Frontier Fake News: Nevada's Sagebrush Humorists and Hoaxsters by Richard Moreno (review)

Jerome Tharaud

Western American Literature, Volume 59, Number 2, Summer 2024, pp. 181-183 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/wal.2024.a937411*

Richard Moreno, *Frontier Fake News: Nevada's Sagebrush Humorists and Hoaxsters*. Reno: U of Nevada P, 2023. 174 pp. Paper, $21.95; e-book, $21.95.

In September 1862, just over a year after arriving in Nevada Territory, Samuel Langhorne Clemens joined the Virginia City *Territorial Enterprise* as a staff reporter, launching the meteoric ascent that would soon make "Mark Twain" a household name from San Francisco to New York. He joined a group of talented, funny, and prolific writers that literary historian Ella Sterling Cummins dubbed the "Sagebrush school": mostly young, white, Eastern-born men who had lit out for the territories during the Gold Rush only to realize that their richest prospects lay in chronicling the raw "frontier" society taking shape around them.

But as Richard Moreno documents in *Frontier Fake News*, Twain and his fellow Sagebrushers were hardly objective, "just the facts" journalists: they were canny fabulists who exaggerated, embellished, and even outright invented the stories they told. Their best-known hoaxes include Twain's "Petrified Man" (about a corpse found mummified in limestone sediment, its hands frozen in a gesture suspiciously like thumbing its nose); Dan De Quille's "Solar Armor" (about an inventor who engineers an air-conditioned suit to protect the wearer from the desert heat, only to be found frozen to death in Death Valley, trapped in his own invention); and Sam Davis's "The Typographical Howitzer," in which a fictionalized Twain and De Quille repel an Indian attack by firing movable type from a cannon. Moreno's book surveys this lively but now largely forgotten literary scene.

Frontier Fake News opens with a brief history of "fake news" in the United States and an overview of the Sagebrush school. Subsequent chapters profile eight Sagebrush writers: Twain, De Quille (William Wright), James "Lying Jim" Townsend, Fred H. Hart, Davis, Alfred "Alf" Doten, William J. Forbes, and Major John H. Dennis. The book concludes with chapters on the editors who bottled this literary lightning, the twentieth-century revival of the *Territorial Enterprise*, and a coda on the significance of the Sagebrush school. Moreno builds on the work of scholars including Cummins, Duncan Emrich, and most recently Lawrence I. Berkove, whose *Sagebrush Anthology:*

Literature from the Silver Age of the Old West (2006) contains dozens of sketches, short stories, memoirs, poems, and letters by Sagebrush writers. *Frontier Fake News* nicely complements the *Sagebrush Anthology*: readers tantalized by the brief bios in Berkove's introduction will find fuller accounts in Moreno's chapters, and many of the pieces that Moreno quotes and describes are reproduced in full by Berkove.

Academic readers may regret that *Frontier Fake News* contains no notes identifying Moreno's sources; it does include a selected bibliography, but several scholarly sources mentioned in the text are not listed there. In addition, the book is marred by a few surprising errors. For instance, Ambrose Bierce's famous short story is mistitled "An Occurrence at Owl Creek" (the "Bridge" being omitted). Moreno incorrectly states that Twain's second book, *The Innocents Abroad*, "was about his visit to Hawaii" (57), but of course it was about Europe and the Holy Land; Hawaii occupies the final chapters of *Roughing It*. Though minor, these slips suggest a lack of close attention to the extra-journalistic literary output of the Sagebrush writers, which includes short stories and novellas, novels, plays, comic operas, and histories.

Deeper engagement with these sources might have helped illuminate a central problem raised by *Frontier Fake News*. Moreno observes the parallels between the current age of "fake news" with that of "past eras when the lines between what was factual and what was fictional were frequently blurred" (11), but he notes a crucial difference: "Unlike the so-called fake news of contemporary times—which is usually legitimate news painted with that damning label because some politician doesn't agree with or like the actual facts—fake news of the frontier era was actually fake" (7). Yet the Sagebrushers had a serious political agenda, Moreno argues: "Their hoaxes, puns, and homey aphorisms were often ways to subtly—and not so subtly—attack unfair laws or regulations or to strike back at corrupt corporations and public officials" (158). But though he repeatedly draws a link between their journalistic exuberance and their ostensibly democratic, populist politics, Moreno does not fully probe the tensions and contradictions of their project. When Twain invents a grisly murder-suicide of an entire family to expose corruption in a San Francisco water company because, as he later put it, "The only way you can get a fact into a San Francisco journal is to smuggle

it in through some great tragedy" (52), Moreno's argument seems plausible; yet when Twain then falsely claims that a charity fundraiser put on by a group of Carson City ladies to support Union soldiers is actually supporting an eastern "miscegenation society" (55), one wonders if the impulse to fabulate just as often served anarchic and even racist impulses as democratic ones. Closer attention to the Sagebrush writers' ideas about the press—Twain's reflections on journalists' complicity in runaway mining speculation in *Roughing It*, for instance—might have helped disentangle the mixed motives and fraught legacy of their "frontier" humor.

Jerome Tharaud
Brandeis University

Mia Mask, *Black Rodeo: A History of the African American Western*. Champaign: U of Illinois P, 2023. 275 pp. Hardcover, $110; paper, $24.95; e-book, $14.95.

You might have noticed the recent rise of Black Western images on the silver screen in the three years since the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. From the outlaw drama of Jeymes Samuel's Netflix release *The Harder They Fall* (2021) to the Western flair of Jordan Peele's intergalactic *Nope* (2022), the African American West is currently cutting a sharp and powerful shape in American cinema. Samuel and Peele are not the first to deploy politically salient Black Western images onscreen; instead, they are stepping into a cinematic tradition that stretches back to the earliest days of filmmaking. Despite this long history, Black Western films have all but been erased from the history of the Western genre and American cinema writ large, writes professor and Mary Riepma Ross's 1932 endowed chair of film at Vassar College Mia Mask in her latest book, *Black Rodeo: A History of the African American Western*. Calling for "cinematic reparations" (xv), Mask offers in this important book the first ever survey of Black Western films, centering her analysis on films made during the era of civil rights and Black Power in the 1960s and 1970s.

Mask argues that Black Western films during this period drew from the politics and ideology of Black nationalism to offer a restor-