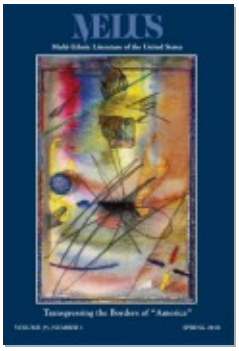
Moving Encounters: Sympathy and the Indian Question in Antebellum Literature (review)



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Moving Encounters: Sympathy and the Indian Question in Antebellum Literature. Laura L. Mielke. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008. xii+316 pages. $80.00 cloth; $26.95 paper.

Laura L. Mielke's innovative *Moving Encounters: Sympathy and the Indian Question in Antebellum Literature* analyzes sentimental encounters between natives and whites in American literature from 1820 to 1850. Mielke posits that American authors of the Jacksonian era were preoccupied with the question of Native American civil rights and that the controversy over Indian removal was addressed in early nineteenth-century literature through emotionally charged displays of sympathy between natives and Euro-Americans. Mielke's study critically examines the cultural impact these "moving encounters" had on race relations in the new republic. The authors Mielke discusses promote tolerance by advocating for a middle ground where indigenous peoples and Euro-Americans can develop mutual understanding. Mielke argues that these sympathetic encounters allowed American Indians, non-native writers, and antebellum activists to propose alternatives to tribal acculturation and removal.

Mielke's initial chapters discuss Lydia Maria Child's and James Fenimore Cooper's attempts to comment on the state of native-white relations by reflecting on the genocidal Indian wars of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Cooper's and Child's mid-nineteenth-century frontier romances employ sympathy to protest the loss of tribal lands and native culture. As Mielke argues, figurations of republican motherhood and the frontiersman informed readers about continued attempts to deny civil rights to natives. For example, Cooper's Natty Bumppo functions as a sympathetic cultural intermediary who oversees and mediates native-white encounters. The frontiersman's intervention between natives and whites results in the preservation of indigenous languages and tribal memories, which in turn educates the reader about disappearing native cultures. Child's novel *The First Settlers* (1828) sentimentalizes pedagogical encounters between republican mothers and daughters as a means to illustrate the ways in which puritanical Calvinism contributed to Native American extermination. In these ways, Mielke observes, Child and Cooper used the republican mother and the frontiersman as rhetorical devices to advocate for native peoples, just as Harriet Beecher Stowe employed democratic-minded women to advocate for the plight of African Americans. Critics have analyzed extensively the impact of sentimental fiction on the

abolitionist movement; Mielke's study breaks new ground by investigating how Euro-American sympathy contributed to Native American civil rights.

While Mielke acknowledges Euro-American sentimental authors' effective use of sympathetic protagonists to advocate for native civil rights, she also asserts that the autobiographical writings of indigenous peoples provide an even more powerful example of the "moving encounter." Mielke's analyses of the works of William Apess, Mary Jemison, and Black Hawk shed new light on the life writing of native authors. Until recently, Native Studies scholars have considered the sentiment in these autobiographies inauthentic. Arnold Krupat argues that the works of Apess and Jemison offer an acculturated native perspective because they are not products of native oral traditions. Krupat maintains that the true expression of the sympathetic native voice only comes from the recorded narratives of ethnographers. Mielke, however, challenges Krupat's assertion by claiming that the native autobiographer employs the discourse of cultural assimilation to argue for self-determination. Mielke recognizes the importance of whites as sympathetic advocates for the plight of the natives, but she also argues that the unfiltered life writing of individual native authors provided an important outlet for self-representation. Her discussion of native autobiographers provides an important critique of a genre that largely has been ignored. Yet, Mielke's study at times may seem contradictory, given that she foregrounds the importance of the white author as a sympathetic conduit even as she privileges the power of the unmediated native voice.

This critical distinction between oral preservation and the acculturated native voice is apparent in Mielke's discussion of Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau. According to Mielke, these transcendentalist authors functioned as ethnographers who sought to record and preserve native language by observing native peoples in their tribal environment. Unlike the sentimental fiction writers, however, Fuller and Thoreau stress the need for native peoples to actively speak in their tribal languages and view their oral tradition as the true expression of the native voice. In *The Maine Woods* (1864), Thoreau regards English-literate natives as culturally degraded, in obvious disagreement with Apess's and Jemison's belief that acculturated natives use the language of Euro-Americans to advocate for the rights of their own people.

In addition to sentimental fiction writers, antebellum ethnographers also were concerned with preserving the cultural traditions of native peoples. Critics such as Reginald Horsman have interpreted the nineteenth-century ethnographic studies of Josiah Clark Nott and Thomas Morton as promoting scientific racism. Mielke's discussion of George Catlin's and Henry Rowe Schoolcraft's scientific studies, however, refutes this view. Mielke

asserts that "early ethnography bears marks of sentimentalism, which performed a particular and important role in the antebellum considerations of the West" (116). She notes that unlike Morton and Nott, who conducted purely biological studies of native peoples, Catlin and Schoolcraft supplemented their anthropological observations with aesthetic representations of native culture. Their aesthetic and anthropological studies invoke sympathy for the plight of the native by emphasizing the primitive beauty of native culture. While Mielke demonstrates how Catlin's and Schoolcraft's studies employ sympathetic discourse, her argument would be strengthened by an examination of antebellum travel writing. Herman Melville's *Typee* (1846), for instance, incorporates ethnographic observation of native peoples in order to portray natives in a sympathetic manner.

Mielke asserts that antebellum ethnographers and sentimental novelists invoked the discourse of feeling to protest continued tribal acculturation and Indian removal. Traditional interpretations of the "moving encounter" view these sympathetic portrayals of natives as supporting acculturation and Indian removal. Mielke's scholarship refutes these views by demonstrating how native-white cultural exchange was vital to native survival and tribal preservation. Mielke thus offers a new perspective on the sympathetic encounter, challenging the reader to examine nineteenth-century Native American literature in a new light.

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