

Book Review

Review of “Race Brokers: Housing Markets and Segregation in 21st Century Urban America”

By Elizabeth Korver-Glenn

Oxford University Press. 2021, 240 pages. <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/race-brokers-9780190063870?cc=us&lang=en>

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To many observers of neighborhoods and housing markets, racial segregation seems normal, natural, or inevitable. In fact, segregation is so central to contemporary cities (and our discussions of them) that these patterns often appear irreversibly sketched into the twenty-first century urban landscape. But in her new book, *Race Brokers: Housing Markets and Segregation in 21st Century Urban America*, sociologist Elizabeth Korver-Glenn forcefully argues that racial segregation is *not* an intractable feature of urban life. Instead, she shows that housing market professionals reproduce and reinforce racial segregation through racist ideas and racialized routines in their everyday work.

Studying the housing market in Houston, Dr. Korver-Glenn introduces readers to four types of housing market professionals—builders, real estate agents, mortgage bankers, and appraisers. Quickly, this comprehensive approach to studying the housing market shows how racist ideas enter the housing market at multiple points in the process of building, buying, and selling homes. Relying on interviews and participant observation, Dr. Korver-Glenn documents how racist ways of thinking permeate the ways these professionals approach their work.

There are plenty of explanations for the persistence of racial segregation, but Dr. Korver-Glenn argues that they are incomplete without an accounting of contemporary housing market professionals. For example, the legacy of historically discriminatory policies, like redlining or blockbusting, provides one compelling explanation, but it alone is insufficient. Other answers point to the preferences of consumers for segregated neighborhoods or practices of overt discrimination in housing markets, but these explanations neglect the role of builders, real estate agents, mortgage bankers, and appraisers in reifying the status quo. The analysis in *Race Brokers* extends these explanations to show how housing market professionals rely on racist ideas as the build, sell, lend, and appraise.

Early in the manuscript, Dr. Korver-Glenn introduces readers to analytical rubrics that provide the backbone for her analysis. She contrasts a *racist market rubric*, which relies on a set of racist and racialized ideas about people and neighborhoods, with a *people-oriented market rubric*, which challenges these racist ideas and, instead, values people of color and their communities. The racist market rubric presents Black people and neighborhoods as financially unstable, dangerous, or undesirable; it simultaneously reinforces racist ideas about White people and neighborhoods as affluent, hip, and market savvy. Housing market professionals regularly deploy ideas from the racist market rubric as they approach their everyday work.

In Chapters 2–5, Dr. Korver-Glenn applies this analytical framework to each type of industry professional in her study, providing readers with a comprehensive look across the housing spectrum. In Chapter 3, readers learn about the real estate brokers who serve as market intermediary between buyers and sellers. Many practices that appear to be race-neutral—for example, the cultivation of client networks or the practice of pocket listings—are shaped by racist ideas. For example, as White agents rely on their racially-stratified social networks to find new clients, they prioritize clients that they expect to generate revenue without imposing an undue hassle on real estate professionals themselves. As they cultivate their clients, Dr. Korver-Glenn shows how real estate brokers rely on racist tropes about how they expect White, Latino, Asian, or Black clients to behave in the homebuying process. She identifies the consequences of these race-based networks in a discussion of pocket listings—a process where real estate agents share private listings with clients before advertising them publicly. When White agents, who often cultivate White networks of clients, utilize pocket listings, they reinforce racial segregation by facilitating privileged access to the housing market to clients in their networks.

This application of the racist market rubric drives Dr. Korver-Glenn's analysis in each empirical chapter. In Chapter 2, she shows that builders rely on racist ideas about people of color and their neighborhoods in making decisions about where to build housing. Builders believe that Black and Latino homeowners are more vulnerable to predatory practices of buying homes at an undervalued price because they often believe that people of color enter the housing market with a more limited understanding of its mechanics. Similarly, the mortgage bankers in Chapter 4 exercise *racialized discretion* as they generate segregated networks and provide access to capital to buy a home.

In the penultimate chapter, Dr. Korver-Glenn makes several suggestions to address the issues raised throughout the book, including policy suggestions to strengthen the regulation of housing market professions and improve the enforcement of fair housing laws. But as a sociologist, the most interesting interventions come when Dr. Korver-Glenn argues for disrupting the *racialized routines* that she observed throughout the industry. Many of her proposed disruptions, including outlawing pocket listings, adopting commission-based fee structures for real estate transactions, and improving fair housing education, would require the buy-in of real estate professionals, but her book powerfully sets the stage for gaining that buy-in. Deftly presented with a style suitable

for academic and non-academic audiences alike, *Race Brokers* methodically shows readers how racist ideas seep into the everyday work of building, buying, and selling homes. Although the book acknowledges that these ideas are often deployed unintentionally or without overt malice, the result is the same. Dr. Korver-Glenn seems to know that changing the racial routines that reinforce segregation will require the participation of market professionals themselves.

For scholars of neighborhoods, housing, and racial segregation, Dr. Korver-Glenn offers an insightful look into the role of real estate professionals in patterning inequality and reifying racial segregation. She reminds readers that our explanations of neighborhood segregation often consider housing consumers, but they rarely focus on the market intermediaries who facilitate access to the market and shape the preference of buyers and sellers.

But beyond the domain of housing markets, *Race Brokers* offers lessons for sociologists interested in understanding how racialized ideas about economic and social life gain traction. Defining the idea of *race brokers* early on, Dr. Korver-Glenn acknowledges the potential application to other marketplaces. “[R]aces brokers are gatekeeping individuals in any social sphere who are more influential than most other people in shaping what race means, and whether and how ideas about race are connected to resources,” she writes (pp. 11–12). With that, Dr. Korver-Glenn offers an opportunity to apply the *Race Brokers* framework beyond the field of housing, helping sociologists better understand how racist ideas and tropes inform other unequal power relationships and market exchanges.