



PROJECT MUSE®

Ghostwriting Modernism, and: Performing Blackness:
Enactments of African-American Modernism (review)

William J. Maxwell

American Literature, Volume 75, Number 3, September 2003, pp. 659-661
(Review)

Published by Duke University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/46633>

***Ghostwriting Modernism.* By Helen Sword. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press. 2002. xiii, 212 pp. Cloth, \$42.50; paper, \$18.95.**

***Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism.* By Kimberly W. Benston. New York: Routledge. 2000. xiii, 386 pp. Cloth, \$100; paper, \$29.95.**

H.D. with a Ouija board; Baraka with a jazz band. Each pairing threatens to refute the other and both seem a world away from “Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar.” Yet these disparate couplings of poet and medium are recruited for similar new modernist projects in Helen Sword’s *Ghostwriting Modernism* and Kimberly Benston’s *Performing Blackness*, books determined to return once-repressed attachments to the forefront of literary modernism. Sword argues against the fading assumption that the ironic, materialist aesthetics of Anglo-American modernism barred its attraction to the transcendental, in this case, to popular spiritualism. Benston argues for the performance ethos of African American modernism, targeting the proposition that such modernism imagined blackness as a textual product instead of a dramatic practice. Together, the books testify to both the bracing innovations of the new modernist studies and this new wave’s nourishing of received modernist ideas and styles.

Sword’s excellent book is a model of sensible lucidity despite, or more likely because of, its spectral, enigmatic subject. With inspiration from Yeats’s metaphor of the slumming muse, Sword unveils the illicit “relationship between mediumistic discourse—a destabilizing, low cultural, often implicitly feminized mode of speech and writing—and modernist literary aesthetics.” By “mediumistic discourse,” Sword means the prodigious textual output of spirit mediums, those professional conduits of communication between the quick and the dead who owe their living to the table-rapping Fox sisters of Rochester, founders of popular spiritualism in the revolutionary year of 1848. From the beginning, spirit mediums were not shy about acknowledging their likeness to imaginative authors: both groups, after all, ventriloquized the dead in written form. But it was not until the twentieth century, Sword contends, that this resemblance was admitted by the sort of male highbrows who had cheered the taming of young women with spiritualist pretensions in Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) and James’s *The Bostonians* (1886). World War I, the primary trauma in so many modernist histories, offered writers in mourning desperate reasons to credit spiritualist contacts with the dead. Yet it was the modernists’ fresh respect for the texture and ontology of mediumistic discourse, Sword maintains, that made for spiritualism’s surprising success in an era of bellicose materialism. Where nineteenth-century writers renounced spiritualism’s “subversive celebrations of alternate, often explicitly feminine, modes of writing; its transgressions of the traditional

divide between high and low culture; and its self-serving tendency to privilege form over content,” twentieth-century writers recognized a fellow traveler.

Sword’s vision of fruitful engagement between modernism and spiritualism demands redefinition of both, and her early chapters establishing the subversive paradoxes of “ghostwriting”—“a medium’s publication of written messages supposedly authored in the spirit world”—rank as her most engaging and inventive. To her mind, Jane Sherwood, Hester Dowden, and other spiritualists who channeled and marketed works by dead white men anticipated the death of the author by breathing literary life into the deceased. Sword’s three central chapters tracing the intense response of canonical modernists to such brazen ghostwriting are both less stimulating and more convincing. She confirms that when Joyce, Yeats, H.D., and Eliot courted postromantic impersonality by doing the police in different voices, they validated “the methods and forms, perhaps even the abject corporeality, of mediumistic discourse.” The final disappointment of Sword’s sophisticated, revealing book stems from the fact that her discovery of the spiritualism near modernism’s heart winds up validating the modernism we have known for at least a decade. Rather than haunting modernist curators into a new relationship with their dearly departed, her mediumistic ghosts consecrate familiar concerns with modernist “authority and iconoclasm,” and once more rediscover modernism’s balanced devotion to “the elitist mystique of high culture and the messy vitality of popular culture.”

Benston, writing without the benefit of Sword’s renovation of Anglo-American ghostwriting, indicts the (post)modern “Euro-American” avant-garde for evacuating living memory. His more urgent concern, however, is an antidote to all scorched-earth aesthetics, namely, the seasoned but vibrant black modernism of the black consciousness movement of the 1960s. This post-Harlem Renaissance, post-bebop modernism, asserts Benston, transformed dead-letter representation into animated presentation and opened a still vital chapter in African American art. In its desire to supplant caricatures of an outmoded, hyperessentialist Black Arts movement, Benston’s study joins a surge of recent and forthcoming books in literary criticism, cultural studies, and old-fangled history. His contribution is distinguished by his emphasis on blackness as a “productive process” and by his abiding commitment to a black vernacular theory ironically born in opposition to Black Arts excesses.

The results of Benston’s challenging fusion of performance studies, vernacular theory, and the new modernism are always heady and sometimes brilliant. Two core chapters concerning saxophone colossus John Coltrane, the book’s declared culture hero, open up onto valuable descriptions of the Black Arts theater, the “modern chant sermon,” the dramatic prefaces of Adrienne Kennedy, the confessional “autocritography” of African American literary critics, and the performative poetics of Amiri Baraka, also the subject of Benston’s much-cited first book. Still, too many pages become painful to

negotiate because of a distended, jargon-stuffed prose, styled to approximate modernist difficulty as well as poststructuralist estrangement. Lest this complaint be confused with the revenge of an antitheoretical prejudice, I'll quote a sample sentence from the chapter on the playwright Kennedy: "Seeking to control the crisis of incommensurate interpretive tasks by establishing its limit through thematized configurations of specific conflictual linguistic performances—in particular, undertaking to establish the contrast in *Funnyhouse of a Negro* between the Jungle and the Room (emblems of reified stasis—statuary, walls, repetition—versus signs of wildness—hair, scream, movement) as synecdochic enactment of a larger defining tension between classicism (such as colonialism, the unified bourgeois subject, theater history) and its disruption or interruption by the Uncanny (such as revolutionary resistance, the subject-in-process, the Imaginary)—I experienced instead the frustration of any sure conceptual grasp as Kennedy's play continuously displaced my schema by its own ceaseless self-interrogations" (229). Simply put, Benston's book is too good to contain such candidates for the museum of bad academic writing.

William J. Maxwell, University of Illinois,
Urbana-Champaign

***Ethnic Modernisms: Anzia Yeziarska, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Rhys, and the Aesthetics of Dislocation.* By Delia Caparoso Konzett. New York: Palgrave. 2002. xiv, 202 pp. \$55.00.**

***Rereading the Harlem Renaissance: Race, Class, and Gender in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, and Dorothy West.* By Sharon L. Jones. Westport, Conn.: Praeger. 2002. ix, 159 pp. \$62.95.**

The study of all literatures depends on definitions. During the past decade, the study of American literature has benefited immensely from new perspectives on its national and generic characteristics. Much of the recent critical work published under the rubrics of new historicism, feminism and postfeminism, and cultural, race, and queer studies has focused on modernism and its needlessly separated subcategory, the Harlem Renaissance. These two books draw usefully upon this decade of work, and—more important—help to move the discourse into different patterns of emphasis.

Delia Konzett's *Ethnic Modernisms* considers how the writings of Anzia Yeziarska, Zora Neale Hurston, and Jean Rhys attack stereotypes of class and nativism. The opening chapter is a model of helpful definition in which Konzett rehearses the crucial dilemma of recognition that Henry James experienced upon his return from England in 1904. Absent for over twenty years, thoroughly—and complacently—immured in the social and literary conventions of the upper middle class, James was aghast at the current state of cul-