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*The American Counterfeit: Authenticity and Identity in
American Literature and Culture* (review)

Catherine Seltzer

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(Review)

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who display the conflicting forms of masculinity, ultimately favoring the more domestic, gentle, feminized figure—such as Dr. Trescott in Crane’s “The Monster” or Lawyer Royall in Wharton’s *Summer*. With these characterizations, Morgan argues, the texts question the ethical value of the emerging “national masculinity” and—in Crane’s case, for example—offer a form of “male-maternalism” in answer.

Somewhat out of place in this study is the chapter on Washington’s speeches and autobiography. Certainly there is value in this chapter; Morgan uses his analysis of Washington’s rhetorical strategies provocatively to call for a reassessment of Washington in answer to criticism that Morgan believes has reductively cast him as an assimilationist villain against the heroic race radical W. E. B. Du Bois. Moreover, Morgan insightfully identifies the gender tension central to his study in Washington’s rhetoric, thus extending his argument beyond literary texts to include “philanthropic and social reform writing.” Nevertheless, as part of a genre study, analysis of the complex gender negotiations in more traditionally categorized fiction by African American authors (Charles Chesnutt’s *The Wife of His Youth* or Pauline Hopkins’ *Winona* come to mind) would have provided stronger support for *Questionable Charity*’s thesis.

Overall, however, William Morgan offers an illuminating and thoughtful new approach to this much-studied and complex genre. Carefully researched and far-ranging in its implications, *Questionable Charity* makes an important contribution to the body of scholarship on U.S. literary realism.

JILL BERGMAN
University of Montana

The American Counterfeit: Authenticity and Identity in American Literature and Culture. By Mary McAleer Balkun. Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 2006. 181 pp. Cloth, \$35.00.

Perhaps it is particularly ironic to begin a review of a book entitled *The American Counterfeit* by judging its cover; yet the title of Mary McAleer Balkun’s study, which suggests that we cannot always gauge things by their appearance, is so perfectly illuminated (and expanded) by the inclusion of Victor Dubreuil’s 1898 oil painting “The Eye of the Artist” that it seems the obvious place to begin. At the center of Dubreuil’s painting is an eye peering from a roughly hewn hole in a series of planks. This image certainly evokes the notion of masked identity that is at the core of Balkun’s project, and the fact that the painting (itself a work of *tromp l’oeil*) is reproduced on the book’s

jacket underscores the study's focus on mimicry and (in)authenticity. Yet it is Dubreuil's depiction of an oversized five-dollar bill, even more than the book's title, that suggests the ways in which *American Counterfeit* links notions of identity and authenticity: Balkun sees material culture as the dominant force in deeming the self-authentic. Drawing from cultural studies (the work of Jean Baudrillard, Walter Benjamin, and Charles Taylor), museum studies (Alan Wallach and Susan Pearce), and economic theory (Irvin Wyllie and Thorstein Veblen), Balkun posits that authenticity is neither innate nor absolute, but rather is granted through the marketplace: objects—and, indeed, people—are subject to collection, classification, and valuation. Balkun sees “the created self as an object with a specific function within consumer culture” and explores the ways in which “imposters” in five canonical American texts attempt to assert their value within the shifting and often uncertain society of America in the years between 1890 and 1930.

Balkun's premise is extraordinarily compelling and her first chapter, which serves as an introduction to the project, reveals a deep knowledge of American history, cultural theory, and art criticism. She persuasively links the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century trend of collecting (art, antiques, postcards, etc.) and the resulting “anxiety over the authenticity of objects” with a larger apprehension about the American self. Thus by applying the rhetoric of connoisseurship to individual identity, Balkun establishes a framework for reconsidering notions of race, gender, and class which she extends into the following five chapters, each of which is dedicated to the reading of a single text. Perhaps not surprisingly, this approach is most successful when Balkun considers texts in which notions of commoditization and identity are not already explicitly linked: for example, her readings of Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, while careful and nuanced, are not particularly revelatory. Other chapters, however, read very much against the grain of existing criticism. In examining Whitman's *Specimen Days*, for example, Balkun recognizes the seeming folly of associating Whitman, whom she identifies as “the acknowledged adopter of personae, modifier of biographical information, and abettor in constructions such as the ‘rough’ and the ‘good gray poet,’” with a quest for the authentic. Yet she convincingly argues that Whitman has created a work that, through its careful accumulation and classification of “specimen,” becomes a textual museum and, consequently, Whitman becomes its self-conscious curator. Balkun points to Whitman's struggle to accurately illustrate and interpret “real” events as one of the text's central tensions, and she argues that in this work Whitman cites the authentic as sole poultice for a society disrupted by Civil War and growing industrialism.

Balkun moves from Whitman to Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a

contemporary, yet radically different, text. Here, she explores both Huck's and Jim's mimicry of the discourses of capitalism, tracing the ways they are able to successfully reinvent themselves by enacting various forms of authenticity. While she sees danger in Huck's willingness to respond so readily to the needs and desires of those he meets, she reads "the hotly contested" ending of the novel optimistically, suggesting that in separating from Tom and Jim, Huck will no longer objectify others or himself but will "belong only to himself." Thus the notion of the truly authentic is preserved. Balkun's treatment of Nella Larsen's *Passing* is less optimistic: Irene Redfield also possesses a complex understanding of modes of valuation, but, unlike Huck, she feels powerless within the highly commoditized environment in which she operates. Her murder of Clare Kendry is her only means of ensuring her own value and, significantly, escaping the troubling questions about authenticity that are linked to passing. Both of these chapters present insightful readings of the novels, and perhaps more impressively, Balkun is able to effortlessly weave existing discussions of race, gender, and class into her own interpretations of the texts.

My quibbles with this book are few: primarily, I would have been delighted to see a short conclusion to address some of the intriguing questions about the trajectory of national refashioning that Balkun poses in her introductory chapter and which are teased out in her readings of texts but never fully addressed. Otherwise, this book's strengths are manifold: Balkun's prose is wonderfully clear, her use of theory and history is creative, and her succinct chapters work well together or alone. I also suspect that her choice of "texts [she] love[s] to read and teach" will resonate with many readers, making her study useful to a broad audience.

CATHERINE SELTZER

Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville