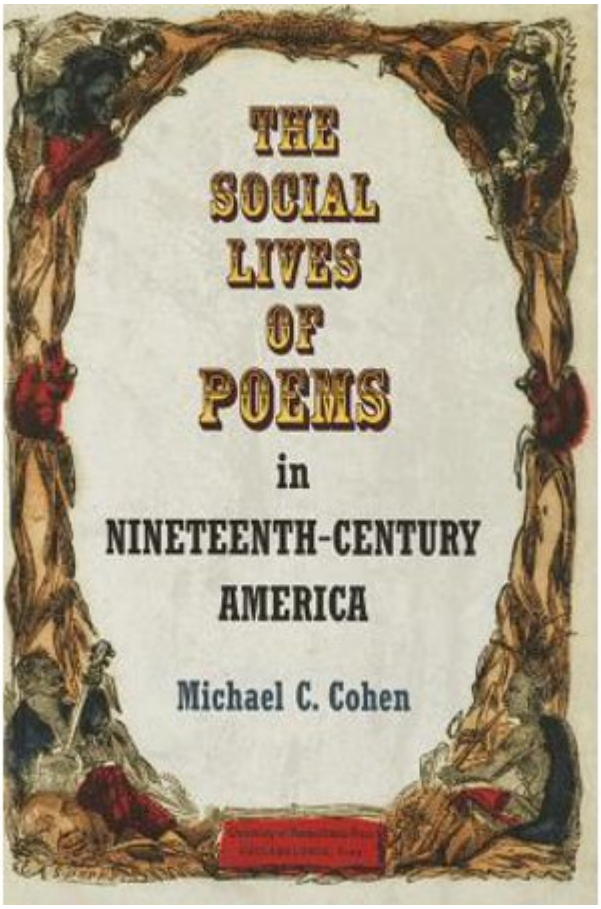
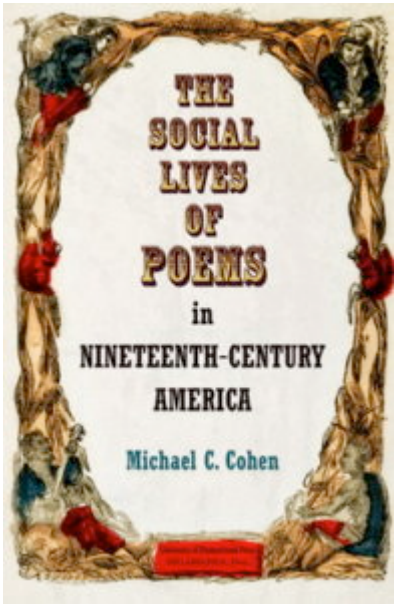
Usable Poetry





Michael C. Cohen, *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. 296 pp., $55.

Michael C. Cohen's *The Social Lives of Poems in Nineteenth-Century America* begins with the observation that nineteenth-century American poetry contains a

mass of poems “so popular, so unread, [and] so seemingly unreadable” (12) that critical interest in them has been scant at best. He takes on this body of disregarded poetry not by focusing on reading the poems, but by highlighting their social uses. He looks at how readers forged social connections through poems—by reading them aloud, recopying them, buying and selling them, and in other ways using poems rather than interpreting them. Without quite maintaining that anyone should read the poems he studies, Cohen brings us a cluster of curious finds from the archives, which he discusses in ongoing relation to the career of John Greenleaf Whittier.

Chapter one begins with Whittier’s childhood memories of “a Yankee troubadour” (17) named Jonathan Plummer, who practiced a form of ballad poetry that circulated outside the bounds of the literary sphere. As a Massachusetts “balladmonger” (22), Plummer sold his poems himself—sometimes hawking them in the streets. Cohen notes that Plummer’s work was understood by many of his readers to be “worthless” (37); this worthlessness, however, was necessary to its popularity as a medium of social relations (the process is not unlike how people share things on Facebook in order to assert social connection). The chapter then moves to consider a Mainer named Thomas Shaw, who wrote and transcribed a voluminous amount of verse in which he expressed his hostility to literary culture and the world of printing (he was often unsuccessful in his attempts to publish). Taking the cases of Plummer and Shaw together, Cohen suggests that in the nineteenth century what poetry meant, and what counted as poetry, appeared unstable and often unclear to its practitioners, as did its relation to a distinct literary sphere. Still, what was central to poetry overall was its “*social exchange value*” (59; italics in the original), which proliferated outside the bounds of whatever solidified literary culture there was.

Chapter two takes up this argument by looking at poetry connected with reform, and with the abolitionist movement in particular. The very “generic-ness” of most abolitionist poems, Cohen writes, mattered because it “prepared them for reprinting and reproduction across different venues” (65), making this poetry important because its emptiness enabled it to build social connections in an implicitly unstructured fashion. Cohen’s reading of an ornate scrapbook edition of Whittier’s abolitionist poetry emphasizes how a group of friends copying out his poems constituted a relationship to poetry outside of authorship, one that contributed to the social fabric of their reform community. The third chapter discusses the genre of the contraband song, songs either actually or only purportedly authored by the formerly enslaved who reached Northern territory during the Civil War (and were classified by the Union as “contraband” of war). An instance of the ambiguity of these songs’ status is that one of the most famous, “At Port Royal,” was actually written by Whittier, and then learned and performed by African American singers. Cohen uses the popularity of such songs as “At Port Royal” and “Let My People Go” as an example of how the circulatability of inauthentic poetry fostered a sense of shared sociality in the post-Civil War United States, in which poems were shareable in part because they were easily torqued into conflicting political directions.

Chapter four returns to the ballad, focusing on the role of the Harvard professor Francis Child in the formalization of the genre. In one of the book's more striking moments, Cohen relates how Child understood the popular ballad to be a genre defined not by its formal features but by its existence in relation to a society lacking in class difference and without a sense of distinction between literary and popular culture. Cohen argues that while the ballad may lack its supposed natural origin in spontaneous oral culture and have no formal identity, it was powerful just as a name for the concept that there are specific poems around which impressions of social unification cluster. The ballad features in the fifth chapter as the means through which Whittier became enshrined as a major national poet, a process Cohen discusses in relation to an archive of letters written by readers who appreciated Whittier's poems. Here again, the ballad as a genre names not a quality identifiable in the text, but a quality of readers' relationship to those poems and their sense of what reading the poems did for them. The final chapter takes up the topic of spirituals and minstrel poetry, arguing that, during Reconstruction, there was no firm boundary in the print culture between minstrel songs and the spirituals that W.E.B. Dubois set forth as central to African American identity. Cohen concludes that "*Performance, not race, consolidated black poetry as a tradition* after 1870" (224; italics in the original). Put that way, the claim appears not to allow for thinking of race as itself a performance, but the main point seems to be that African American poetry has its "origin . . . in the welter of mid-century and postbellum popular American poetry" (224).

The discussion of the ballad's status in nineteenth-century American culture—a theme that runs across several of the book's chapters—is the book's strongest and most compelling account of how a poetic genre might have a cultural presence without having an identity one could locate in the form or words of any particular poem. The cases of Jonathan Plummer and the interpretation of Whittier, along with other examples throughout, follow the thread of the ballad across the century with persuasive detail. Cohen's commitment to keeping interpretation at bay has its limitations, and one of them is that the book does not offer as much historical context and explanation as the material calls for. For example, his account of the presentation of spirituals, contraband songs, and minstrel songs as popular commodities open to all and cut off from an authentic origin or fixed meaning traces the flexibility of the songs' applications without critiquing that flexibility, partly because one of the book's principles is that the separation between a text and its authorship is implicitly anti-hierarchical and thus liberating. But given the interlacing of conceptions of blackness with the structure of the commodity, market circulation, and openness to use, connections which have been explored in works such as Stephen M. Best's *The Fugitive's Properties* (2004), the stakes of race and circulation raised by this archival material would benefit from further interpretation and historicization. In like measure, the history of how literary and popular culture became striated in the nineteenth century (as considered in Lawrence W. Levine's *Highbrow/Lowbrow* [1990], for instance), and the history of nationalism's relationship to the Civil War and Reconstruction, are not themselves made much clearer by the book's account of how poems

contributed to these two historical developments. That poetry was so used is evident; what difference that makes to the historical issues is harder to specify.

While Cohen announces that he will “suspend the assumption that poems are meant to be read” (10), and that he is interested in how poems were used rather than in their content, the location of the titular “social lives of poems” remains ambiguous. At times, the point appears to be that the social use of poems had little to do with the poems as such, but in many cases the sociality appears to be located in the texts themselves: Cohen states at one point that “complex social relations inhere in poems” (102), which would place the sociality in the poem rather than in their readers or users. The title’s droll phrasing also suggests that the sociality at stake is a property of the poems, rather than of the human society in which they emerged, and for all its interest in the usage of poems, it would not be accurate to call this book a history of reading or a reception history, as Cohen himself observes. Perhaps as a consequence of the theoretical ambiguity concerning where the social life of poems resides—in persons or in poems—the book does not land as far “beyond the bounds of ‘reading’” (2), and even of new critical formalism’s commitment to the text as the best source of information about a culture, as it aims to do. I take this to be the reason why, as I have already indicated, the book is not at heart a historicist study. It does not stray far from the archival objects that are its primary focus, and it tends to treat those texts as synecdoches of the broader historical period—that do not, therefore, require historical explanation. Ultimately, the departure not from formalism but from historicism struck me as the more significant critical commitment of the book, although this shift away from historical, rather than formal, interpretation is not acknowledged by the author.

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