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“Past and Post: Metafiction in Catherine Sedgwick’s *Hope Leslie*”

Historiographic metafiction as characterized by Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* is a quintessentially postmodern genre. My paper, however, suggests that the rhetorical and conceptual moves associated with the genre can also be found in earlier, pre-postmodernist texts. Specifically, I argue that Catherine Sedgwick’s 1827 novel *Hope Leslie*, a text that reflects America’s then-new postcolonial status, explores the connection between history and fiction and challenges the idea that a “truth” about history can be represented (cf. Insko). Through its depiction of the ways in which Native Americans influence and appropriate “American” identity, the novel examines how the country’s newfound independence comes with questions about what constitutes a “true” American identity. Indeed, for Native Americans and women, for example, independence also created questions about why they could not participate in representative government. Hence my analysis focuses on the ways in which Sedgwick’s text, rooted in the cultural conditions of its time, suggests that Native Americans have never been heard, and that our only access to them is filtered through histories, which are inevitably biased.

This paper considers Sedgwick’s representation of the Native American Magawisca, drawing on Gayatri Spivak’s argument that the subaltern cannot, in fact, speak. Sedgwick acknowledges in the preface to the novel that colonial history is biased and that, if they could, Native American “historians or poets” (my emphasis) would tell a different story. Because they cannot speak, others have spoken for them, and continue to do so in *Hope Leslie*, which continually refers to the potential for unreliable translation and the biases of the recorders of history. As these concerns of Sedgwick’s text illustrate, we can never have direct access to a historical real, only alternate versions of history and, in Spivak’s words “the faint whisper of what could not be said” (NATC 2196). Synthesizing Spivak’s postcolonial theory and Hutcheon’s account of postmodernism, my paper examines how early American authors like Sedgwick anticipate postmodern questioning of the boundary between fiction and history.