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Introduction

HISTORIES OF FICTION in the early United States have long centered on the rise of the American novel.¹ The genre's privileged place in the national cultural imagination has produced a preoccupation with its origins: scholars have sought in early American fiction both a sense of the novel's unique relationship to the new nation and the foundations of a "tradition" of the American novel that would culminate in the "Great American Novels" of the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries.² This book, however, argues that this long-standing fixation on the origins of the American novel has obscured the remarkably diverse uses and understandings of fiction found in the early republic. Where later writers would grapple with what it meant to write a distinctly American novel, early US writers wrestled with a more fundamental question: what constitutes a legitimate form and use of fiction? *Founded in Fiction* reframes the history of the novel in the United States as a history of competing varieties of fictionality.

In his 1857 work *The Confidence Man*, Herman Melville wrote that "in books of fiction," we look for "even for more reality, than real life itself can show."³ Melville has sometimes been read as an author who helped to consolidate a national literature, and twenty-first-century readers are comfortable with the concept of fiction that he promoted. His eloquent description of what we want from "books of fiction" neatly encapsulates what Raymond Williams has identified as the fundamental element of our modern understanding of "fiction": "we can now . . . say that . . . bad novels are pure fiction, while . . . serious fiction tells us about real life."⁴ Yet to many Americans in the decades following the Revolution, Melville's claim would have seemed absurd, even nonsensical. In the early United States, there was a pervasive suspicion of fiction.⁵ In 1798, Charles Brockden Brown sent Thomas Jefferson a copy of his "American Tale," *Wieland*, with a letter lamenting the ascendant attitude toward fiction in the republic: "Whatever may be the merit of my book as a fiction, it is to be condemned because it is a fiction."⁶ Many of Brown's

contemporaries did, in fact, condemn all fiction on the grounds of its epistemological unreliability. Pedagogues, preachers, and politicians insisted that because fiction did not have a firm basis in fact and reality, it could only mislead readers with false pictures of the world: “to supplant a reality by a fiction,” wrote one critic in 1810, “is a preposterous method of diffusing truth.”⁷ Early American critics objected, in short, to the fictionality of fiction.

Until recently, fictionality—or the quality of being fictional—had been largely overlooked by literary historians.⁸ Although scholars recognized fictionality as a constitutive feature of the novel genre, they gave it little attention. Over the past decade, however, Catherine Gallagher’s groundbreaking essay “The Rise of Fictionality” (2006) has provoked a flurry of new studies that have put fictionality at the center of recent developments in novel studies and novel theory.⁹ But even as this new scholarship on the history of fictionality in France and England has provided a means of rethinking conventional narratives of the rise of realist fiction, the history of fictionality in the United States has been either ignored or dismissed: “Fictionality,” as Gallagher herself puts it, “seems to have been but faintly understood in the infant United States.”¹⁰ This reproduces a long-standing and surprisingly persistent critical narrative: suspicion and misunderstanding slowed the development of the novel in the United States, leading to the poverty of its early fiction.

Founded in Fiction challenges this narrative by expanding our focus beyond the novel genre to the varied uses of fiction in the early republic. In doing so, it reveals an era of dynamic experimentation during which US fiction was dialectically engaged with the republic’s pervasive antifictional discourse. Writers who broke the taboo against fictionality argued for the mode’s unique worth within frameworks of value they shared with fiction’s critics, such as civic virtue and instructional efficacy. By approaching fictionality as a set of historically variable structures of supposition rather than a stable, genre-defining characteristic, *Founded in Fiction* recovers the array of theories and varieties of fictionality that early US writers developed as they wrestled with the most pressing social and political questions of their moment. It offers a history of how these different fictionalities structured American thinking about issues ranging from republican politics to gendered authority to the intimate violence of slavery.

Founded in Fiction focuses on the United States out of neither a sense of American exceptionalism nor an investment in the distinctive Americanness of early US fiction, but to account for the new nation’s sociopolitical specificity in a time of transatlantic exchange: US fiction emerged in relation to both a robust culture of transatlantic circulation and reprinting and the republic’s uniquely virulent antifictional discourse.¹¹ Faced with a widespread suspicion that fiction was, as one periodical put it in 1798, “one of the most fruitful sources of ignorance,” early American writers interrogated the dangers and possibilities of diverse varieties of fictionality.¹² Twenty-first-century readers

tend to regard fictionality as a singular characteristic: a text is either fiction or nonfiction. This binary, however, is of little value for understanding the many varieties of fiction circulating in the early United States. In the republic, fictions could be governed by possibility, probability, or pure fancy. Their narratives could be suppositional, counterfactual, or based on actual events. They could invoke widely divergent conceptions of fictional “truth,” a term that might refer to a narrative’s moral vision, its mimetic accuracy, or its aesthetic impact. Counterintuitively, the prevailing skepticism about fiction’s ability to serve as a source of knowledge about “the world as it is” made early American writers especially attuned to the unique kinds of speculative and suppositional knowledge that fiction *could* impart.

Recovering the many varieties and uses of fiction in the early United States, *Founded in Fiction* breaks with our most influential histories of fictionality: where many scholars have followed Gallagher in tracing a monolithic emergence of fictionality in the realist novel, I trace the multiple fictionalities circulating during the novel’s slow rise to dominance in the United States. In doing so, *Founded in Fiction* also revises our ascendant histories of American fiction, which have focused almost exclusively on the novel genre, overlooking how many of the books that we have long considered the earliest American novels insist, in their paratexts and narratives, that they are not novels at all. While modern readers tend to regard these extended prose fictions as self-evidently novelistic, their writers explicitly disavowed the novel genre: they developed self-consciously extra-novelistic varieties of fiction in order to distance their work from a genre widely associated with privacy, idleness, and licentiousness. Retrospectively consolidating these varied fictions under the generic umbrella of “the novel,” we have overlooked the remarkable diversity of early American fiction.

Founded in Fiction restores to view the varied logics of fictional writing that novel history has tended to normalize, including many that do not conform to the conception of fiction-reading as a private leisure activity oriented toward aesthetic appreciation and personal self-cultivation that became ascendant in the later nineteenth century. The story of fictionality in the republic is not one of isolated authors struggling with literary theory, but one of the individuals and movements that used different modalities of fiction for community building and social reform. This book charts how early US writers used diverse varieties of fictionality as tools for deliberation, education, and persuasion.¹³ These writers sought to harness the mental processes elicited by different fictional logics—evaluations of possibility, considerations of counterfactual scenarios, speculations on different potential futures, or identification with suppositional persons—for a range of social projects. They developed new fictionalities for intervening in political debates, training engaged citizens, shaping conduct, constructing a national past, and advancing social criticism.

This era's many instrumental fictions caution against the modern tendency to conflate the fictional with the literary—a tendency that prevails even in recent historicist scholarship. The late antebellum period, however, also saw the emergence of an understanding of fiction as a distinctly literary art that anticipates many of our contemporary assumptions about fiction's value and purpose.¹⁴ In addition to uncovering an array of early theories of fictionality from which we have become historically estranged, *Founded in Fiction* traces the development and consolidation of this more familiar understanding of fiction's value. These two projects are intimately intertwined. In tracing the historical emergence of the idea that fictionality is a sign of literariness (in its later nineteenth-century sense), I hope to denaturalize an understanding of fiction that we too often take for granted. While the rise of this familiar conception of fiction often has an air of inevitability in histories of American fiction, *Founded in Fiction* shows it to be only one among a host of competing theories of fictionality circulating in the antebellum United States. Only by tracing a genealogy of this later understanding of fiction can we recover those theories of fictionality that are obscured when we back-project it onto earlier moments. To understand the often-unfamiliar ways in which early Americans conceived of, to tweak Brown's phrase, the merits of their books *as fiction*, we must first examine the implicit assumptions governing our own approach to fiction.

The Fictional and the Literary

In much Western literary theory, fictionality is regarded as a marker of a text's literary nature and its orientation toward aesthetics. Gerard Genette's *Fiction and Diction*—his ambitious answer to the question “What is Literature?”—is exemplary. Invoking the “widely accepted definition” of literariness as “the aesthetic aspect of literature,” Genette neatly sums up the prevailing conception of fictionality: “*Fictionality*,” means that “a (verbal) work of fiction is almost inevitably received as literary . . . because the approach to reading that such a work postulates . . . is an aesthetic attitude.” Fictionality, Genette suggests, is almost universally regarded as both a sign of a text's “literariness” and a signal for an aesthetic approach to the text.¹⁵

For Genette, this is the received wisdom about “literariness” from which he advances a new theory of literature: literariness, he argues, has evolved in two distinct ways, which eventually converge. In addition to what he calls the “constitutive regime” of literariness—defined and signaled by fictionality—he identifies what he calls the “conditional regime” of literariness, which encompasses those texts that are not primarily oriented toward the “aesthetic aspect” but become so over time—a “page of history . . . may outlive its scientific value or its documentary interest” yet be retained for its aesthetic interest: “What is at question here is thus the ability of any text whose original, or originally dominating, function was not aesthetic but rather, for example, didactic or

polemical to transcend or submerge that function by virtue of an individual or collective judgment of taste that foregrounds the text's aesthetic qualities."¹⁶ For Genette, then, "literariness" is defined by the *prioritization* of a text's "aesthetic aspect" over such extra-literary functions as education or polemic. This reflects a widespread twentieth-century understanding of literature as an autonomous art defined by its internal "aesthetic qualities" and formal arrangement.¹⁷ (As Richard Brodhead has shown, this conception of literariness rose to ascendance in the United States in the late nineteenth century and it would remain the dominant one through most of the twentieth century.¹⁸) Genette distinguishes between the constitutive and conditional modes of literariness in order to suggest the need for a theory of literariness capable of addressing how "literature" could encompass both the fictional (epic, drama, novel) and the nonfictional (lyric, autobiography, history).

Fictionality, for Genette, always means "constitutive literariness"—"conditionally literary fiction" is "a notion that strikes [him] as passably contradictory."¹⁹ Yet insofar as we accept his understanding of the "literary"—those texts that have a primarily aesthetic function—much early US fiction represents exactly this kind of "conditionally literary fiction." Many early national fictions have "dominating" functions other than an appeal to aesthetic appreciation. Some have the "didactic" and "polemical" functions that Genette mentions, while others have religious, civic, and historiographical functions. It was these instrumental ambitions that led to mid-twentieth-century critical judgments about the poverty and unsophistication of early US fiction: the modern assumption of an identity between the fictional and the literary transformed a group of texts without *primarily* aesthetic aspirations into failed works of art. The association of fictionality with this modern kind of literariness was so strong that Terence Martin in 1961 invoked the "sub-literary" character of early US fiction—the subordination of "an independent, autonomous form of expression" to instrumental concerns—as evidence that early Americans simply did not understand fiction: "It has long been obvious to us that these early American writers produced distinctly sub-literary fiction, we may even perceive what was evidently not so obvious to them, the principal condition of their failure—more primary than a relative innocence of technique—the lack of a concept of fiction."²⁰

Subsequent generations of critics have revised this obsolete narrative that early US fiction failed to rise to the level of literature, showing the literary interest, aesthetic complexity, and imaginative power of these fictions. This extended scholarly effort to overturn characterizations of early US fiction as "sub-literary" has culminated in the recent "aesthetic turn" in early American studies. Scholars such as Edward Cahill, Edward Larkin, Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, Christopher Looby, Cindy Weinstein, Russ Castronovo, Christopher Castiglia, Matthew Garret, and Philipp Schweighauser have offered robust accounts of the complex aesthetics, variously understood, of early US fiction

and persuasively advocated for the importance of attending to the aesthetic dimensions of American fiction that had been neglected by the politically engaged historicism that has dominated Americanist literary studies since the 1980s. Without reintroducing a New Critical emphasis on the text as an isolated object, this body of scholarship has uncovered early US fictionists' sustained engagement with aesthetic theory, and it has shown how intimately bound up aesthetic and political concerns were in the early republic.²¹

While recent recoveries of early US fiction's literary artfulness have produced far more nuanced accounts of early national fiction than the mid-twentieth-century dismissals, even historicist studies have sometimes assumed an association of the fictional with the literary or the specifically aesthetic dimensions of literature that risks obscuring alternative conceptions of fictionality. In his recent attempt to uncover nascent conceptions of autonomous art in early US fiction, Schweighauser, for instance, sets up an opposition between a "pre-modern understanding of literature" that emphasizes service to "extraliterary purposes," such as religion, politics, and education, and a modern understanding of literature as an autonomous art in order to argue that we can detect "signs of an emergent autonomy of art" in early US fiction.²² While Schweighauser offers compelling readings of the tensions in early US writers' attitudes toward fiction, this framework introduces a teleological strand into his argument, as it assumes evolution toward a "modern" understanding of literature as an autonomous art. This leads his account to echo old claims about early US writers' instrumental justifications of fiction being contrary to fiction's essential nature: the "didacticism, which pervades the prefaces of early American novels," he writes, "hardly constitutes a ringing defense of fiction."²³ Such a statement, however, only holds if we assume that fictionality is a sign of literariness—or what Schweighauser calls the "modern understanding of literature."

I do not want to resist the "aesthetic turn," downplay the imaginative power of early American fiction, or deny these fictionists' interest in aesthetics. But, as decades of scholarship have definitively refuted reductive claims, such as Martin's, that early American fiction lacked literary merit or an underlying aesthetic theory, I believe that we are now positioned to pursue the interesting insight buried in his dismissive claim that early Americans produced sub-literary fiction: many early American uses of fiction do, in fact, lie beyond our modern conception of literariness. Martin's claim that early Americans had "no viable concept of fiction"—were not even aware of this lack!—does not, of course, mean that they had no "concept of fiction," but only reveals that they do not share his distinctly modern understanding of fiction as "an independent, autonomous" literary art: the "failure" of their fictions as works of art reflects their orientation toward other frameworks of value. Now that scholars have established the literary and aesthetic interest of early US fiction, I want to return to the instrumental justifications for fiction that critics

such as Martin regarded as naïve and confused. Many of the prefaces of early US fiction *do* constitute, to use Schweighauser's phrase, a "ringing defense of fiction"—they just do not constitute a ringing defense of fiction as an autonomous art. In these texts, fictionality is not in tension with their instrumental ambitions, but a fundamental means of realizing them. In the early United States, fictionality itself often served extra-literary ends.

My point is neither that such instrumental fictions lack literary or aesthetic dimensions nor that literariness does not often serve extra-literary endeavors such as religion, education, and politics.²⁴ It is also not to suggest that early US writers never embraced fictionality as a vehicle for aesthetic autonomy or imaginative play. Rather, my point is that our own persistent association of fictionality with imaginative liberation, aesthetic play, and literary artfulness has led us to overlook alternative conceptions of fictionality's value and purpose circulating in the early United States. The republic's sustained periodical debates about fiction rarely focused solely, or even chiefly, on aesthetic concerns. A 1798 *Philadelphia Minerva* essay succinctly captures the grounds on which fiction was usually valued and judged in the early United States: "[W]hat is the use of novels? Is there any particular advantage to be obtained from perusing such books, which may not flow as easily from some other source?"²⁵ For early Americans—fiction's advocates as well as its critics—the question of fiction's value was not principally one of aesthetics but of "use." While different writers would construe "use" in very different ways, it—along with a group of related terms, including "instruction," "virtue," and "knowledge"—provided a coherent framework of value within which the struggle over fictionality took place in the early United States. Fictionality does not *yet* serve as a sign of literariness in Genette's sense.

So how does fictionality come to serve as a sign of literariness in the United States? And even more than this, how does this conception of fictionality anachronistically come to govern earlier periods? Understanding this process of back-projection requires revisiting some of the most familiar theories of fiction in order to see how they obscure earlier, less familiar ones. Take, for example, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), a text that has been regarded as both a major work and a manifesto of antebellum fiction. As Meredith McGill has shown, Hawthorne establishes his authority as national romancer in *Seven Gables* by embedding forms of fiction in which he had previously worked—gothic tales, domestic fiction, sketches, children's stories—in his romance in order to disavow them.²⁶ For McGill, Hawthorne's consolidation of the book-length romance at the expense of these genres reflects a wider turn away from what she has influentially dubbed "the culture of reprinting." I would add that it also crystallizes Hawthorne's elevation of a specific conception of fictionality's purpose and meaning over a host of alternative understandings: Hawthorne's espousal of the romance as a privileged genre is tied up with his endorsement of fiction as an aesthetically oriented work of art.

Hawthorne's brief definitional claim for romance—that it is “a work of art” that reflects the “truth of the human heart”—serves as a kind of aside: even within a longer phrase set apart by dashes, it is subordinated grammatically, giving it the air of something that can be taken for granted. This theory of romance, however, was only one among a number of competing conceptions of fiction circulating at this moment. The preface reveals as much, when Hawthorne contrasts his romance with didactic fiction. Although Hawthorne explicitly sets forth a moral for his narrative—“the wrong-doing of one generation lives into the successive ones”—he insists that he will not “relentlessly . . . impale the story with its moral”: “When romances really do teach anything . . . it is by a more subtle process than the ostensible one.”²⁷ Hawthorne, like many later antebellum fictionists, does not reject didacticism, so much as he offers an alternative ideal of didactic fiction, in which fiction's instructional potential is subordinated to—and even hinges upon—its aesthetic impact: fiction can teach only by offering a “high truth . . . fairly, finely, and skilfully wrought out, brightening at every step.”²⁸ In making didactic efficacy depend upon artful creation and aesthetic effect, Hawthorne advances an understanding of fiction as constitutively literary—his work's “dominating function” is “aesthetic” *because* of its fictionality—implying, like many later critics, that those writers who subordinated aesthetic concerns to didactic ones have misunderstood the purpose of fiction.

Hawthorne only explicitly disavows one alternative framework of fictional value (moral didacticism), but the understanding of fiction he advocates obscures a wide range of alternative “dominating functions” for fiction: training citizens, political polemic, creating knowledge about the past, and building social movements. Many of Hawthorne's romances make this same metafictional gesture: he consistently takes up the conventions of varieties of fiction that appealed to other frameworks of value and redeploys them within his romances with their aesthetic “dominating function.” Just as *Seven Gables* draws on the gothic tale and the domestic sketch, *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Blithedale Romance* take up subgenres originally oriented to other ends (historical fiction and social movement fiction, respectively) and deploy their conventions in fictions oriented *primarily* to aesthetic judgments. This does not mean, of course, that Hawthorne's romances do not comment on history and politics. Their commentaries, however, are mediated by an understanding that romances should be judged by aesthetic standards specific to fiction rather than, for instance, the standards governing history or political writing.²⁹ The same is not true, as we will see, for many of the historical fictions and social movement fictions on which Hawthorne's romances draw. Presenting this aesthetic orientation as constitutive of fiction, Hawthorne obscures not only the short fiction associated with reprinting, but also a host of other varieties of book-length fiction and their accompanying theories of fictional value. Yet even as his romances occlude these earlier ways of understanding fiction's

value and purpose, his implicit engagement with them reveals a culture in which a multiplicity of theories of fiction vied for legitimacy.

Hawthorne's romances are thus both product and vanishing point of an age characterized by competing conceptions of fictionality. His engagement with such a variety of fictional genres, however, is easy to overlook, because he explicitly frames his artistic project in terms of only two competing forms—the novel and the romance. I do not want to revisit old debates about the romance/novel distinction, but rather, I hope to suggest how a fixation on it has obscured a host of other logics of fictionality.³⁰ Hawthorne's preface encourages exactly this oversight by setting up a binary that his fiction troubles. As McGill has shown, Hawthorne's "romance" grapples with the prosaic details of modern life, exactly the end his preface assigns to the "novel."³¹ Held to its preface's generic categories, *Seven Gables* is a hybrid novel-romance. It melds the style of romance with the project of the novel: the story's historical specificity, Hawthorne admits, has brought its "fancy-pictures almost into positive contact with the realities of the moment" (3). My point is not that Hawthorne is disingenuous or merely inconsistent, setting forth his fiction's project on terms it fails to fulfill. Rather, the preface is central to his project, because, for Hawthorne, the book's status as a "romance" *depends* on how the reader approaches it: he "would be glad . . . if . . . the book may be read strictly as a romance, having a great deal more to do with the clouds overhead than with any portion of the actual soil of the County of Essex" (3). He presents the text's genre ("romance") less as a categorical, text-internal attribute than as something that inheres in the reader's approach to the fiction. Hawthorne seeks to *establish* his text's genre by urging readers to judge it in a specific way.

Asking readers to read *Seven Gables* "as a romance," Hawthorne invites them to approach it as an aesthetically oriented "work of art" answerable to "the truth of the human heart," even as it also undertakes the more mundane project of representing modern social life. To establish generic difference, then, Hawthorne subordinates narrative content to the framework of judgment through which a fiction is approached: this means that "novels," no less than his own "romance," can be approached on these terms (as "works of art" answerable to "the truth of the human heart"). *Seven Gables* thus sets up a generic opposition only to provide a synthesis, establishing a conception of fictional value that encompasses both sides. In this synthesis, Hawthorne embraces an understanding of fiction that would become ascendant in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century: fiction should be approached as an aesthetically oriented work of art that nonetheless reveals something about the real world. What this synthesis obscures, however, is how the initial opposition encompasses only two theories among the wide range of understandings of fictional value circulating in the 1850s (including those associated with the other genres on which *Seven Gables* draws). This can be easy for modern readers to overlook exactly because we are so comfortable with the conception of

fiction that Hawthorne advocates. But while Hawthorne might ignore other forms of fiction, this does not remove his work from this wider competition among fictionalities. Rather, his silence is best understood as a strategic part of this struggle. By not explicitly engaging with them, Hawthorne refuses to mark these other varieties of fiction as legitimate objects of competition, elevating the Novel and the Romance—and the Novel-Romance—over them.

Hawthorne's romances are ultimately exemplary early American fictions less because "romance" is a distinctly American genre than because his romances explicitly advocate for a specific conception of fiction's value and purpose. Romance might be only one among a host of understandings of fiction, but Hawthorne's effort to delineate a clear fictional logic that would govern readers' encounters with the text was shared by almost all of his contemporaries and predecessors. Hawthorne's romances are an especially instructive hinge in the history of fictionality, because they explicitly argue for a conception of fictionality that we have come to take for granted when it was *not yet* taken for granted. Their prefaces reveal that fiction's "constitutive literariness" is not a timeless meaning of fictionality, but only one of an array of different understandings of fictionality that vied for ascendancy in antebellum print culture.

In the 1980s and 1990s, feminist critics, championing women writers of sentimental fiction, challenged the long-standing primacy of "the Romance tradition" in the study of American fiction.³² In these "canon wars," the social and political engagement of writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe came to be set against the Romantic detachment of writers like Hawthorne.³³ Yet beneath the apparent opposition between Stowe's engaged sentimentalism and Hawthorne's detached aestheticism, there is a deeper, underlying unity. For both writers, fiction is a vehicle for individual self-culture and aesthetic appreciation. Stowe's abolitionist fictions strain against this conception, using fiction for social advocacy, but, as I will show in chapter 6, they also insist on fiction's cultural coding as a genre of private, moral self-fashioning, making it a key part of their appeal. Beneath the substantial differences between Hawthorne and Stowe's fiction is a kind of consensus: both writers seek to neutralize the problem of fictionality by naturalizing the value of fiction. They insist that fiction's legitimacy as a vehicle for self-cultivation, private leisure, and aesthetic appreciation is self-evident (even as they continue to argue for it). This understanding of fiction would be consolidated only in the late nineteenth century, but it begins to gain prominence in the 1840s and 1850s. In this moment, there is a gradual displacement of a multiplicity of varieties and theories of fiction by a narrowed range of alternatives. The 1850s have long been regarded as an origin point—a decade defined by the emergence of "mature" American literary "art and expression" and thus, the beginning of "major" American literature.³⁴ But they are also an end point: in this moment, we begin to see the foreclosure of the myriad possibilities for fiction opened up by the sustained interrogation of fictionality's purpose that defined the first eight decades of US fiction.

Over the past thirty years, the major accounts of American fiction have left the question of romance behind—and with it, the question of fictionality. In the wake of influential studies by Jane Tompkins, Nancy Armstrong, and Cathy Davidson, scholars have studied a more expansive body of fiction, with a focus on these fictions' political and social implications.³⁵ This scholarship has remade our understanding of early US fiction and greatly expanded our sense of its significance by highlighting fiction's central role in educating women, imagining the nation, practicing democracy, advocating social reform, and justifying American empire and its colonial violence.³⁶ The romance critics' seemingly old-fashioned questions about competing forms of fictional "truth," however, have stakes for understanding both the vast archive of fiction they neglected and the sociopolitical issues they largely ignored.³⁷ This is because a fiction's distinctive suppositional logic mediates readers' encounters with its narrative, structuring how a fiction persuades, moves, and educates. Early US fictionists often sought to influence readers not only through a fiction's interpretable message, but also through readers' participation in the speculative and evaluative exercises associated with different fictionalities.³⁸ If focusing on fictionality returns us to what might seem like antiquated questions about fictional truth, the following chapters will argue that recovering these varied fictionalities has stakes for some of the most persistent concerns of recent Americanist literary criticism and American studies: theories of the public sphere and political deliberation, structures of nationalist feeling, the mechanics of normativity, the gendered imperatives of social life, histories of enchantment and disenchantment, the politics of sentiment, and the racialization of inner life. Uncovering the array of fictionalities that shaped social life and political struggle in the early United States, however, requires first reconsidering the rise of the novel paradigm that has predominated in histories of American fiction.

The Limitations of Novel History

Fictionality is pervasive in modern society. It serves a communicative function that extends far beyond the prose genres that we usually group together as "fiction."³⁹ Fictionality's unique mode of suppositional reference plays a central role in advertising, political discourse, stand-up comedy, and even the natural sciences (among countless other social arenas). This book, however, focuses specifically on the fictionality of extended prose fiction. There are two reasons for this delimited scope. First, early US writers theorized and debated the question of fictionality principally in relation to prose fiction in general and the novel in particular. Second, even *within* our histories of fiction in the United States, scholars have largely overlooked the question of fictionality.

For twentieth-century literary historians, fictionality was a constitutive but unremarked upon aspect of the novel genre. As Gallagher succinctly puts it,

“No feature of the novel seems to be more obvious and yet more easily ignored than its fictionality.”⁴⁰ But even as Gallagher’s work has recovered fictionality as an object of analysis for literary history (as opposed to narratology and analytic philosophy), her foundational “The Rise of Fictionality” also suggests why fictionality has been overlooked: it has been subsumed under the novel as our privileged category of analysis. The terms “fiction” and “novel” have largely functioned as synonyms in both popular discourse and much literary history.⁴¹ Our commonsense conflation of the category of fiction with the novel genre has both led us to ignore novelistic fictionality and obscured other, self-consciously nonnovelistic varieties of fictionality.

For Gallagher, “the novel discovered fiction,” this new kind of narrative about “nobody” that emerged in the eighteenth century, and her account focuses exclusively on what she calls “novelistic fictionality.”⁴² In arguing for *why* novelistic fictionality arose when it did, Gallagher treats fiction as a uniform category, more or less continuous with the novel. Srinivas Aravamudan has critiqued this delimited account, drawing attention to the host of fictional forms circulating in eighteenth-century England, such as the Oriental Tale and the beast fable, that Gallagher’s account—like Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel* before her—obscures.⁴³ I would add that this critique of a novel-centric approach to fictionality could extend even to a host of fictions that we have tended to read *as* novels. Within the body of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts that literary histories of the United States have brought together under the extensive canopy of “the novel,” we find hoaxes, scandalous chronicles, sketchbooks, moral tales, romances, and social movement fiction, many of which defined themselves in *explicit* contradistinction to the novel genre.

The “rise of the novel” paradigm invoked by Gallagher’s title has profoundly shaped the study of early US fiction, largely due to the continuing influence of Davidson’s field-defining *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (1986; 2004). This study, more than any other work, overturned the persistent twentieth-century narrative about the poverty of early US fiction by shifting attention from what had been regarded as the early novel’s literary deficiencies to the genre’s ideological force in the republic. By focusing on the “rise of the novel” as a social phenomenon and exploring the genre’s political meaning in the United States, Davidson sparked a wider reevaluation of a body of fiction that, at the time, lacked recognized classics or major works and established a framework for studying early American fiction that continues to shape the field today.⁴⁴ (The ongoing influence of Davidson’s “rise of the novel” paradigm is evident in the frequent recurrence of her Wattian subtitle in subsequent studies of US fiction.⁴⁵) But while Davidson’s account of the novel’s “rise” helped to refocus the study of early US fiction around questions of the genre’s political meaning and ideological implications, the enduring prominence of “rise of the novel” narratives has obscured how many early US fictions actually used claims of *distinction* from the novel to structure their

attempts to persuade and influence readers. Faced with a widespread suspicion of novel-reading as a frivolous indulgence and a threat to civic virtue, early writers developed alternative, self-consciously extra-novelistic varieties of fiction for their varied social and political projects.

Our histories of the American novel, then, often include books that insisted they were not novels. One reason for this disconnection is a subtle but significant distinction between how modern scholars and many early US writers use the term “novel.” Where modern scholarship tends to categorize most extended prose fictions as novels, antebellum periodical reviewers, as Nina Baym has shown, were preoccupied with distinguishing “the novel proper” from other varieties of prose fiction.⁴⁶ Treating generic designation as one of the reviewer’s chief tasks, these writers dedicated significant space to adjudicating whether a given work should be considered a novel: in general, they regarded a unified plot as defining the “novel proper” and they often categorized fictions that did not foreground the “interest” of their plot as falling outside the genre. “A string of events, connected by no other tie, than the mere fact, that they happened to the same individual, or within a given period of years,” wrote the *North American Review* in 1838, “may constitute a fictitious history or memoir, but it does not make a novel.”⁴⁷ Such judgments had a markedly different force in different reviews: sometimes, reviewers would identify a work as extra-novelistic in order to highlight that it had a moral project that transcended entertainment; in other cases, reviewers used this categorization as an aesthetic judgment that suggested the writer’s failure to produce a unified plot. (In general, the former meaning predominated in the early national period when, as we will see in chapter 1, novels were widely regarded as pernicious; the latter became more common in the later antebellum period when, as we will see in chapter 4, the genre gained widespread, though not universal, acceptance.) But often, a reviewer’s designation of a fiction as extra-novelistic implied neither praise nor disapprobation, but simply a recognition that the fiction deemphasized the “interest” of its plot in favor of ends other than entertaining readers.

Fictionists seized upon this narrow definition of the novel and often used claims to generic distinction from the “novel proper” to orient their narratives to goals other than those usually associated with novels. To understand the stakes of these metageneric gestures, the study of early US fiction needs to rely less on strictly taxonomic approaches to genre or teleological “rise” narratives and instead focus on genre as a mode of address—a means of engaging readers on specific terms and eliciting certain reading practices. While critics have tended to treat claims of distinction from the novel as disingenuous disavowals of a suspicious genre, early writers used such claims to encourage readers to approach their narratives in specific ways. In William Hill Brown’s *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), for example, Mrs. Holmes gives a young woman a work of fiction with an important qualification: “I do not recommend it to you as a

Novel, but as a work that speaks the language of the heart and that inculcates the duty that we owe to ourselves, to society and the Deity.” While admitting that novels are more engaging than “didactick essays,” Holmes encourages her young friend to approach this narrative as she would a “didactick essay,” so as to be “capable of deducing the most profitable lessons” from it.⁴⁸ By insisting that she does not recommend the narrative “as a novel,” Holmes approaches genre not as a text internal characteristic but as something that is determined by the reader’s approach to the narrative. I would suggest that the claims to generic difference that pervade early US fiction often serve a parallel function: they are attempts to elicit specific reading practices.⁴⁹

The relation between genre and reading practice in the early United States is perhaps best illustrated by the widespread concern that readers might transform any text into a “novel.” Washington Irving’s *History of New York* (1809) pokes fun at this anxiety when Diedrich Knickerbocker, the ostensible author, complains about readers who misread his history by “skim[ming] over the records of past times, as they do over the edifying pages of a novel, merely for relaxation and innocent amusement.”⁵⁰ The joke is, as usual, on Knickerbocker, who seems unaware that he writes a most amusing variety of history. But Irving’s joke captures a common concern among early writers that readers would approach their narratives (whether fictional or nonfictional) *as* novels—that is, as occasions for frivolous entertainment. The corollary of this anxiety, however, is the idea that a different form of generic address might transform readers’ approach to a text, even one that seems novelistic. Writers used claims to distinction from the novel to *appeal* to certain reading practices and orient their fictions to ends other than those usually associated with the novel (the “relaxation” and “amusement” mentioned by Knickerbocker).

Robert Pendleton Kennedy’s *Swallow Barn, or a Sojourn in the Old Dominion* (1832) provides a concrete example. *Swallow Barn* is a fictional sketchbook, which details a Northern traveler’s stay on an idealized Virginia plantation and his conversion to a proslavery position. Kennedy insistently comments on his narrative’s resemblance to novels only to disavow the resemblance on the grounds of *Swallow Barn*’s discontinuous nature. When he republished the fiction in 1851 as an “antidote to the abolitionist mischief,” Kennedy added a preface that underscored this generic distinction: “Swallow Barn is not a novel. It was begun on the plan of a series of detached sketches . . . it has still preserved its desultory, sketchy character.”⁵¹ Issued with the politically motivated republication, this preface clarifies what has been at stake in Kennedy’s metageneric project all along: Kennedy encourages readers to approach *Swallow Barn* as a “history,” “collection of letters,” or “book of travels” rather than a novel to establish its reliability as a source of information about Southern life in general and slavery in particular.

The specter of novelism haunts *Swallow Barn*, threatening to undermine its claim to mimetic accuracy. But his fiction’s resemblance to novels also

gives Kennedy an opportunity to underscore its difference from them: “I, who originally began to write only a few desultory sketches of the Old Dominion, have unawares, and without any premeditated purpose, absolutely fallen into a regular jog-trot, novel-like narrative,—at least, for several consecutive chapters” (374). Kennedy underscores the normative force of generic conventions: once his “desultory sketches” have begun to resemble the unified plotting that defined the “novel proper,” he feels “the weight of the obligation” to provide a satisfying conclusion. Kennedy, however, insists that he has stumbled into such generic imperatives unwittingly: he is “unaware,” he has “fallen” into a “novel-like narrative,” and he has done so without any “premeditation.” This differentiates *Swallow Barn* from novels, which Kennedy presents as highly artificial, inorganic texts. By marking the moment when the narrator moves from inartistic reporting to the planned unfolding of a plot, Kennedy suggests that the narrative has, up to this point, not been governed by such imperatives. And when, in future chapters, he interrupts his novelistic love story with digressions on local history, traditions, and especially plantation life, he stages his deviation from novelistic convention in favor of an alternative organizing principle—the traveler’s experience. *Swallow Barn*’s divergence from the novel genre attests to its reflective—as opposed to artfully constructed—nature and by extension, its mimetic accuracy.

Chapters 6 and 7 will take up how epistemological anxieties about fictionality impacted debates about slavery more generally. I invoke *Swallow Barn* here, however, because it exemplifies the prevailing move of metafictional distinction in early US fiction. Staging his fiction’s divergence from the novel genre, Kennedy seeks to both establish the grounds of its difference (an organic rather than artificial form that enables it to accurately reflect the world) and orient it toward alternative ends (the dissemination of ethnographic information as opposed to entertainment). Parallel claims of distinction from the novel structure the varied projects of an array of fictions—from Judith Sargent Murray’s *Story of Margaretta* (1792–94) to Walt Whitman’s *Franklin Evans* (1842) to Fanny Fern’s *Ruth Hall* (1854) to Orestes Brownson’s *The Spirit-Rapper* (1854)—that otherwise share little with Kennedy’s plantation narrative. While literary historians have generally treated *Swallow Barn* as a novel, it defines its project in contradistinction to the genre, revealing the inadequacy of history of the novel approaches for capturing the dynamics of generic address in early US fiction.

Yet, even as it exposes the limitations of novel history for understanding early American fiction, *Swallow Barn*’s use of the novel as a constitutive generic other also reveals the novel’s centrality to the history of fictionality in the United States. Early critics of fiction were especially preoccupied with the novel’s fictionality, and the republic’s virulent antifictional discourse was, in fact, a response to the novel’s exploding popularity. So while many early fictions explicitly defined their projects in contradistinction to novels, critics

often lumped all fiction together under the pejorative labels of “novels” or “romances.” (Early writers were well aware of this dynamic: even as Frederick Jackson insists that his *The Victim of Chancery* [1841] should be read as a “story of facts” or a “narrative,” he anticipates that “grave men” might “call it a novel” as a means of discrediting his critique of “the present condition of things.”⁵²) In this sense, the antifictional discourse mirrors twentieth- and twenty-first-century novel history, consolidating a variety of prose fictions under the capacious category of “the novel.” This produced a strange generic dialectic in the early United States: while fiction’s critics tended to group all fictions together as “novels and romances” in their condemnations of the mode, many writers insisted that their fictions were *not* novels in an attempt to rescue the fictional mode from its association with the corrupt genre.

To fully capture this complex generic negotiation, *Founded in Fiction* attends to the centrality of the idea of “the novel” in the history of fiction without allowing a retrospectively consolidated understanding of the novel genre to obscure the generic diversity of early US fiction. It offers a history of fictionality in the United States that encompasses both those fictions that claimed the label of novel and those that disavowed it. In part, this book traces—in the spirit of Virginia Jackson’s work on the lyricization of Emily Dickinson’s poems—the novelization of American fiction: the normalizing process by which a host of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century book-length prose fictions that figured their projects in contradistinction to novels would come to be grouped together under the generic umbrella of “the novel.”⁵³ In other words, an array of explicitly extra-novelistic early fictions have been subsumed under our expansive definition of the novel as meaning almost any extended prose fiction. This understanding of the novel genre is evident in some antebellum writing, but it is not yet assumed or taken for granted. Rather, it remained contested and controversial throughout the antebellum period. The *American Review* in 1850, for instance, set out a “scheme of criticism” dedicated to “correcting a prevailing error of the day”—the tendency “to call every fiction a novel.”⁵⁴

But even as many antebellum reviewers sought to adjudicate the boundary between “the novel proper” and other varieties of fiction, their reviews also reveal a proliferation of different kinds of novels, oriented toward a variety of ends, that exploded such clear generic boundaries: “Do you wish to instruct, to convince, to please? Write a novel!” wrote *Putnam’s* in 1854, “Have you a system of religion or politics or manners or social life to inculcate? Write a novel!”⁵⁵ Although these reviewers often objected to such attempts to expand the scope of the novel’s form and mission, their reviews also reveal the gradual, uneven emergence of a more capacious sense of the genre. By the end of the antebellum period, reviewers increasingly regarded the novel as defined only by three very general characteristics—length, prose, and fictionality.⁵⁶

My argument, then, is not that the novel did not “rise” in the early United States—it most certainly did. But what also arose during this period was a

more capacious conception of the novel genre as encompassing almost any book-length prose fiction that many fictionists of this era would have rejected. While this more capacious sense of the novel would remain contested throughout the antebellum period, it has been assumed in modern narratives of the novel's "rise." Because scholars have taken this expansive definition of the novel for granted, they have tended to treat early fiction's claims to generic distinction from the novel as evasive, disingenuous, and confused. This, in turn, has allowed for these various fictions to be consolidated into teleological histories of the novel. Such histories subsume under the label of "the novel" a variety of fictions that explicitly disavowed the novel genre as a fundamental part of their projects (such as *Swallow Barn*), fictions that were not regarded as novelistic by many antebellum readers and reviewers (such as *Moby-Dick*), and narratives that did not employ the fictional address that we now consider constitutive of the novel genre (such as *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*). My point is neither that our current, more expansive definitions of the novel are wrong per se nor that *Moby-Dick*, for example, has no place in histories of the novel's development in the United States.⁵⁷ Rather, it is that the ascendance of this more expansive sense of the novel—the process by which books like *Ruth Hall*, *Moby-Dick*, *Pym*, and *Swallow Barn* come to be regarded as self-evidently novelistic—is itself a crucial development in the history of fiction in the United States and that we should not take this understanding of the novel for granted nor back-project it onto the early republic, as this obscures the complex metageneric negotiations that structured how earlier fictions sought to educate, persuade, and move readers.

This, then, is this book's two-part argument about fictionality and novel in the early United States. On one hand, it argues that fully understanding the diverse fictionalities circulating in the early United States requires extending our attention beyond the novel genre. By tracing out the logic through which various fictions claimed distinction from the novel, *Founded in Fiction* embraces the *American Review's* 1850 call to resist the "prevailing error of the day . . . to call every fiction a novel" in order to uncover the republic's many varieties of extra-novelistic fiction. On the other hand, it also argues that fictionality was a defining preoccupation of the US novel through the middle of the nineteenth century. The novel was fundamental to the republic's contentious debates about fictionality and these debates, in turn, profoundly shaped the development of the novel in the United States. Approaching the history of fictionality in the United States as a complex process of generic normalization and diversification, *Founded in Fiction* is both a piece and a critique of novel history: it looks back from our consolidated, more capacious understanding of the novel, but it seeks to recover the variety of fictionalities *within* this body of fiction that will later be categorized as novels. In doing so, it resists the tendency to collapse "fiction" and "the novel" as categories of analysis. This is necessary for understanding writers' divergent responses

to the republic's intertwined anxieties about fiction and novels. In the early United States, some writers sought to legitimate their novels by disavowing the genre's suspicious fictionality. Others insisted their fictions were not novels in order to reclaim fictionality from the pernicious novel genre. Still others rejected critiques of both the novel genre and the fictional mode and argued for the value of fictional novels. In considering both avowedly novelistic and explicitly extra-novelistic fictions, this book takes seriously the generic categories and distinctions set forth in the subtitles and prefaces of early US fiction in order to explore how writers used genre as means of engaging readers and establishing a text's logic of fictionality—the terms on which a text addresses readers, to use Brockden Brown's phrase, "as a fiction."⁵⁸

Logics of Fictionality

Founded in Fiction begins with the 1780s and 1790s, when the increasing popularity of fiction led to an intensification of the antifictional discourse. It ends with the 1860s, when fictionality had largely ceased to be controversial. By the late nineteenth century, readers had become so comfortable with the concept of fiction that any discomfort with fictionality began to seem strange. William Dean Howells played this for laughs in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), where the vulgar, *nouveau riche* Mrs. Lapham discusses her daughter's reading with the educated, aristocratic, Mr. Corey:

"I used to like to get hold of a good book when I was a girl; but we weren't allowed to read many novels in those days. My mother called them all LIES. And I guess she wasn't so very far wrong about some of them."

"They're certainly fictions," said Corey, smiling.⁵⁹

Howells invites readers to smile with the urbane Corey at what he regards as Mrs. Lapham's antiquated category error: the conflation of fiction and lies. By 1885, the antifictional stance could be regarded as a relic of a provincial and unsophisticated past.

Fully understanding early US fiction, however, requires taking such antifictional critiques seriously, rather than, like Corey, dismissing them as a sign of naïveté and unsophistication. Almost every early US fictionist took up, in some way, the epistemological anxiety about fictionality—the idea that narratives without a basis in fact were lies that would mislead readers about reality—underpinning Mrs. Lapham's mother's interdiction against novels. Early US fiction, in fact, provides an especially rich archive of theories about fiction, exactly because these writers were endlessly confronted with such critiques. Forced to justify their use of this suspicious mode, early fictionists insistently reflected on the specific terms of their texts' fictionality, seeking to legitimate their fictions discursively in paratexts and formally in narrative. Isaac Mitchell's preface to his 1811 novel *The Asylum* exemplifies the project, undertaken

by almost every early US fictionist, of delineating exactly what separates his book from the mass of pernicious fictions and novels: “let not the moralist or the Divine turn fastidiously from our pages before he has given them a perusal. Let not prejudice condemn the book merely because it may be considered as coming under the class of Novel. Permit it to speak for itself; let it be its own advocate.”⁶⁰ *Founded in Fiction* lets early American fiction “speak for itself,” tracing the varied terms on which these writers advocated and theorized the value of their fiction.

My goal, in doing so, is to reconstruct the varied logics of fictionality found in early US fiction. A text’s logic of fictionality encompasses the framework of value to which it appeals, the standards through which it seeks judgment, the speculative exercises it invites, the structures of supposition on which it relies, and the reading practices it encourages. While claims to generic distinction, such as disavowals of the novel genre, often play a central role in establishing a text’s logic of fictionality, these fictional logics are not reducible to generic classifications. (Texts within the same genre or subgenre, as we will see, exhibit widely varying logics of fictionality.) These varied logics of fictionality are also not strictly text-internal: they emerge in the interplay between the fictional logic established in a text and the assumptions governing fiction-reading in the social world in which that text circulates. The desire to reconstruct these historically specific logics of fictionality underlies this book’s methodological eclecticism. It draws variously on the history of reading (examining the theories of reading and descriptions of reading practices found in fiction and writing about fiction), book history (tracing publication histories and paratextual packaging), reception studies (surveying reviews of fiction), intellectual history (exploring changes in concepts such as truth and probability), and readings of specific texts (reconstructing a text’s account and deployment of its own fictionality) in order to more fully historicize these logics of fictionality.⁶¹

Founded in Fiction, then, takes as its subject the evolving, often contentious, discussions about the value and purpose of fiction-reading that played out in American periodicals, conduct literature, and fiction itself over the eight decades following independence.⁶² My ambition is to describe the text-internal logics of fictionality found in specific fictions, the conceptions of fiction-reading that circulated in US print culture more generally, and how they intersected in an attempt to reconstruct how fictions engaged readers in the early United States. This endeavor is broadly historicist, but also necessarily speculative: this book focuses on the elusive, ever-receding relation between cultural practices and the text-artifacts on which we rely for their reconstruction. It does not offer a history of reading practices so much as it offers a history of appeals to different reading practices in American fiction and a history of how fictionists sought to intervene in the republic’s sustained, spirited debates about fiction-reading: in the reflections on fictionality that permeate their writings, early fictionists commented on the social meaning of

fiction-reading in the United States and engaged the prevailing assumptions about how and why people read fiction, often urging readers to approach their own fictions in very particular ways.⁶³

Historicizing the development of fictionality in the United States, however, also requires grappling with how transatlantic influence, circulation, and reprinting shaped fiction-reading in the republic. Much recent scholarship has shown the limitations of narrowly national frameworks for understanding US literary history by highlighting the transatlantic networks of exchange that influenced both what people read and the development of literary culture in the new nation. For the half century following independence, English books dominated the US literary marketplace and many Americans would have chiefly read English fiction. In the nation's earliest years, most fictions circulating in the republic were imported from England, but over time, these imported books were increasingly displaced by American reprints of English fiction. Such reprints would remain a defining feature of the US literary landscape throughout the antebellum era.⁶⁴ Drawing on recent transatlantic approaches, *Founded in Fiction* explores how US writers' interrogation of questions of fictionality developed in relation to both transatlantic conversations about fiction and the prevalence of English fiction in the republic.⁶⁵ It charts how early American conceptions of fictionality were shaped by the republic's uniquely virulent antifictional discourse within a context of transatlantic circulation and influence.

Founded in Fiction is divided into two parts. The three chapters in part I focus on the epistemological problem of fictionality—the question of whether fiction could produce true knowledge of the world—that framed both critiques and defenses of fiction in the early republic. Chapter 1 offers an overview of the antifictional discourse of the 1780s and 1790s and reconsiders the “Founded on Fact” novels prevalent in this era, tracing the different terms on which writers sought to decouple the popular novel genre from its suspicious fictionality. Chapter 2 focuses on writers from the 1790s who argued against the political anxiety that fiction-reading would separate citizens from civic life, instead positing fictionality's suppositional reference as peculiarly suited to addressing the challenges of modern republicanism. Chapter 3 explores the rapidly evolving debates about the effects of fiction-reading on female conduct, especially as they played out in the neglected fictions published between 1800 and 1820.

The four chapters in part II tell the twofold story of fictionality in the antebellum United States. On one hand, this is the story of prose fiction's gradual and widespread—though far from universal—acceptance as both respectable reading material and an important branch of American letters. Chapter 4 traces a dramatic shift in justifications for historical fiction across the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s, as historical fictionists more and more disavowed the arguments for fiction's value as a tool for speculative historiography that had predominated in the 1820s and instead argued that their texts' fictionality

signals an orientation to ends specific to fiction, such as aesthetic appreciation and moral self-cultivation. The chapter argues that these changing logics of historical fictionality both reflect and exemplify a broad transformation in discussions of fiction across the antebellum period: this era sees the rise of an understanding of fiction-reading as a private leisure activity oriented toward aesthetic appreciation and personal self-culture that shifted emphasis from epistemological questions to moral and aesthetic ones in both discussions of fiction and fictions themselves.

On the other hand, the story of fictionality in the antebellum United States is also the story of the persistent struggles over the acceptable forms and uses of fictionality that continued over these same years. Where chapter 4 charts the increasing ascendancy of a conception of fiction-reading that largely foreclosed the epistemological questions about fiction's status as a source of knowledge that had preoccupied earlier fictionists, chapters 5, 6, and 7 show how such epistemological anxieties resurfaced intermittently across the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s, especially when fictionists broke with the understanding of fiction-reading as a vehicle for aesthetic and moral self-culture. Chapter 5 turns to two literary hoaxes of the 1830s to explore the relationship between fictionality and the Jacksonian public's fascination with "humbug." It considers how these literary hoaxes eschewed conventional fictionality to raise anew the questions about belief, credulity, and fraud that were becoming increasingly marginal in discussions of fiction. Chapter 6 explores how certain fictionists of the 1840s and 1850s did not just resist the newly ascendant conception of fiction-reading as a private leisure activity, divorced from political controversy, but actually made this generic coding a key part of their projects of social criticism: because fiction was consistently figured as outside of politics, it was, they argued, ideally suited to expose the limitations of politics as usual. Chapter 7 argues that fiction came to play such a central role in the struggle to define the "true" nature of the slave experience in the 1850s because its distinctive mode of transparent psychonarration made it an especially potent genre for giving Northern white audiences the sense that they were accessing the hidden inner lives of enslaved persons. The chapter traces the incisive metacriticisms of fiction's role in this representational struggle that formerly enslaved writers developed, as they explored both the persuasive power of fiction's revelatory access to inner life and the epistemological pitfalls of using fiction to probe slave interiority.

Taken together, the two parts of this book chart a series of dramatic transformations—in the publishing and distribution of fiction, the prevailing attitudes toward fiction, and the ascendant theories of fiction's purpose—that reshaped the production and reception of fiction across the early national and antebellum periods. But they also reveal a surprising continuity across the first eighty years of US literary history: throughout this era, fictionists remained preoccupied with the fictionality of fiction. *Founded in Fiction* traces the gradual acceptance of fiction in the United States, but it is especially interested

in the enduring contestations over fictionality that shaped American fiction through the middle of the nineteenth century.

The persistence and pervasiveness of questions of fictionality in American fiction present the historian of fictionality with a challenge, as there are far more innovative theories and deployments of fictionality from this period than could be covered in a single book. The chapters that follow spotlight some of the most significant controversies over the acceptable uses of fiction in the early United States, with each chapter taking up a different anxiety about fictionality and considering how a different set of novels or fictions emerged in dialectical relation to this anxiety. In tracing these controversies over fiction's value and purpose, I have tried to feature both texts that exemplify important diachronic shifts in discussions of fiction and texts that emphasize the synchronic variety of theories and uses of fictionality. In many places, I have highlighted texts, such as Leonora Sansay's *Laura*, Robert Montgomery Bird's *Sheppard Lee*, and Frederick Douglass's *The Heroic Slave*, that self-consciously engage and comment on such shifts and developments. In other places, I have featured texts, such as Hugh Henry Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry* and Tabitha Tenney's *Female Quixotism*, for the novelty, even idiosyncrasy, of their fictional logics in order to more fully capture the array of fictionalities circulating in the republic. In doing so, my hope is to restore to our current discussions of American fiction the hyper-awareness of fictionality that characterized early US debates about fiction. A focus on fictionality uncovers the interest of less familiar works, such as S.S.B.K. Wood's *Dorval, or the Speculator* and John Neal's *Rachel Dyer*, but it also gives fresh interest to canonical works, such as Brown's *Wieland* or Edgar Allan Poe's *Pym*, by restoring to view key aspects of their projects that have been overlooked in our inattention to fictionality.

I am especially interested in recovering theories and uses of fictionality from which we have become historically estranged. *Founded in Fiction* often dwells on those conceptions of fictionality—such those found in Royall Tyler's *The Algerine Captive*, Rebecca Rush's *Kelroy*, or Samuel Woodworth's *The Champions of Freedom*—that trouble or defamiliarize our common-sense notions of what fiction is and does. For this reason, I offer only brief accounts of the understandings of fictionality advocated by those canonical heavyweights, Hawthorne and Melville. This is not only because previous scholars have offered robust accounts of their theories of fiction, but because Hawthorne and Melville, as Jonathan Arac has documented, embraced an understanding of fiction as a distinctly literary art that both anticipates and profoundly shaped later conceptions of fiction's value and purpose.⁶⁶ While chapter 4 and the coda track the historical development of this conception of fiction, they do so in order to resist the tendency to take this understanding of fictionality for granted or back-project it onto earlier fictions. It is only by recognizing the historical contingency of our sense of fictionality's "constitutive literariness," to use Genette's phrase, that we can uncover the alternative logics

of fictionality that early US writers developed as they grappled with both epistemological critiques of fiction and anxieties about its inutility.

Before turning to these fictionalities, however, I want to distinguish this history of competing fictionalities from the related histories of fabrication and fraudulence that have been incisively examined by scholars such as Lara Langer Cohen and Emily Ogden.⁶⁷ Fictionality as a mode of address is defined by its explicit or tacit acknowledgement of its fabricated nature. This is what differentiates it from fraud and lies. Because *Founded in Fiction* seeks to recover how writers used different varieties of fictionality as rhetorical tools for influence and persuasion, it—with the notable exception of chapter 5—focuses on texts that addressed readers *as* fiction rather than those texts that, from our contemporary perspective, are fictional simply in the sense of being made up. At the same time, American fiction developed in conversation with accusations that fiction was nothing but a form of lying, from periodical condemnations of fiction in the 1790s to critiques of abolitionist fiction in the 1850s. In laying out the terms on which their fictions were *not* lies, fictionists offered some of the era's most elaborate reflections on the varieties of fraud that many saw as rampant in American social life.

The histories of fictionality and fraud are thus distinct but intimately intertwined strands of a much wider history of veridiction or truth-telling.⁶⁸ In the following chapters, we will see how many American fictionists—writers as different as Brackenridge, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, George Lippard, and Stowe—shared a preoccupation with the question of how a writer could establish herself as a speaker of truth. The history of fictionality in the United States is the history of the cultural, institutional, and intellectual developments that would allow these writers to claim that fictionality could enhance their credibility as speakers of “truth”—an idea that would have seemed contradictory, even absurd, to many in the early national period. While some writers would claim fiction was capable of conveying a kind of truth as early as the 1790s, theirs was a controversial, minority position—one that had to be defended at great length. By the late nineteenth century, the possibility of a true fiction would be taken for granted. Over the intervening years, the question of fictional truth—a truth that did not depend on factuality—would be among the most persistent and vexing in American letters.

Founded in Fiction tells only a small part of this expansive, multifaceted story. This book is not an exhaustive history of fictionality in the United States, but an argument for the value of such an undertaking and a preliminary exploration of it within one delimited area—extended prose fiction. Resisting the normalizing impulse of much novel history, it hopes to further what Duncan Faherty has called the “decentering of the novel” in early American studies.⁶⁹ Yet in focusing on novels and fictions that have been read as novels, it largely neglects the short periodical fictions that often had a greater circulation than all but a few book-length fictions. It does not take up the varieties

of fictionality found in poetry and drama. Nor does it consider the role suppositional reference played in a range of nonfictional discourses, from political oratory to natural philosophy. But by exploring the diverse fictionalities found in prose fiction, *Founded in Fiction* hopes to draw attention to fictionality's communicative power, opening up new lines of inquiry into the many genres that it does not consider.⁷⁰

In the early United States, fictionality was a contested site at which writers and movements imagined and reimagined how texts could affect, persuade, educate, and move readers. By reframing the history of the novel in the United States as a history of competing varieties of novelistic and extra-novelistic fictionality, this book seeks to recover what one anxious early critic referred to as "*the ingenious diversity of fiction.*"⁷¹ *Founded in Fiction* is an anatomy of the theories and forms of fiction circulating in the republic and a literary history that resists teleological genre history, so as to do justice to the remarkable variety of early American fiction. Moving beyond unitary "rise" narratives, it seeks to offer a new way of understanding the rich and strange archive of fiction produced in the era before the novel's dominance. But more than a reconsideration of fiction's place in American literature, it is a history of the ways in which these diverse fictionalities shaped how early Americans thought and argued about some of the most pressing social and political issues of their era.

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