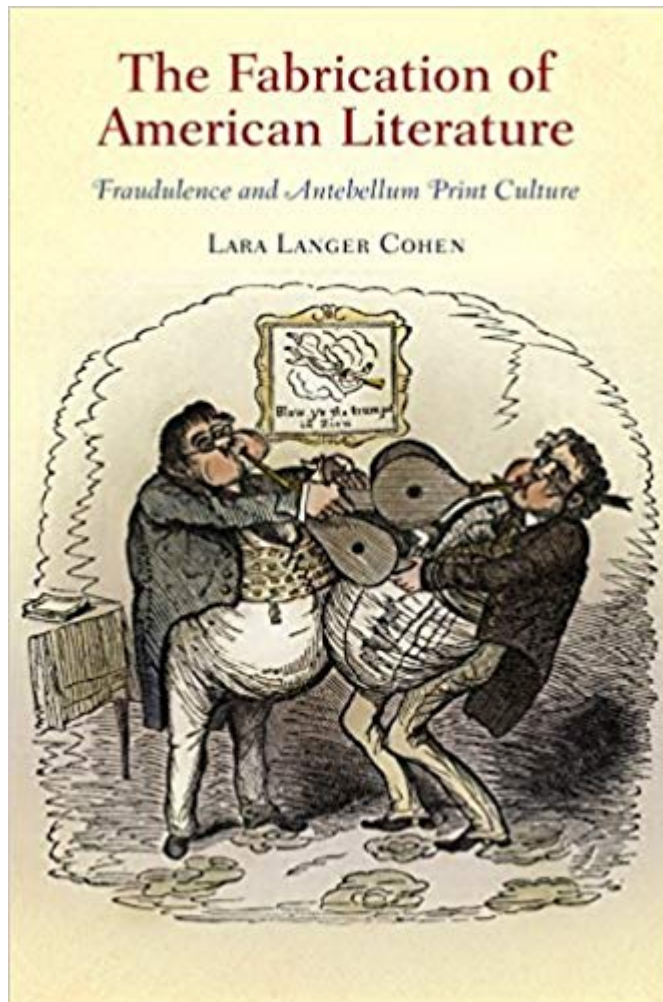
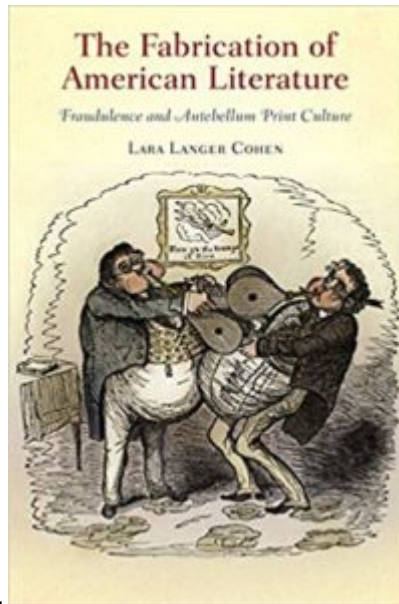


Fakebooks



The Fabrication of American Literature is a long-overdue examination of the antebellum practice of “puffing” books, or shamelessly promoting them for profit, politics, and other interested motives. Cohen exposes the mechanics and machinations behind the “genuine” literature that was supposed to prove the United States’ artistic and cultural maturity to the Old World—as well as behind more marginal publications like “ersatz backwoodsman’s tales” and “false slave narratives,” which could have suggested just the opposite to cosmopolitans on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet, she is careful to avoid imagining an entirely disinterested literature and literary criticism as the ideal state from which the antebellum period fell into a world of petty deceit, relentless competition, and utter confusion. Cohen does so by starting from “a paradox at the heart of American literary history: at the very moment when a national literature began to take shape, many observers worried that it amounted to nothing more than what Edgar Allan Poe described as ‘one vast perambulating humbug’” (1). She argues that this paradox disrupts not only critical narratives of the flourishing of a representative national literature after its difficult birth and awkward adolescence, but also counter-narratives of the “cultural work” done by popular and political—and not just refined and



removed-literature.

Antebellum Americans looked to literature to settle the most complicated and important questions of the day—questions about nationhood, democracy, race, gender, class, and region among them.

By assembling and working from an archive of concerns about “subterfuge, impostures, and plagiarism” in print, Cohen situates mid-nineteenth-century literature within, rather than apart from, the rest of antebellum American culture. As a result, unnoticed family resemblances become more prominent. The practices of publishing and reviewing books of all kinds begin to look a lot like promotions for quack medicine, land bubbles, and worthless shares of stock. Even Poe—best known to us as a poet and gothic fiction writer, but notorious in his own time as a critic who reviewed and promoted his own writings—makes himself heard among the many voices cautioning that the “indiscriminate laudation of American books” is “a system which, more than any other one thing in the world, has tended to the depression of that ‘American Literature’ whose elevation it was designed to effect” (34).

Again, it is worth emphasizing that Cohen insists on the seamier side of the fabrication of American literature not to expose the idea of American literature itself as a fraud, but rather to show how antebellum literature did and did not work. In making her much more nuanced and responsible argument, she is careful to distinguish between fraud—cases of intentional hoaxing, forgery, and plagiarism—and fraudulence—what she defines as “the hopelessness of distinguishing impostures, forgeries, plagiarisms, and hoaxes from literature proper” (2). This impossibility of distinguishing fact from fiction, real from fake, true from false in the messy world of antebellum print made significant trouble not just for latter-day critics, but for the public at the time. As Cohen observes, antebellum Americans looked to literature to settle the most complicated and important questions of the day—questions about nationhood, democracy, race, gender, class, and region among them. “The expedients readers, writers, critics, and editors devised to fulfill these impossible tasks, the

accusations of fraudulence that inevitably resulted, and the attempts some writers made to turn this fraudulence to account," Cohen explains in her introduction, "are the subject of this book" (2).

The first chapter examines the literary nationalist movement of the 1830s and '40s and the puffery that dominated literary criticism at the time. In the same moment that authors and critics were working to establish a mature literature they hoped would place the United States on equal footing with Europe, many of them were also writing wildly enthusiastic reviews that had less basis in the works themselves than in favoritism, financial interest, and partisan politics. As Cohen argues, these decidedly undemocratic practices significantly compromised the democratic promise that a representative American literature was supposed to hold for the young country and the rest of the world. And antebellum American readers noticed, as we see in the range of anxious responses that Cohen summons to make her case. A memorable example comes from poet and journalist Lambert Wilmer, who warned in 1841 via verse that

'Twould seem no less than destiny's decree
That we the victims of all frauds should be:
Our literature and currency are both
Curs'd with the evil of an overgrowth; (42)

Cohen deftly turns these shaky foundations of a national literature into solid ground on which to build the rest of the book. Following chapter one, Cohen shifts her attention to the periphery that the central literary culture established only to challenge. Doing so, she explains, allowed the center to shore up its legitimacy by making marginal writers' works—and not their own equally vulnerable writings—the suspect examples of the kind of literature that America was capable of producing. The second, third, and fourth chapters of *The Fabrication of American Literature* are case studies of these dynamics in action.

Chapter 2 pairs Davy Crockett and Jim Crow, examining not just the commonalities but also the deliberate linkages of their strange careers as cultural others. They were manufactured as "our ONLY TRUE NATIONAL POETS," as one reviewer put it, to fabricate an idea of authenticity that mainstream American literature would both borrow from and attack to establish its own. Jim Crow and Davy Crockett regularly appeared not only separately but together in numerous "songsheets, almanacs, plays, and fictitious autobiographies" circulating in the antebellum period. Fraudulence was at the center of both figures' public personae, with "minstrelsy laugh[ing] at the trickery and pretensions of Jim Crow" and the "Crockett literary industry mak[ing] wild tall tales the frontiersman's stock in trade" (67). At the same time, "Jim Crow's shams were acted out by white men themselves shamming as black, while Davy Crockett and the host of semiliterate 'backwoods' characters he inspired were largely manufactured out of northeastern publishing centers" (67). Working from this double layering of apparent deceit, the rest of the chapter surveys the print culture of Crow and Crockett to illustrate how these figures "achieved

the remarkable feat of parlaying a fake authenticity into authentic fakeness” in “a culture preoccupied with the problem of fraudulence” (67-68).

The third chapter focuses on neglected pseudo-slave narratives by white writers that circulated alongside now well-known narratives written by blacks who had actually experienced slavery. The pseudo-slave narratives allow Cohen to continue her examination of what she calls the “racialization of fraudulence”—or the transformation of “fraud from a national problem” into a characteristic specifically associated with blackness—and how it worked both to legitimize and threaten the center’s authority (102). The popular newspaper columnist and novelist Fanny Fern is at the center of the fourth chapter, in which Cohen shows how Fern both exploited and was made vulnerable by the questions raised for readers and professional critics by her pseudonymity and the deliberate artifice of her writing style. The conclusion succinctly reads Herman Melville’s novel *The Confidence Man* as the ultimate case study for the book’s overall point: “that antebellum fraudulence cannot be embodied in individual acts and persons,” and that such fraudulence and the effort to establish a national literature are impossible to distinguish from each other (22).

While *The Fabrication of American Literature* is one of the most innovative works to be produced in the ongoing scholarly effort to rethink what came in the twentieth century to be designated as the “American Renaissance,” it doesn’t break entirely from its critical forebears who were just as interested in the relationship between literature and nationalism as antebellum Americans were. What is in many ways a radical view of American literature is also a rather traditional one, focused on works produced in the United States from the 1830s through the 1850s. It does not take the “spatial turn” that many scholars have in recent years, looking not just nationally but transnationally, hemispherically, and beyond. Nor does it attempt to bridge the gap between early American and antebellum American studies, as other scholars have encouraged us to do. But of the work that is still to be done in American literature, surely revisiting twice-told tales to retell them in a way that analyzes, synthesizes, and adds new dimensions to those tellings—as Cohen’s book does by balancing subtlety with complexity, serious history and theory with humor—is work well worth doing.

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