

Black Arts, Black Women, Black Politics

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The Meaning of Soul: Black Music and Resilience since the 1960s, Emily J. Lordi. Duke University Press, 2020.

African American Arts: Activism, Aesthetics, and Futurity, edited by Sharrell D. Lockett. Bucknell University Press, 2019.

Fictional Blues: Narrative Self-Invention from Bessie Smith to Jack White, Kimberly Mack. University of Massachusetts Press, 2020.

I begin with a brief meditation on Beyoncé's 2016 soul-inspired song and music video, "Don't Hurt Yourself," from her influential visual album, *Lemonade*. Featuring vocals and instrumental accompaniment by Jack White, her coproducer, the song uses White's signature distortion effects as Beyoncé shout-sings about a wife's frustrations over her husband's infidelity. The interpersonal subject matter hit a bit close to home for Beyoncé, as many listeners read the album, and "Don't Hurt Yourself" in particular, as an autobiographical account of Beyoncé's marriage to Jay-Z and their eventual reconciliation.

Yet Beyoncé creatively uses the music video to accommodate more open-ended readings that center the interiority and sociopolitical lives of Black women. In a key part of the video, Beyoncé utters, "Bad motherfucker, God complex / Motivate your ass, call me Malcolm X," and the music stops while the camera pans to various Black women, and the voice and words of Malcolm X's 1962 funeral speech for Nation of Islam member Ronald Stokes plays over the camera shots: "The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman." By invoking Malcolm X's name and voice, and, most importantly, in the camera's move away from Beyoncé to the faces of other Black women, "Don't Hurt Yourself" performs what Daphne Brooks posits as a key element of Beyoncé's artistry—the creation of "a particular kind of black feminist surrogation . . . an embodied cultural act that articulates black women's distinct forms of palpable sociopolitical loss and grief as well as spirited dissent and dissonance . . . a new era of protest singing" (183). Which is to say, "Don't Hurt Yourself" organizes a musical landscape of Black

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feminist consciousness-raising through which Black women listeners and producers can use the song to voice their interpersonal and institutional struggles as well as find and facilitate community through such shared struggle; it marks the necessity of and power in Black women's collectivity.

This provocation of Black cultural production's ability to create politically informed spaces of intimate and institutional Black collectivity, especially Black women's racialized gender oppression, provides the occasion for discussing Kimberly Mack's *Fictional Blues: Narrative Self-Invention from Bessie Smith to Jack White* (2020), Emily J. Lordi's *The Meaning of Soul: Black Music and Resilience since the 1960s* (2020), and Sharrell D. Luckett's edited collection *African American Arts: Activism, Aesthetics, and Futurity* (2019). Although differing in scope—the blues, soul, visual, and performance art—and form, the three books are recent works that are invested in explicating Black, and especially Black women's, artistic creation as sites of and spaces for alternative Black world-making. They share "Don't Hurt Yourself's" demand to consider how Black expressive culture is personal and political, singular and social, and how it can offer creative, collective, and intersectional strategies for living in a more liberatory world. They illustrate how, for past and present Black artists, and Black women artists in particular, cultural production is a key site of struggle in grappling with multiple and concomitant oppressions as well as developing alternative formations of Black living and being, inevitably showcasing the importance of Black cultural production in our contemporary world of anti-Black racism.

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1

Born out of a series of conferences organized by Bucknell University's Griot Institute for Africana Studies, and flanked by Carrie Mae Weems's "visual foreword" and an afterword featuring Rickerby Hinds's play *Blackballin'*, Luckett's *African American Arts* anthology impressively explores "how one has or how one might approach the use of African American artistry to promote social change, conciliatory moments, and freedom acts" (6). For Luckett, Black art and aesthetic practices are necessarily political, tied to an ongoing history and exercise of Black art as Black activism, and as a means through which to envision and enact frameworks that will "advance and sustain the lives of Black peoples" (3). *African American Arts* builds on classic edited collection predecessors like Gina Dent and Michele Wallace's *Black Popular Culture* (1992) and Thomas DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez's *Black*

Performance Theory (2014), bringing the former's attention to the political stakes of Black cultural studies into the twenty-first century and extending the latter's focus on theory to include and articulate with praxis. Here the essays argue for "the perennial need for art and art-makers to remain central to social justice advocacy" (1) within and beyond our contemporary moment of Black struggle and survival. Indeed, the "and" in Luckett's edited volume's subtitle *Activism, Aesthetics, and Futurity* marks the inextricability of the politics of Black expressive culture (activism and aesthetics) to temporality (futurity), even as it describes how such categorical linkages illustrate the ways that Black art lays the groundwork for new epistemologies and political possibilities. In this respect, Luckett's book nicely complements Simone Drake and Dwan K. Henderson's *Are you Entertained?: Black Popular Culture in the Twenty-First Century* (2020).

Through its 15 essays divided into three sections, *African American Arts* pursues such "questions involving activism, aesthetic exploration, and new possibilities for African American arts" (5). The first section, "Bodies of Activism," surveys Afro-diasporic fashion, stage plays, visual culture, film and film criticism, and dance to examine how Black embodied performances "inhabit, negotiate, identify, mark, or carve out safe spaces" (6). For example, Amber Johnson's chapter examines how visual art of Black trans women and Black nonbinary people can reimagine their lives as not exclusively tied to disproportionate state-sanctioned and quotidian violence. Johnson proposes the portmanteau term, "transfuturism," as a framework for naming "the multiple ways in which trans bodies have begun laying the groundwork for enfleshed possibilities" (22), as well as a "photograph, oral history, and art activism project" that Johnson developed with artist Wriply Bennet (19). To that end, Johnson interviews a series of Black trans and nonbinary people, and then Johnson and Bennet use these interviews to develop comic art that transforms the interview subjects into superheroes. In this way, Johnson and Bennet's transfuturism literally illustrates the "freedom in trans" by imagining worlds of Black trans liberation (24).

Section two, "Music and Visual Art as Activism," analyzes the work of artists Jean-Michel Basquiat and Houston Conwill along with singers Erica Campbell and Beyoncé, among others, to consider how "African American arts and artists have influenced humanity and engendered activism through music and art, broadly construed" (8). In one of the strongest essays in the anthology, Abby Dobson takes seriously Daphne Brooks's contention of the Black- female-soul-singer-as-surrogate to examine how Black women singers create "sonic narratives to give voice to and evidence our subjectivity .

. . . to remember and embody their own humanity in spite of ravages of dehumanization heaped on their backs” (156). To explicate this point, Dobson turns to her own song “Say Her Name,” named after the social movement and hashtag #SayHerName formed in the wake of recent police murders of Black women. Her song aims to remember, document, and demand justice for Black women who are far too often elided in mainstream media narratives of such killings—where attention generally falls to Black men. Dobson cautions against interpreting her argument as positioning Black women’s singing as inherently intersectional, and she uses *Lemonade* to drive this point home. For Dobson, while Black women are heavily featured in the visual album, the album perpetuates the media bias of police killings by exclusively engaging Black men and boys as the direct victims of state violence. Consider my opening discussion of “Don’t Hurt Yourself” where the sampled Malcolm X quotation is drawn from a eulogy of the police killing of a Black man and where neither the sampled quotation nor the music video take into account state killings of Black women. In failing to do so, “Don’t Hurt Yourself” still leaves “a need for justice that is intersectional and specific to (or at least inclusive of) Black women” (166). Despite this critique, Dobson sees political growth in Beyoncé’s artistry and therefore urges us to embrace the *potentiality* of Black women singing as a “sonic intervention . . . a call to acknowledge the humanity of Black women and girls in the United States and around the world” (164).

The final section, “Institutions of Activism,” examines the political implications of Black art(ist) organizations in order to “offer exemplars of ways that institutions, collectives, and their leaders can function as viable vehicles of action” (9). Take Shondrika Moss-Bouldin’s essay exploring her participation in Claudia Alick’s theater project *Every 28 Hours*. Named after the statistic that a state-sanctioned killing of a Black person occurs every 28 hours, this national theater project assembles producers, directors, playwrights, and community leaders across the US to stage a continuing series of plays dramatizing “what it means to be Black in America” (193). For Moss-Bouldin, the collaborative approach of *Every 28 Hours* advances a dynamic and broadly based vision for justice that captures “the significance of African American theatre for social change while providing an outlet for healing and empowerment” (199).

This conception of *Every 28 Hours* exemplifies the scope of *African American Arts* as a whole. The anthology archives and presents an impressive array of Black art and performance that speaks to how Black politics manifests across various media and addresses the depth of Black art activism. Yet gathering so many writers to detail such an extensive collection of Black art also means that the chapters are short; their brevity does not allow the writers to

fully address their artform of choice and its political stakes, leaving the reader wanting more information and analysis. Nevertheless, this desire for more just indicates the strong quality of the essays in *African American Arts*, work that readers will find inspiring in responding to the racialized violences of our contemporary world.

2

If *African American Arts* presents a wide range of Black art and aesthetic practices in order to assert the political stakes and alternative world-making power of Black expressive culture, Lordi's *The Meaning of Soul* and Mack's *Fictional Blues* pursue similar thematics through more localized studies on soul and blues, respectively. *The Meaning of Soul* is not, as the title might suggest, a book that attempts to pin down the ever-elusive definition of soul, nor is Lordi interested in restricting soul to just a musical genre. Rather, Lordi persuasively argues that we must understand soul as a "habit of thinking, a logic" (8), one that underscores "the redemptive possibilities of black suffering" (46). For Lordi, the logic of soul "signif[ies] the special resilience black people had earned by surviving the historical and daily trials of white supremacy," a quality that could ultimately "promote black thriving, if not liberation" (5). Key to this liberatory potential and ideal of soul is understanding its logic of resilience and overcoming as necessarily dynamic and capacious. This shift in soul allows us to trace how soul's power comes from "fortify[ing] one's sense of belonging to a buoyant black collective" (27) as well as creating a Black collective that includes and is led by Black people struggling against heteropatriarchy. On this latter point, Lordi challenges major strains of postsoul theory that view the soul era of the 1960s as masculinist and heteronormative. Instead, Lordi demands an inclusive understanding of soul-as-resilience that expresses new and alternative "ways of being black together in a perilous age," centering "women's, femme, and queer voices." Soul is thus an intersectional "stylization of survival [that] is conditioned by pain . . . and driven by imagination, innovation, and craft" (5).

Lordi illustrates this imagination, innovation, and craft of soul by considering how various Black singers—from Mahalia Jackson to Solange—deploy musical techniques to perform intersectional logic of Black collective resilience. In one chapter, Lordi analyzes the work of covers, and asks what covers might mean within the context of soul's logic that "recast[s] suffering as brilliant survival and extend[s] that transformative potential to listeners" (48). Lordi claims that, more than a mere remake, soul covers signify a "process

of covering over or supplanting an original recording, and of creating cover behind which to stage subversive, if not unspeakable, conversations about racial influence, recognition, and profit, as well as interracial struggles for power and love” (49). It’s here that readers may find Lordi’s take on soul covers as resonating with Jason King’s contention that Black musical covers are “reconstructions” that “reorient both the melodic and lyric foundations of the original, as well as its performative cultural and political effects” (426). Take, as Lordi does, Aretha Franklin’s cover of Simon and Garfunkel’s “Bridge Over Troubled Water.” Lordi rightly points out that the original is inspired by a line from Claude Jeter and the Swan Silvertones’ gospel rendition of “Mary, Don’t You Weep,” singers whom Simon failed to adequately compensate. Franklin’s cover is gospel-inspired—replete with an organ, a choir, call-and-response, and vocal squalling—and critically speaks back to the original. It musically responds to a long history of white appropriation of Black music and culture by recentering “Bridge” within the Black musical tradition of gospel, a genre that offers “emotional and spiritual reassurance and sustenance to the other members” of Black communities (61). Beyond a simple rendition, Franklin’s cover is ultimately a re-cording that reimagines “Bridge Over Troubled Water” for and by Black people.

In addition to covers, Lordi also studies techniques like vocal delivery and how practices such as falsetto give meaning to soul. She brilliantly rejects the conventional notion that falsetto is a male affair, choosing to include women artists like Minnie Riperton in her list of soul falsettists. To Riperton, Lordi brings perhaps her sharpest analysis. She situates the singer’s rise within the emergence of Black feminist writers and movements like Toni Morrison and the Combahee River Collective, respectively. And she beautifully illustrates that, in addition to being aesthetically pleasing, Riperton’s falsetto contributes to a Black feminist impulse of creating “more space for black women’s interiority” (116). Riperton’s falsetto allows her to make more musical and extramusical room for Black feminist expression, imagination, and collectivity. For Black women of the 1970s (and even today) whose movements were (and are) constantly confined, Riperton’s falsetto offered ways of living that refuse constriction, that know no bounds.

Significantly, Lordi does not limit her study to soul singers of the past. *The Meaning of Soul* also explores the work of Black women singers of today and how they perform soul’s logic of Black collective resilience through an engagement with what Lordi calls “Afropresentism.” Seeking to complicate what she sees as the over-use of Afrofuturism as the go-to world-making vision within Black cultural studies, Lordi presses for an embrace of Afropresentism, a

Black aesthetic strategy that uses “the past . . . as a resource for rethinking this [contemporary] world” (154). For Lordi, Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* is emblematic of an Afropresentist aesthetic, especially the song “6 inch” and its sampling of Isaac Hayes’s cover of Dionne Warwick’s “Walk on By.” Lordi explains that much of the sampled material from “Walk on By” in “6 inch” involves Hayes’s Black female backup singers who, much like Black women did for Beyoncé on “Don’t Hurt Yourself,” act as a “sisterhood of rebels.” Because sampling inserts material from the past into a present recording, there is a temporal social life to samples, so it is unsurprising that Lordi refers to the sampled background singers as “spirits” or “ghosts” who help guide Beyoncé through her struggles (157). These are struggles that Lordi reads in the “6 inch” music video, which features Black women comforting Beyoncé behind a burning plantation. Lordi reads this scene as intimating the power of Black feminist communal organizing: it can “help the community heal. . . . [and/or] help burn shit down. These are not necessarily different” (158). Through such a reading, Lordi further lays bare the import of the logic of soul in binding the personal and political for Black liberation.

If, as Dobson’s chapter in *African American Arts* attests, Black women singers offer “sonic-based narratives as expressions of socio-political desire” (161), then *The Meaning of Soul* draws on a rich archive of Black artists who portray how such desires manifest within and as soul and the cultural and political legacy of logic as collective Black resilience. Yet I also wondered how and why Lordi chose these artists. While Lordi sought to center “women’s, femme, and queer voices,” the selected queer voices were Black queer affecting/effecting artists rather than queer-identified. What would it look like to consider the soul techniques of artists like Carolyn Franklin, Tony Washington of the Dynamic Superiors, Sylvester, and/or Jackie Shane? Such a critique is only offered to expand what Lordi already gives us: a great example for how to rethink soul and its intersectional political promise.

3

Kimberly Mack’s *Fictional Blues* joins *The Meaning of Soul* in challenging dominant understandings of Black musical genres and *African American Arts* in insisting on the political nature of Black cultural production. But where Lordi complicates the soul-as-elusive narrative and Luckett ties Black art’s activism to the state, Mack pushes us to rethink the assumed-already-settled image of what constitutes blues authenticity and the kinds of cultural and everyday political possibilities that might open up in light of such a retheorizing of the

blues. The blues artist archetype is beset with racist, classist, and sexist images of the backward, poor, rural, southern, Black man. In *Fictional Blues*, Mack tackles these “racially essentialist notions of blues authenticity and recasts the blues as a narrative tradition,” one through which blues artists “fashioned worlds through their own fictionalized autobiographical and biographical storytelling and self-made personas” (2). In shifting the meaning of blues to artists’ self-fashioning, storytelling practices, Mack refuses to center blues music’s problematic authenticity tropes. She focuses on how blues makers define themselves as artists and highlights these cultural producers’ agency in (re)articulating and (re)shaping their identities and (re)telling their stories. Moreover, blues fictionalized storytelling is, for Mack, a site through which its makers “reclaim their subjectivity in the face of racism, patriarchy, and poverty” (14), an act that simultaneously contests systems of oppression “while [also] writing themselves into the blues tradition” (5). Here Mack redefines the blues tradition away from nebulous, and racist, notions of authenticity and more toward a political genre and genealogy, as a cross-generational collective, of fictionalized narratives.

Central to Mack’s study is her interrogation of how blues makers contend with the figures of the bad bluesman and transgressive blueswoman that have defined, and continue to define, blues visual and lyrical representation. In particular, Mack probes the tale (or many tales) of Stagolee, based on a true story of a Black man, Lee Shelton (aka Stack Lee), who shot and killed another man on Christmas day in 1895 and stole his Stetson hat. The story of Stagolee, in some variation, has appeared in a number of blues songs well into the twenty-first century, and it has crossed to other genres like rap and rock and roll. For Mack, each variation of the Stagolee tale is important because each one speaks to the ways that “blues personas are built through autobiographical and biographical fictions” (31). Because there is little information about Lee himself or the murder, blues makers, as storytellers, add their own twist to the tale—for example, that Lee played music with the devil and/or became Satan himself—and give new life to a blues persona—like the myth of Robert Johnson selling his soul to the devil, or the trope of the bedeviled bluesman. The power of these retellings is most apparent in Mack’s discussion of blueswomen like Ma Rainey who, in her 1926 song “Stack-O-Lee Blues,” sings about being Lee’s girlfriend and/or prostitute. Just as Riperton’s falsetto created space for Black feminist expression, Rainey’s take on the Stagolee myth stages a Black feminist erotic critique of blues patriarchy. She can transgress racialized gender norms as a sexually-desiring Black woman and sex worker, just as she can situate Black women as central to the blues tradition—via the popularity of the Stagolee myth—

which has perpetually sidelined Black women as the inauthentic proprietors of the more authentic bluesman. Indeed, Rainey's iteration is told through such particular intimacy with and about Lee that it further cements her position as the "Mother of the Blues."

In addition to real-life people, Mack is also interested in studying fictional blueswomen, like those found in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), who combat the "racist, patriarchal, and classist categorizations and limitations" informing their often "negative biographical representations" (69). Mack reframes Celie as a "biographer of sorts" whose diary entries (re)construct "each subject's life story" (76). Reading Celie as a biographer matters because her narration of conversations with and lives of blueswomen like Shug Avery and Squeak enables these women to talk back to the racism, sexism, and misogyny they face as Black women in general and Black blueswomen in particular. Similar to Johnson's transfuturism project that was discussed in *African American Arts*, Celie's entries and her conversations with Shug Avery and Squeak challenge oppressive narratives while foregrounding the voices and desires of the oppressed. *The Color Purple*, in Mack's account then, becomes yet another example of Black feminist interruptions of the patriarchal structures of the blues.

Mack's interrogation of blues authenticity and autobiography also extends to white blues artists like Jack White. As a white man from Michigan performing the Black southern genre of the blues, White's participation in blues music raises the specter of cultural appropriation. White tries to sidestep such charges by forgoing any outward references to or any adoptions of the blues—use of an acoustic antique guitar, dressing in a working-class manner, singing in a particular southern way. He also takes up "autobiographical misdirection" or "autobiographical fabrication" (146, 148)—think of White's narrative that Meg White of his band The White Stripes is his sister rather than his actual former wife and business partner—to mark himself within the blues tradition of storytelling and self-fashioning. It's because of his commitment to autobiographical storytelling and self-fashioning that White advances a career in blues, and, perhaps because of this commitment, that Beyoncé collaborated with him on "Don't Hurt Yourself": his blues-informed storytelling assists in the alleged autobiographical nature of *Lemonade*. Due to Beyoncé's famously private life and the rumors of Jay-Z's infidelity, White's autobiographical misdirection skills can keep "the audience and media off balance" (176) in *Lemonade*'s narrative that dances around the cheating rumors. But in centering *Lemonade* on her own autobiographical fictions, Beyoncé moves away from the whiteness of White's blues positionality to recenter Blackness and the Black feminist origins of

genres like the blues in a fashion similar to Franklin's cover of "Bridge" or Dobson's song "Say Her Name." Black storytelling is, as Terrion Williamson contends, "the consummate methodology and an outcome and condition of black social life" (21). So it's through Beyoncé's storytelling in *Lemonade* that she reclaims this tradition for Black people, especially Black women.

Fictional Blues is a rich interdisciplinary study of the potential of storytelling to contest the racist, classist, and masculinist strictures of blues authenticity. But as Mack explores the dynamics of blues authenticity with respect to race, gender, and class, I wondered about other formations such as nation. *Fictional Blues* is a US specific monograph, but as blues musicians traveled internationally and as blues music circulated across the globe, what might storytelling and mythmaking look like transnationally? *Fictional Blues* sets the groundwork for such a future study.

Indeed, future studies on Black expressive culture will be better because *Fictional Blues*, *The Meaning of Soul*, and *African American Arts* now exist. These are three sophisticated intersectional accounts of the politics of Black expressive culture and the centrality of Black women's cultural production to Black liberatory imaginations. They represent, to my mind, the best of Black cultural studies scholarship because they force us to reconsider what we thought we knew, and they force us to look toward the horizon of what we do not yet know. These books open up new possibilities for Black cultural research, for Black being, and, ultimately, for Black futures.

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