.S. domestic cultures, in new configurations of mimicry and scorn' (Ngô, p. 177).

*Imperial Blues* is provocative in the way that it challenges the predominant analysis of race in the Jazz Age as one of black and white encounters. Indeed, race in 1920s New York is much more than an interpretation of blackness, it is the result of a constant negotiation, confrontation and intermingling of the dominant with the 'other', and this other is made up of a plethora of signs and symbols that emanate from around the world. However, while the book is persuasive in its argument that 'the hegemony of an imperial imaginary in U.S. popular culture nonetheless produced differential access to imperial selfhood', historians (and indeed geographers enticed by the book's subtitle) may feel that the book needs more 'boots on the ground', that is concrete evidence and examples that are not only based in art or literature, but in the lived experience of New Yorkers. From Miller's book alone it is clear that there are a number of avenues that could have been explored, not least Florenz Zeigfeld and his 'Follies', or his 1928 Broadway hit 'Show Boat', the first to showcase a black and white cast (Miller, p. 540). But there was also scope to examine the era's entertainment culture more closely, such as the case of the musicals and plantation reviews featuring popular performers such as Florence Mills, one of the decade's most popular entertainers but unfortunately most widely neglected in academic studies. Overall, there is a sense throughout *Imperial Blues* that the idea of empire in the United States needs to be more clearly articulated and contextualized (Ngô, p. 185). What is missing is an appreciation of the emergence of this imperial ideology and hegemony during the Jazz Age, particularly with regards to the United States' newly inherited international position following the end of the First World War, and how this political activity became ingrained in the popular consciousness.

Both *Supreme City* and *Imperial Blues* refer to New York as a city of empire, but in very different ways. Ngô argues 1920s New York was a microcosm that reflected empire, and thus encounters within its spaces constituted the reproduction of multiple identities shaped within the context of an imperial ideology. Miller is much more focused on celebrating his 'empire city', in its ability to accommodate and inspire ambitious and determined individuals from across the world. However, putting both manuscripts together, one wonders whether the emphasis on New York during the 1920s means the city is so synonymous with the Jazz Age that the experiences of other American cities in this period has been obscured. Could the geographies of

New Orleans or Chicago, for instance, be as representative of 'imperial logic'? Were other American spaces participating in the creation of modern America alongside New York? Miller and Ngô demonstrate that there is much more to say on New York in this period, but also indicate that city continues to be a centre of gravity for studies of the 1920s. In *The Culture of Cities* (2), Lewis Mumford argued that 'mind takes form in the city; and in turn, urban forms condition mind'. This certainly rings true for *Supreme City's* main characters that lived Jazz Age New York. However, it is also possible to suggest that it is not just the mind, but the present-day imagination that takes form in the city, and in turn, New York conditions the imagination.

## Notes

1. Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York, NY, 1996).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York, NY, 1938).[Back to \(2\)](#)

Fiona Ngo is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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