

Garabedian closes on a hopeful note: That after being “subject to the multiple tragedies of white denial” for too long, these songs might finally be given the hearing they deserve (181). *A Sound History* offers a foundation for such a hearing, but does not take the work of a systematic study of the songs upon itself; musical and lyrical detail is examined largely to verify the songs, rather than to consider their aesthetic and political claims. A full examination of the material thus remains a task for future scholarship. Since the book is peppered with invitations to examine the Gellert collection at the Archive of Traditional Music at Indiana University, it would seem this is Garabedian’s hope, too.

Such future work might consider further why dismissive attitudes toward Gellert’s collection have persisted long after the postwar conflicts that generated them faded, a question to which Garabedian sketches only one possible answer. Folk and blues scholarship, he suggests in the Epilogue, is a small field, deeply influenced and still well-populated by figures who came of age during the 1960s revival, and it remains an interpretive community whose politics, while progressive, still hold fast to the romantic racialism of their revivalist forebears (177). But as demonstrated by the book’s comparison of the 1930s and 1960s folk revivals, the continuity of personnel does not guarantee a continuity of politics. Further work in this area might, then, ask: What are the continuities between Cold War anti-communism and the neoliberalism of the 2000s, or the rightist populism of the 2010s? Why have some disciplines, such as History and American Studies, been quicker to develop a more sanguine approach to the “dialectic of resistance between ‘red’ and ‘black’” than music studies (12)? Beyond the confines of academic politics, is there space in the contemporary Left, too often mired in bad-faith battles between “class-reductionism” and “racial liberalism,” for this kind of historical example? As the book strongly argues, the lines between academic and national politics are finer than it might be comfortable to believe. As I write, several states have passed, or are in the process of passing laws that would make the songs in Gellert’s volume, and indeed Garabedian’s exegesis, once again “verboten” (29), at least within public education systems.³ As a study in the racial character of U.S. political suppression, then, Garabedian’s book could not be more timely. As a contribution to U.S. music history, it speaks equally to folklore, cultural history, and music studies without sacrificing accessibility or rigor. And as a validation of a radical tradition, a testament to the possibility of a politics beyond the meagre rewards of whiteness’s “psychological wage,” it is essential.

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Fictional Blues: Narrative Self-Invention from Bessie Smith to Jack White

By Kimberly Mack. University of Massachusetts Press, 2020.

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Kimberly Mack’s first full-length monograph, *Fictional Blues: Narrative Self-Invention from Bessie Smith to Jack White*, is a breakthrough in blues scholarship. Mack argues that autobiographical self-invention is an important but rarely examined tradition in blues performance, recording, writing,

³According to Education Week, seventeen states have imposed bans or restrictions that would limit how teachers can discuss racism and sexism at K-12 or collegiate level, while a further twenty-five have legislation or other action in progress. Map: Where Critical Race Theory Is Under Attack (June 11, 2021, updated September 28, 2022). Education Week. Accessed October 21, 2022. <http://www.edweek.org/leadership/map-where-critical-race-theory-is-under-attack/2021/06>.

and literature. This tradition of blues storytelling counters “racially essentialist notions of blues authenticity” and “recasts the blues as a narrative tradition cutting across traditional boundaries of race” (2). By analyzing historical and contemporary blues performers and fictional literary figures, Mack shows that musicians and authors use embellished or falsified autobiographical details to take control of, invent, and re-invent their blues personas. In doing so, blues musicians and figures can “resist racial, social, economic, and gendered oppression while writing themselves into the tradition” (5).

Mack situates herself within the milieu of progressive blues, folk, and music revival scholarship from the last two decades, referencing and adding to work by Elijah Wald, Marybeth Hamilton, and Grace Hale.¹ Literary analysis and criticism are her dominant methodologies, and she cites literary and cultural theorists Mieke Bal, William Nelles, and Gérard Genette as foundational to her understanding of autobiographical narrative.² Mack applies her analysis to original song lyrics, lyrical revisions of traditional blues and folk songs, interviews with and about musicians and authors, stage banter, gossip, and reception history.

Mack’s thesis, that autobiographical storytelling is a major tradition in blues, challenges the reader to rethink what blues is, and shifts the popular characterization of blues from a “racially naturalized skill to a storytelling art form” (4). Instead of drawing rigid racialized, gendered, or cultural boundaries around blues authenticity, the author offers nuanced analyses about the different ways performers use autobiographical self-invention for their varied personal goals. However, as Mack shows throughout her work, just because any musician can write themselves into the blues tradition through autobiographical storytelling does not absolve practitioners of cultural appropriation or exploitation.

In the first chapter, Mack profiles the “architects of the blues,” who she defines as “Black men and women who used fictionalized autobiographical blues expression to take control of their own narratives,” showing how their fictionalizations “reclaim their subjectivity in the face of racism, patriarchy, and poverty” (14). For instance, singers like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey subverted gender norms by embracing rumors of their sexual prowess. Composer W.C. Handy, who crowned himself the Father of the Blues, published some of the earliest blues compositions after claiming to have “discovered” the genre from uncredited Black musicians playing at a train station in rural Mississippi. However, just as Handy foregrounded his proximity to the impoverished rural creators of the genre, he delineated a clear boundary between them and himself as the translator, refiner, and producer of blues for popular (read: white and cosmopolitan Black) audiences.

Mack asserts that white blues writers in the 1940s and beyond took as fact the embellishments blues musicians inserted into their songs and stories, but that this was not the intention of the genre’s architects. This disconnect created a body of blues revivalist literature in which white blues revivalists turned myths and embellishments into historical facts. Combined with racial stereotyping, these misunderstandings and misconceptions about blues permeated the dominant narrative and the tropes understood to be associated with the genre, and Mack builds on these concepts in each subsequent chapter.

In the second chapter, she turns to blues musician Big Mama Thornton, contemporary blues-influenced pop star Amy Winehouse, and fictional blueswomen characters created by Alice Walker to show the ways in which women have defied gendered limitations through autobiographical self-invention.³ The author discusses how blues revivalist writers have created reductive notions of blues authenticity that have relegated blueswomen to a specific set of attributes embodied by early women blues stars like Bessie Smith. Thornton, however, defied the expectations foisted upon her by dressing in men’s clothing, disclosing little information about her love life, and playing harmonica (which was not a women’s instrument). Mack further shows that Thornton, the original singer of the Elvis Presley hit “Hound Dog,” advocated for her often-forgotten position in blues history by repeating

¹Elijah Wald, *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues* (New York: Amistad Press, 2004); Marybeth Hamilton, *In Search of the Blues* (New York: Basic Books, 2008); Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

²Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); William Nelles, *Frameworks: Narrative Levels and Embedded Narrative* (New York: Peter Lang Publishers, 1997); Gérard Genette, trans. Jane E. Lewin, *Narrative Discourse* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980).

³Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Harcourt Publishing, 2003).

her songwriting prowess and historical importance while onstage and in interviews. In regard to Amy Winehouse, Mack points out that her lyrics and vocal style placed her within the blues tradition, but that she also adopted a “Black, male persona in some of her work” (104). Although Winehouse, who was white, had a vocal style and sound that clearly appropriated Black music, Mack notes that “the concept of blues authenticity is rooted in narrative fictionality to begin with, so Winehouse [was] merely contributing to that tradition” when she adopted the persona of a Black man (104). Her lyrical gender-bending thus diverted attention away from the overwhelming media focus on her physical appearance and chaotic personal life.

Robert Johnson—the epitome of the rural, rambling, romantic bluesman trope—is the focus of Chapter 3. Mack recounts how the Johnson mythology centers on him selling his soul to the devil in exchange for musical prowess, a deal that allows him to perform and record commercially, but leads to his untimely and mysterious death. Because very few biographical details of Johnson’s life can be confirmed, white blues revivalist writers and musicians who “discovered” and (re)popularized Johnson’s recordings in the 1950s and 1960s entangled his music with their ideas of him as authentic, exotic, and otherworldly. Johnson, who died in 1938, cannot speak back to revivalists through autobiographical reinvention, but authors who use the Johnson trope in their fictional works do challenge and reinvent his mythology and reshape his place in blues music. Mack shows this by analyzing *Reservation Blues* by Sherman Alexie, *RL’s Dream* by Walter Mosley, and various works by Geoffrey Becker and T.C. Boyle.⁴ In *Reservation Blues*, the crossroads myth drives the plot, and Johnson is able to repay his debt to the devil and earn his spiritual freedom. In *RL’s Dream* the Johnson-like character is a ghost and facilitates the main character’s ability to become a storyteller. Here, Mack shows that it is possible to reinvent even the most entrenched blues tropes.

Contemporary blues-influenced rock musician Jack White wrote himself into the blues tradition in the 2000s, and his story is the focus of Chapter 4. At the beginning of his career, White wrote and performed lyrics that used blues signifiers, played Delta blues cover songs on vintage equipment, and foregrounded his own self-imposed luddite sensibilities to align himself with dominant ideas about authentic blues. Simultaneously, he broke with blues tropes by creating a pastiche of confusing sonic, visual, and biographical details: The vintage equipment he used was often from a later era than the songs he covered, he employed bold pop-art visual branding incongruous with the visual elements used to signify blues authenticity, and, oddly, he lied to the press about his relationship with his bandmate (an ex-wife who he said was his sister). As he wrote himself into the blues tradition, his absurd and outlandish persona helped him avoid critiques about his own authenticity and undeniable whiteness. White may operate within the tradition in many respects, but Mack highlights the racial essentialism present in his interviews with the press, wherein he explains blues as primitive and innocent. These actions, combined with White’s more recent project of reissuing old blues records, hint at some of the major issues within the blues industry—a topic which Mack only alludes to in this monograph.

Mack focuses on blues apprenticeship in the final chapter. Formal apprenticeships are common in blues, and include the master-apprentice musician pairings often underwritten by state humanities boards, and informal apprenticeships formed by casual multigeneration friendships that develop organically at blues jams and in local music scenes. Mack’s most engaging example of this practice examines Gary Clark, Jr., a young, Black, now-famous musician who learned a great deal about blues through an informal relationship with white traditional blues musician Jimmy Vaughan (the older brother of blues-rock luminary Stevie Ray Vaughan). Mack reveals several interesting commonly shared notions about authenticity in blues through Clark. Historical and contemporary Black blues musicians are perceived as instantly authentic by fans and critics because of their race, but “projections of authenticity directed at Black blues musicians, in particular, tend to overshadow their accomplishments as professionals in control of their own work and their personas, who are striving for commercial success” (7). Mack discusses how fans and critics therefore expect young Black blues musicians like Clark to remain faithful to traditional blues and are upset when they venture outside of a constructed

⁴Sherman Alexie, *Reservation Blues* (New York: Grove Press, 1995); Walter Mosley, *RL’s Dream* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995).

notion of blues purity. This reduces Black musicians' agency and self-determination and erases white mentors like Jimmy Vaughan from the narrative. Mack's careful analysis reveals the ways in which apprenticeships both function and are obscured in blues traditions.

By incorporating autobiographical storytelling into the concept of blues, this book is a groundbreaking work that will be foundational for scholars of blues, popular music, American studies, Black studies, and media studies. The book is aimed at scholarly audiences, but the writing is accessible and engaging enough for advanced undergraduates and general audiences. Mack's work offers a new analytical frame for considering who can participate in blues and how, while simultaneously locating and challenging reductive tropes and exploitative and appropriative participants. This work could be built upon by future scholars to include how the blues industry—including blues labels, nonprofits, blues societies, and the blues radio and festival circuit—factors into these conversations.

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Atmospheric Noise: The Indefinite Urbanism of Los Angeles

By Marina Peterson. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021.

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Atmospheric Noise: The Indefinite Urbanism of Los Angeles follows the transformative significances of noise occasioned by the opening of the Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) in 1959 in terms of new challenges to urban planning, modes of life, and onto-epistemic slippage. Here, Marina Peterson uses a variety of mutually informing methods whose indeterminacy sometimes models the liminality of noise itself. Peterson theorizes the local and contextual significances of sound in the shifting urban world of Southern California in the 1960s and 1970s using rigorous archival and ethnographic work. The book repeatedly eschews fixed definitions of noise in favor of local, contextual, and plastic considerations of the atmospheric rather than the semiotic or formal. "Atmospheric" here refers to a focus on the material entanglements that frame being and occasion knowledge. Rather than respecting subjects or objects as discrete, Peterson's phenomenal approach to the atmospheric emphasizes "sensation and immaterial forms of energy, materializations over materiality—motion, emergence, immanence, in and of air and sense" (9).

Informed by the methodological and epistemic assumptions of "new materialism," this study focuses on the particular qualities of diverse forms of matter and their entanglements.¹ Furthermore, it addresses a lacuna in related literature that has rarely engaged the challenges of the atmospheric; that material space that, in its liminality, connects subjects to their physical and social possibilities of being. Though in dialogue with many strands of sound studies, this method allows Peterson to sidestep arguments about the potential signifying, lisible character of sound and noise

¹Peterson explicitly notes the study's investment in new materialism, a developing field that offers many contributions to humanistic study broadly construed. For more on the methodological and epistemological assumptions of new materialism, see Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).