

# Pocahontass Daughters: Gender and Ethnicity in American Culture



When Pocahontas, Americas first ethnic heroine, laid her head over John Smiths to save him from her father, she also unknowingly lay down certain themes that would permeate Americas female ethnic literary tradition and culture from that moment on. Using the figure of Pocahontas as a representative symbol or story in the American cultural imagination, this is the first study to examine American womens fiction--from *Our Nig* by Mrs. H.E.W. Wilson, the first novel by a black woman, to the writings of Anzia Yeziarska, Gertrude Stein, and Toni Morrison--in terms of gender and ethnicity, terms that Dearborn finds essential to our understanding of American culture.

Pocahontas left no authentic written record of herself, a fact that Dearborn uses to launch her wide-ranging discussion of the problems of authenticity, authority, and genre that plague the ethnic female literary tradition. She then goes on to consider the various elements of the Pocahontas story, such as generational conflict, renunciation of ones ethnic origins, and intermarriage, that resurface in American womens fiction as dominant ethnic themes in American culture. Finally, Dearborn suggests that American women writers, in taking ethnicity as an integral part of the American identity, can perhaps best portray what it has meant to be a woman and an outsider in American culture.

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