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## Book Review: *Fictional Blues: Narrative Self-Invention from Bessie Smith to Jack White*

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Kimberly Mack. *Fictional Blues: Narrative Self-Invention from Bessie Smith to Jack White*. University of Massachusetts Press, 2020. 264 pp.

In *Fictional Blues: Narrative Self-Invention from Bessie Smith to Jack White*, Kimberly Mack offers a welcome spin on debates about blues musicians' supposed authenticity (debates frequently expressed in racial terms) that have characterized blues performance, reception, and (often) scholarship since White listeners, collectors, and performers got in on the act. Without diminishing the significant contributions on this topic by Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Elijah Wald, and Marybeth Hamilton, among others, Mack presents the reader with a question that is both sly and artful, insightful and provocative: what if it's all an act?

I am, admittedly, simplifying for effect. But the fact remains that *Fictional Blues* offers a new way of thinking about old questions by posing an approach to blues' narrative self-invention that redirects readers away from perennial debates such as "Does blues music belong to Black people? Do non-Black people have a legitimate right to play it? Do Black people play the music most authentically? Can non-Blacks also play the blues authentically?" (186).

*Fictional Blues* brings to the surface a tradition of "autobiographical blues self-invention" or narrative practices of self-fashioning that may fabricate, fictionalize, or exaggerate. In short, performers tell stories—about their lives, about their music, about their desires—in their lyrics, in their onstage banter, and in the press and media. Mack suggests that we attend to those stories *as stories*, and explore what this self-invention and reinvention might offer performers and their audiences. Mack's brilliantly straightforward (but by no means simplistic) proposal is a most necessary one because, as Mack suggests, White listeners' demands for blues' authenticity—in classed, gendered, regional, and especially racial terms—have put enormous pressure on artists. Narrative self-invention is one way to claim biographical and autobiographical agency. It is also an opportunity to play a bit, to artistically experiment, to have some fun, to pull one over.

The first chapter situates this narrative blues tradition within a Black folkloric oral tradition of tall tales and storytelling. Here, Mack turns to the story of Stagolee (the spelling varies), who shot and killed another Black man in a St. Louis saloon in 1895. Though rooted in a historical occurrence, Stagolee's story takes on a life of its own, and he

becomes the mythical “bad man” who appears in dozens of folk ballads and blues songs. Mack persuasively argues that it is precisely the *lack* of detailed narrative information that often drives the revision, elaboration, and circulation of such tall tales and that performers employ both “autobiographical and biographical fictions” to craft their personas. Mack concludes this chapter with a look at “classic” blueswomen’s narrative self-invention. This exploration deepens in the subsequent chapter as Mack, building on key Black feminist works by Hazel Carby, Daphne Duval Harrison, and Daphne Brooks, explores how blueswomen from Bessie Smith to Amy Winehouse “deploy autobiographical agency” to self-fashion as a stay against misogynist and, in the case of Black performers, racist attacks by the press. This chapter stages what might initially seem to be a surprising encounter between literary blueswomen (Shug Avery, Squeak, and Celie from Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*) and historical ones (Big Mama Thornton, Amy Winehouse). Yet Mack has developed a theoretical framework for examining the autobiographical acts of blues’ self-invention that is supple enough to allow for these exciting combinations—and makes her book an ideal teaching text in African American literature courses.

Chapter three takes on perhaps the most tenacious blues story of all: that of Robert Johnson, the early twentieth-century Mississippi Delta bluesman who reportedly sold his soul to the devil for guitar-playing talent beyond measure. Johnson’s few recordings and scant information about his life have fired the imaginations of listeners and musicians ever since, particularly during the transatlantic blues revival of the 1950s and 60s. But more recent artistic works also make use of the Johnson myth, and in this chapter Mack explores two late twentieth-century novels, Sherman Alexie’s *Reservation Blues*, and Walter Mosley’s *RJ’s Dream*, alongside short stories by T.C. Boyle and Geoffrey Becker in which Johnson appears as a character. His legend, Mack shows us, proves fertile ground for the narrative self-invention of other characters, who find in Johnson’s story the raw material for their own self-actualization.

Chapter three also emphasizes the importance of Johnson’s legend in the self-fashioning of the White male transatlantic blues musician—a subject position that Jack White of the White Stripes has assiduously tried to avoid. Through costuming, the adoption of a visual Pop Art aesthetic, and—most notably—his assertive misdirection about his relationship to bandmate Meg White, Mack argues, White playfully crafts a blues persona that takes critics’ attention elsewhere, inoculating him against charges of cultural theft or inauthenticity. Mack situates White within the African diasporic trickster tradition, linking his self-fabrication to a longer tradition of blues storytelling. In this chapter, Mack’s skills as a rock critic are on full display, beautifully capturing the sonic on the page and bringing the effervescence of live performance to readers.

The final chapter of the book is the shortest and in many ways the most interesting. Here, Mack looks to the contemporary practice of blues’ apprenticeships, wherein an older, seasoned mentor musician transmits traditions, skills, and practices to a younger acolyte. At times these apprenticeships are formalized, as is the case with programs sponsored by state cultural boards. Other apprenticeships are informal, or even unannounced, as Mack stretches the bounds of “mentorship” to be something that can take place across space and time. Mack pays particular attention to mentor/apprentice

pairings that mix participants of different racial and/or gender identities by tracking, for example, the apprenticeships of Debbie Bond, a White female blues guitarist who has apprenticed to several older Black bluesmen. When Johnny Shines tells stories about his encounters with Black blues legends over his lifetime, he is not encouraging Bond to take those stories as her own, but to “continue this tradition with her own peers.” How do *stories* function as the glue that binds blues’ generations together, even as those stories might be radically revised by someone with a different story to tell?

*Fictional Blues* is an outstanding contribution to contemporary popular music scholarship. It should be widely read by blues scholars, of course. But it should be taken up beyond that: anyone concerned with race, performance, and authenticity politics in popular music studies should read this confident and erudite book. While it fulfills its promise best as a complete monograph, the chapters are written in such a way as to stand easily on their own, making this an ideal teaching text in many different kinds of courses. And, dare I say, the book is also—like the best blues raconteurs—great fun, filled with well-told tales, and the occasional zinger. Mack offers us a new way to listen to what we thought we knew and to appreciate anew the artistry, savvy, and ingenuity of blues music, and the people who make it.

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