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**A. Yemisi Jimoh**. *Spiritual, Blues, and Jazz People in African American Fiction: Living in Paradox.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002. vii + 218 pp. $ 30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57233-172-3.

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## Spirituals, Blues and All That Jazz

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In *Spiritual, Blues, and Jazz People in African American Fiction* A. Yemisi Jimoh provides close textual analysis of a series of mostly twentieth-century, canonical African American texts: Paul L. Dunbar's *Sport of the Gods*, Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, Zora N. Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Ann Petry's *The Street*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Toni Morrison's *Sula*, and James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" to name a few. At the very least, *Spiritual, Blues, and Jazz People in African American Fiction* might serve as an example to young scholars of how to perform extended close readings well. Yet close reading is not what makes this text interesting; instead it is Jimoh's attention to musical themes and characters in well-known African American novels. Spirituals, blues, and jazz created by African Americans out of their distinct American experience–slavery, emancipation, Jim Crow, and the fight for Civil Rights–serve as the impetus for Jimoh's work. And she's interested in the how these musical forms inform the production of African American literature. Her analysis uncovers how music is embedded in literary artifacts, from character development to the plot development. Jimoh seeks to "investigate many of the African American intracultural issues that inform a more broadly intertextual use of music in the making of character and theme in fiction by black writers in the United States" (p. 4).

But some may wonder how Jimoh's text differs from that of well-known scholars dealing with music's connection to African American literature, particularly Houston Baker (*Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*). Why read Jimoh's book? Other than covering more musical ground (forms and periods), one of the ways she believes her text contrasts, and thus might serve as an complimentary text, is in her attention to the "historical situatedness of the discursive formations" that inform her, somewhat, new-historicist approach (53). Each chapter of her text is heralded with a whirlwind historical overview that offers the reader a glimpse into the political, geographical, and musical realities of American blacks living during these designated eras. These chapter introductions cover roughly twenty year increments and move from the last decade of the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. They track the emergence of each musical form vis-à-vis specific stages of the black experience: the themes of spirituals are indicative of the slave's desire for freedom; blues "illustrates the post-enslaved cultural expression of a people negotiating the modern world on terms that purport to be different from those encountered while enslaved, yet the terms are not substantially different" (p. 23); and jazz, stemming out of blues, attempts to negotiate individual and group exigency, it seeks to make useable the fragments of a post-modern life. And it makes sense that these musical forms would follow the trajectory from pre-modern to post-modern in much the same way as the literary texts and historical time periods of which Jimoh writes.

Yet, there is something missing from Jimoh's text: music. While *Spiritual, Blues, and Jazz People in African American Fiction* makes reference to a few specific song titles, the text is uncannily devoid of music and musical lyrics. Jimoh frequently cites W.E.B. Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folk*, in which each chapter is introduced with bars of music and a chapter is dedicated solely to the analysis of "sorrow songs," as a meaningful influence, but she fails to capture Du Bois's wonderful infusion of music in literary and cultural analysis. Instead Jimoh assumes that all

readers will know typical spiritual and blues lyrics, or understand jazz's improvisations. Nevertheless it appears that Jimoh, maybe at the prompting of early reviewers, realizes her lack of musical specificity, because she includes a four page appendix, "Allusions and References to Musicians and Music in the Narrative," listing the titles and composers/singers/players of all the songs alluded to in her selected texts. But this appendix is just that, tacked on and offering little guidance.

Similarly, Jimoh writes about the importance of spiritual, blues, and jazz "metaphors" in fiction, but fails in her musical discussion to perform the same diligent close textual readings that she offers of the literature. In Chapter One, "Muddy Waters," it would have been beneficial to have provided an analysis of lyrics making more evident the commonalities of theme and content between African American music and fiction.

*Spiritual, Blues, and Jazz People in African American Fiction* is clearly a useful text to scholars of African American fiction. Its close readings are succinct, interesting, and provide young scholars with a wonderful model of literary analysis. However, its lack of musical background information might be alienating to those unfamiliar with Spirituals, blues, and jazz. But such a deficiency might ultimately prove to be a pleasure for readers who are willing to supplement Jimoh's text by listening to a few CD's-this is where the appendix might come in handy.

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