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*Black Writers, White Publishers: Marketplace Politics in
Twentieth-Century African American Literature* (review)

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American Studies, Volume 48, Number 1, Spring 2007, pp. 163-164 (Review)



Published by Mid-American Studies Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ams.0.0062>

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the U.S. mortgage industry scrambles to recover losses from its aggressive, and arguably abusive, financial products targeted at naïve and overly optimistic home “owners,” creating one of the newest American flavors of mainstream financial hardship.

Hornstein’s book turns on the question of what constitutes “middle class” in the United States. He writes: “How did virtually all Americans come to think of themselves as ‘middle class’ in the twentieth century?” (ix). From the promotion of the real estate agent as a serious, stabled professional to the quasi-scientific boosterism that argued for a new science of “realology” by mid-century, the book provides an important study in the intersection of aspirational consumer culture, boot-strapping entrepreneurship, and American history.

Social and economic researchers differ on definitions of U.S. middle class status. One of the main strengths of Hornstein’s book is that it argues powerfully that the term “middle class” defines a state of mind rather than an externally applied demographic or economic fact. The book shows how cultural mythology—here an American belief in self-determined individual achievement and optimism about the promise of equal life chances for all—combine with business interests to produce a sustained and powerful cultural and business premise which is a central theme of U.S. history.

One of the values of Hornstein’s book is his meticulous history of an occupation that he argues marks American cultural identity: the real estate agent. The “realtor,” as Hornstein traces, is a uniquely American invention. Real estate agents were also one of the primary professions open to and marketed toward women. Thus, the story of the central role played by the real estate industry’s promotion of home ownership in defining normative culture, and the armies of women real estate agents who ultimately turned this idea into reality, is both historically important and a good read. Among the book’s other strengths is its textbook example of how business and consumer ambition synergistically weave together a perceived truth, no less real because it is constructed. Hornstein demonstrates how the desire to professionalize one realm of an otherwise lower status sales job—the real estate agent, or realtor—synergistically orchestrates tandem growth in the real estate industry. Developers, leveraged capital in the form of mortgages, and consumer desire are only a few of the synergistic businesses that the real estate market conjoins.

This is an excellent book. It would make a valuable text for course work in cultural, business, consumer, and women’s history. If there is a less successful element in the book, it can be found in the book’s attempt to provide a moral perspective. While Hornstein’s conclusions may be justified, the argument that the real estate industry and its agents fueled the demise of inner cities and urban areas in favor of economically efficient tract and suburban home developments suggests rich territory for a more complex economic and market perspective. Future scholarship on the intersections of human striving and economic interests must contend with Hornstein’s case study of the U.S. real estate industry as one overall direction of property ownership and the resulting life’s chances.

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BLACK WRITERS, WHITE PUBLISHERS: Marketplace Politics in Twentieth-Century African American Literature. By John K. Young. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi. 2006.

Realigning the broad concerns of cultural studies with the revisionary tendencies of American literary history is a necessary project for twenty-first century scholars, mainly because the conditions that obtain in the production and reception of literature have changed radically. John Young argues convincingly that by giving sustained attention to

the contexts of textual production, “we can best understand both the complex negotiations required to produce African American texts through a predominately white publishing industry and the material marks of those negotiations” (5).

Young seeks to use the methodologies urged by editorial theory to illuminate relations among writers, editors, and publishers as well as how such paratextual materials as book designs, advertising, and reviews reinforce racialized lines of power. Thus, Young forces us to recognize shortcomings in literary histories that ignore the importance of texts as elements in what Michel de Certeau would call the practice of everyday life. Young provides solid evidence that the phenomenon of marketing African American literature is a microcosm of the political economy of the United States.

Young’s discussion of the material and immaterial aspects of textuality leads us to reconsider how urgent is the need to write literary histories which are informed by a sociological consciousness of literary commerce. The five chapters in *Black Writers, White Publishers* are representative treatments of specific issues. The first two chapters deal with the problematic ending of Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929) and the “aesthetic tension” (65) manifested in the printings of Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972). Chapters three and four focus attention on Gwendolyn Brooks’s shift from mainstream publishing to the black bibliographic environments of Broadside, Third World, and David presses and to Oprah Winfrey’s successful marketing of Toni Morrison’s fiction for popular audiences. The final chapter is devoted to the considerable problems of editing Ralph Ellison’s unfinished novel *Juneteenth*.

Although Young’s examination of Oprah’s Book Club pales when compared with Cecilia Konchar Farr’s *Reading Oprah: How Oprah’s Book Club Changed the Way America Reads* (SUNY Press, 2005), his book is, nevertheless, a remarkable contribution to scholarship in American and African American literatures. It provides models of how scholars might begin to fill the gaps left by cultural studies and literary histories that isolate textuality and transmission by failing to articulate how the practice of literary power is constituted. It is crucial, as Young argues in his conclusion, to address how editorial theory and practice have blurred the contingent reality of “race” in America. Indeed, the more ethical scholarship that Young imagines has the possibility of moving us beyond the severe limits of racial binaries into a more adequate and sophisticated historical explanation of how writers and publishers interact in the production of a vast body of works that add flesh and blood to the vexed skeleton of a national literature.

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HISTORY, MEMORY, AND THE LITERARY LEFT: Modern American Poetry, 1935–1968. By John Lowney. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press. 2006.

Focusing on six poets—Muriel Rukeyser, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Elizabeth Bishop, George Oppen, and Thomas McGrath—John Lowney’s book argues that their approaches to cultural memory were deeply inflected by both their experiences of the Depression and their leftist commitments. Lowney grounds his approach to cultural memory in Pierre Nora’s concept of *lieux de mémoire*, which distinguishes “cultural memory” from “history” in modern societies as essentially “archival.” Further, Lowney wants to recuperate a concept of “collective memory,” not in the problematic sense of a hegemonized collective but of a socially dialogic memorialization. Lowney reads the documentary impulses of the poets discussed, especially in their long poems, as ways of articulating a dialogic and fragmentary memorial against the amnesiac forces of hegemony. He identifies the recurring motif of ruins as emblematic in this project, exemplified in the