Call for Papers:

The Epoch of the Hoax: Deception and Dis/Trust in 19th-Century America

University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany, December 12-13, 2025

From love scammers to fake heiresses and fraudulent businesses, deception is as much a part of contemporary culture as the media technologies, social media in particular, that facilitate fraud in the 21st century. Yet if we are currently experiencing a new golden age of deception, as some journalists suggest, it is not the first of its kind: 19th-century America experienced a very similar obsession with deception and dis/trust, prompting Edgar Allan Poe to term this period "the epoch of the hoax." Indeed, parallels have been drawn between the current concern with fake news and the so-called "scientific media hoaxes" orchestrated by Poe and others in the 1830s-1840s (Walsh; see also McLeod). Further parallels could be drawn, on the one hand, between the rise of social media and "the world of strangers" that was instituted by mass-migration from rural to urban areas in the 1820s-1830s, which social historians have identified as one of the main drivers behind the rise of the "confidence man" and its attendant cultural anxieties relating to eroding standards of trust and sincerity (Halttunen); and, on the other, between the current cryptocurrency craze and the financial transformations of the 19th century, when speculation and counterfeiting came to rival traditional trade as legitimate (or at least tempting) modes of economic activity (Mihm). Likewise, contemporary entertainment culture finds an antecedent in the early 19th-century invention of show business and spectacle, epitomized by P. T. Barnum's popularization of "humbug" as a valid form of entertainment (Cook) that far outweighs any demands for factual accuracy (Cohen).

Underlying all of these historical echoes is a foundational American narrative: the currently popular adage, "fake it 'til you make it," goes back much further than the saying itself, to quintessentially American ideas of self-made men and their self-*forged* – the word is telling – identities and fortunes (see Halttunen; Lindberg). This ethos, long central to national myths of personal reinvention and entrepreneurial risk-taking, reveals the cultural permeability between deceit and aspiration, between imposture and legitimacy. Whether in the upward mobility plots of antebellum fiction, the itinerant frauds of the frontier, or the elaborate performance of new social roles in emerging urban centers, the period's cultural archive repeatedly stages deception not as an aberration but as a constitutive feature of American culture.

At the same time, traditions in Black and Indigenous literary and cultural production reveal a more complex and contested relationship to (dis)trust and deception, one shaped by long histories of coercion, surveillance, and epistemic violence. From the strategic opacity of the trickster figure in Indigenous oral and narrative traditions to the disruptions, omissions, and speculative gestures found in Black counter-archives and practices of critical fabulation (Hartman), these works challenge dominant notions of authenticity, coherence, and transparency. Rather than treating deception or fabulation (only) as a deviation from truth, they invite us to understand these as deliberate methods of epistemic resistance, modes of critique, and strategies of survival – especially under conditions where visibility has often meant vulnerability, and where legibility has been demanded as a precondition of recognition (see Schuller; Yao).

Against this backdrop, this workshop brings together a range of critical perspectives on the contested cultural, aesthetic, political, and racial dimensions of **deception and dis/trust in 19th-century America.** We invite contributions from scholars in literary and cultural studies, but also in related disciplines like history, economics, or politics. We are particularly interested in case studies that center on works of literature or other cultural products, performances, or practices – provided that they illuminate broader transformations of the period, such as the evolution of print culture, scientific and technological innovation, or shifts in the political, economic, and legal systems. Put another way, close readings of individual literary texts and cultural artefacts should be carefully framed to also afford attention to the material, medial, and ideological changes that made these works possible.

Possible topics include (but are by no means limited to):

- Newspaper hoaxes and the culture of dis/trust
- Racial (im)posture and passing
- Deception and dis/trust in life writing
- (Pseudo-)scientific hoaxes and epistemic dis/trust
- Fraud (victims), spectatorship, and sensational media culture
- Deception as performance, aesthetic, or political mode
- Trickster figures, opacity, and narrative refusal in Black and Indigenous storytelling
- Dis/Illusions and entertainment culture
- Paratextual (dis)trust: editorial mediation, framing, and (de)authorization
- Narrating the fraud of land and liberty
- Literary hoaxes and art forgeries
- Affects, emotions, and the cultivation of readerly dis/trust or skepticism
- Practices and mechanisms of preventing/uncovering fraud
- Humor and practical jokes in relation to deceit and fraud
- The literary and cultural afterlives of 19th-century deception and dis/trust

We invite **max. 500-word proposals** for papers to be submitted **by August 30, 2025**. Each presenter will have 25 minutes to present and 20 minutes to answer questions to foster a productive discussion. We are working to secure travel funding, especially for scholars who lack institutional financing, and we will keep participants updated about the developments. Workshop participants will be encouraged to revise and expand their presentations for publication in a themed issue of a suitable journal.
To submit your proposal and for more information, contact the workshop organizers: Dr. Sonja Pyykkö, sonja.pyykkoe@uni-due.de, Lea Espinoza Garrido, lea.espinoza.garrido@fu-berlin.de, and Anna Koehler, akoehler@hca.uni-heidelberg.de.

Works Cited

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