

A NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF MRS MARY JEMISON:
RHETORICAL DRAG AND THE DEFIANCE OF HEGEMONIC
CULTURAL MODELS

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In 1758, Mary Jemison was captured by a party of Indians and adopted by two Seneca sisters. She progressively accommodated herself to Indian life, married two Indian warriors and bore them several children. Sixty-five years after her abduction, the woman agreed to tell James E. Seaver the story of her life. My goal is to use Lorraine Carroll's *rhetorical drag* as a hermeneutic to analyze authorial impersonation in *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs Mary Jemison*, to underline the failure of the white male impersonator to marginalize the speaking voice of the narrative and to highlight the capacity of the *I* object/subject to destabilize canonical readings of the text and to offer a revisionist history of cross-cultural encounters. Thus, it is my intention to present this account as an instrument of defiance of hegemonic cultural models and as an example of how intercultural manifestations negotiate and hybridise fixed paradigms.

Keywords: Mary Jemison/Dehgewanus; rhetorical drag; captivity narratives; Indian autobiographies

RELATO DE LA VIDA DE MARY JEMISON: LA MÁSCARA RETÓRICA Y EL
DESAFÍO DE LOS MODELOS CULTURALES HEGEMÓNICOS

En 1758, Mary Jemison fue capturada por un grupo de indios y adoptada por dos hermanas Seneca. Poco a poco, Mary se fue adaptando a la vida india y acabó casándose con dos guerreros indios con los que tuvo varios hijos. Sesenta y cinco años después de su secuestro, la mujer accedió a contarle a James E. Seaver la historia de su vida. Mis objetivos son: analizar el relato de la vida de la señora Mary Jemison mediante el concepto de máscara retórica acuñado por Lorraine Carroll; destacar el fracaso del imitador hombre y blanco para marginalizar la voz narrativa; y subrayar la capacidad del yo objeto/sujeto para desestabilizar lecturas canónicas del texto y ofrecer una historia revisionista de los encuentros interculturales. Es mi intención presentar este relato como un desafío a los modelos culturales hegemónicos y como ejemplo de cómo las manifestaciones interculturales negocian y combinan paradigmas establecidos.

Palabras clave: Mary Jemison/Dehgewanus; máscara retórica; relatos de cautiverio; autobiografías indias

them several children. In accordance with an attitude commonly held by many white captives, Dickewamis repeatedly refused repatriation³ and sixty-five years after her process of cultural assimilation had started, the then eighty-year-old Seneca woman agreed to tell a local doctor, James Everett Seaver the story of her life. Thus, in November 1823, attired with Indian clothes “not as matter of necessity, but from choice” (1998: 128) and accompanied by Thomas Clute, whom she considered her protector, Dehgewanus walked four miles from her home to meet her interviewer.⁴ For three days, the man was “busily occupied in taking a sketch of her narrative as she recited it” (1998: 127) and a year later, in 1824, he published *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs Mary Jemison*.⁵ The book’s elaborate textual apparatus consists of a preface and an introduction written by the male editor, the woman’s first-person narrative account of her life as told to Seaver, and an appendix which contains historical and ethnographical information about Iroquois and Seneca life. Whereas the (seeming) voice of the woman (subject) narrating her own captivity experience (object) provides the reader with the

³ Ebersole quotes several examples which are testimony to this situation in frontier territories. In 1747, Cadwallader Colden, the surveyor-general and a member of the King’s Council of New York, described the circumstances that surrounded attempts to return captives to *civilization* in the following terms: “No arguments, no Intreaties, nor Tears of their Friends and Relations, could persuade many of them to leave their new Indian Friends and Acquaintance; several of them that were by the Caressings of their Relations persuaded to come Home, in a little Time grew tired of our Manner of Living, and ran away again to the Indians, and ended their Days with them”. The situation was much the same in 1753 when Benjamin Franklin contrasted the different behaviours observed by Indian and by whites when being restored to their respective peoples: “When an Indian Child has been brought up among us, taught our language and habituated to our Customs, yet if he goes to see his relations and makes one Indian Ramble with them, there is no persuading him ever to return. When white persons of either sex have been taken prisoners young by the Indians, and lived a while among them, tho’ ransomed by their Friends, and treated with all imaginable tenderness to prevail with them to stay among the English, yet in a short Time they become disgusted with our manner of life, and the care and pains that are necessary to support it, and take the first good Opportunity of escaping again into the Woods, from whence there is no reclaiming them”. This explains Crèvecoeur’s reflections about the superiority of the Indian life in *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782): “[Life among the Indians] cannot be, therefore, so bad as we generally conceive it to be; there must be in the Indians’ social bond something singularly captivating, and far superior to anything to be boasted of among us; for thousands of Europeans are Indians, as we have no examples of even one of those Aborigines having from choice become Europeans!” (Ebersole 1995: 191-92).

⁴ From this point onwards I will use the name *Dehgewanus* to refer to the Native woman who lived for sixty-years among the Seneca and *Mary Jemison* to refer to the woman of European ancestry.

⁵ *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs Mary Jemison, Who was taken by the Indians, in the year 1755 when only about twelve years of age, and has continued to reside among them to the present time. CONTAINING An Account of the Murder of her Father and his Family; her sufferings; her marriage to two Indians; her troubles with her Children; barbarities of the Indians in the French and Revolutionary Wars; the life of her last Husband, &c.; and many Historical Facts never before published. Carefully taken from her own words.*

illusion of an emotional, authentic and direct account of events, Seaver's authoritative figure enhances the ethical dimension of the text by bringing to it the prerogatives traditionally associated with socially dominant masculine figures.

A Narrative of the Life of Mrs Mary Jemison has been traditionally classified either as a captivity narrative (see Vanderbeets 1972; Kolodny 1984, Derounian-Stodola and Levernier 1993; Namias 1993; Castiglia 1996; Strong 1999) or as an Indian autobiography (see Walsh 1992; Oakes 1995; Sayre 1999; Kilcup 2000; Burnham 2003; Buss 2008).⁶ However, the story of the white woman who 'went Native' and never returned to *civilization* can also be revisioned as a rhetorical ruse of the patriarchal hierarchy to circulate a biased perception of American national history. During the 19th century, white Americans looked back to their past in an attempt to find the defining traits of a national identity, since, as Ernst Renan stated in his legendary 1882 conference, a nation's heroic past could unify much more than race or language (Brown 2004: 30). For a long time the stories of helpless white women victimized by ruthless Indian warriors were used to justify the extermination of Native populations and to confine women to the domestic realm (Castiglia 1996: 37). Through the appropriation of these women's voices and experiences, the patriarchal and imperialistic stratum circulated a historiographical project based on a hegemonic cultural model that relied on the superiority of the white race and the male gender.

Lorraine Carroll's *Rhetorical Drag. Gender Impersonation, Captivity and the Writing of History* offers new grounds for the re-examination of *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs Mary Jemison* as an example of "authorial gender impersonation, an act of imposture that begins with the male writer assuming the female captive's voice" (2007: 1). In her introduction, Carroll invites us to use the expression *rhetorical drag* to reflect upon "the practices of authorial impersonation and its cultural effects" (2007: 2) in the popular genre of women captivity narratives. With this phrase she refers to "the performance of female-gendered subjectivities by men to 'sell' a particular historical view" (2007: 185). In her words, "rhetorical drag *appropriates* the body and voice of the captive woman and *explains* how her experience should be understood with the historical vision of the impersonator" (2007: 5). As Carroll argues "through rhetorical drag they could write history as male authorities and live that history as the women who experienced it ... Rhetorical drag provided ... a powerful doubled position of subject and object, the vantage from which to inhabit gender as writing male and speaking female, the means to decide 'what counts as an object' and to form that object as well" (2007: 188).

⁶ In his *For Those who Come After: A Study of Native American Autobiography*, Arnold Krupat distinguishes between autobiographies by Indians and Indian autobiographies. Whereas the former would include autobiographies by *civilized* or christianized Indians and traditional Native American literature in textual forms among other manifestations, the latter would involve "[the] collaborative efforts, jointly produced by some white who translates, transcribes, compiles, edits, interprets, polishes, and ultimately determines the form of the text in writing, and by an Indian who is its subject and whose life becomes the content of the 'autobiography' whose title may bear his name" (1985: 30).

After analyzing the narratives of Hannah Swarton, Hannah Dustan, Elizabeth Hanson, Mrs Johnson and Mrs Jemima Howe through the lenses of *rhetorical drag*, Carroll refers to Mary Jemison's and Olive Oatman's accounts as "good candidates for elaborating and extending critical methods for the interpretation of instances of rhetorical drag because they provide 'speaking' women whose voices readily reveal the artifice of their rhetorical forms" (2007: 191). Whereas the life of Mary Jemison constitutes "the contribution of the nominal subject of the autobiographical book", Seaver is sanctioned as the "culture-bearer who contributes with [the text's] artifactuality, grammar and writing" (Krupat 1985: 43). Hence, my goal is to use Carroll's *rhetorical drag* as a hermeneutic to analyze authorial impersonation in *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs Mary Jemison*, to underline the failure of the white male impersonator to marginalize the speaking voice of the narrative on the basis of gender and ethnicity and to highlight the capacity of the *I* object/subject to subvert and destabilize canonical readings of the text and to offer a revisionist history of cross-cultural encounters. Thus, it is my intention to present this account as an instrument of defiance of hegemonic cultural models and as an example of how intercultural manifestations negotiate and hybridise fixed paradigms.

2. "Rhetorical drag": gender impersonation in Jemison's narrative.

As Carroll has persuasively argued, gender imposture, or rhetorical drag, was initially affected to control readers' interpretations of U. S. history (2007: 6). By using the discourses of domesticity and sentiment and standardized models of *femaleness*, Seaver constructs a woman's first person voice that authenticates the experience narrated, thus imputing to the text "the power of the female captives' empirical knowledge of both the events of captivity and the cultural practices of the people who captured her" (2007: 7).

As much as in the initial paragraphs of the preface Seaver dwells on the moral dimensions of the story, the final lines of the foreword draw attention to the veritable intentions of his project, those being "to increase our love of liberty; to enlarge our views of the blessings that are derived from our liberal institutions" (Seaver 1998: 124). An exemplary instance of his commitment to this historiographical project is to be found in the following declaration: "Many gentlemen of respectability, felt anxious that her narrative might be laid before the public, with a view not only to perpetuate the remembrance of the atrocities of the savages in former times, *but to preserve some historical facts*" (1998: 126; my italics).

According to June Namias, the editor of the narrative "wished to frame the past to show the march of progress – of rising Anglo-American dominance, domesticity, industrial expansion, and Christian piety over a savage but receding Indian presence" (1993: 159). It is for this reason that in the initial pages of his introduction to the narrative, Seaver, as a *self-conscious editor*⁷ already articulated the *polarized* ideological

⁷ Brumble distinguishes between *absent editors*, who pretend that the narrative is the Native informant's and *self-conscious editors* who acknowledge their own shaping of the story but try to preserve the Native's perspective and narrative style (Wong 2005: 133).

and political agenda privileged by the white patriarchal sphere that was going to inform the text and that seemingly distinguished between the idyllic Arcadia of civilized white settlers (to whom he curiously refers as *Native Americans* [Seaver 1998: 125]) and the untamed wilderness of savage Indian warriors:

The Peace of 1783, and the consequent cessation of *Indian hostilities and barbarities*, returned to their friends those prisoners, who had escaped *the tomahawk, the gauntlet and the savage fire*, after their having spent many years in captivity, and *restored harmony to society*. The stories of *Indian cruelties* which were common in the new settlements, and were *calamitous realities* previous to that propitious event; slumbered in the minds that had been constantly agitated by them, and were only roused occasionally, to become the *fearful topic* of the fireside. (1998: 125; my italics)

Thus, in order to sustain the prefatory aims and to present the narrative as history – the *history* of Dehgewanus/Jemison – from the initial lines of the first chapter, the captive woman becomes the “historical informant” (Carroll 2007: 7) but only through authorial impersonation. With the aim of authenticating the woman’s voice, Seaver adopts the language of melodrama which characterized contemporary sentimental fiction: “But alas! how transitory are all human affairs! how brittle the invisible thread on which all earthly comforts are suspended! Peace in a moment can take an immeasurable flight; health can lose its rosy cheeks; and life will vanish like a vapour at the appearance of the sun! In one fatal day our prospects were all blasted; and death, by cruel hands, inflicted upon almost the whole of the family” (Seaver 1998: 133).

Emotionally charged passages such as this fragment plague the story. Moreover, textual markers such as apostrophes, exclamations and certain types of tropes are employed to highlight female sensibilities and to extend “[the] representation of expressive female discourse” (Carroll 2007: 180). Standardized models of *femaleness* and the typical discourse of victimhood that characterizes most women captivity narratives tinge significant passages of the narrative:

It is impossible for any one to form a correct idea of what my feelings were at the sight of those savages, whom I supposed had murdered my parents and brothers, sister, and friends, and left them in the swamp to be devoured by wild beasts! But what could I do? A poor little defenceless girl; without the power or means of escaping; without a home to go to, even if I could be liberated; without a knowledge of the direction or distance to my former place of residence; and without a living friend to whom to fly for protection, I felt a kind of horror, anxiety, and dread, that, to me, seemed insupportable. (Seaver 1998: 137)

Seaver’s impersonation of the female voice in the text becomes then a rhetorical gambit to circulate his own interpretation of historical events and enhance the pervasive power of a dominant ideology. As Carroll reminds us in the closing lines of her epilogue to *Rhetorical Drag*, by examining the textual formation of captivity narratives, “we gain critical insights into the ways people used gender formations to control and contain the meanings of a ‘speaking’ subject. An impersonated female captive represents not only an object of history but also an advertisement for a particular version of what her impersonator imagines history to be” (2007: 194).

3. Mary Jemison and the defiance of hegemonic cultural models

Nevertheless, and although the initial chapters of the narrative attest to the rigid binary hierarchies – man/woman, public space/private realm, white/Indian, civilized/uncivilized – that structure Seaver’s ideological discourse, soon we commence to suspect a dissonant voice struggling to escape control, a voice that contemporary scholars find “resistant” or “counterhegemonic” in the narratives (Carroll 2007: 189), and that clearly departs from Seaver’s political rhetoric. The disjuncture between both discourses is first seen in the manipulation of the traditional rhetoric of captivity narratives:

Frequently, I dream of those happy days: but, alas, they are gone: they have left me to be carried through a long life, dependent for the little pleasures of nearly seventy years, upon the tender mercies of the Indians! In the spring of 1752, and through the succeeding seasons, the stories of Indian barbarities inflicted upon the whites in those days, frequently excited in my parents the most serious alarm for our safety.

The next year, the storm gathered faster; many murders were committed; and many captives were exposed to meet death in its most frightful form, by having their bodies stuck full of pine splinters, which were immediately set on fire, while their tormentors, exulting in their distress, would rejoice at their agony! (Seaver 1998: 132)

Although Jemison’s dissertation is originally reminiscent of Mary Rowlandson’s or Elizabeth Hanson’s bigoted speeches, we soon learn that, contrarily to what happened in those cases, expressions such as *the tender mercies of the Indians* are devoid of ironic tinges and are to be interpreted literally in the discourse of the *Seneca woman*.

There is a further vital point that evinces the clashing of voices here and this is the depiction of female fortitude and resilience versus male weakness and vulnerability as when Jemison speaks of both her parents’ attitude towards their captivity:

Mother, from the time we were taken, had manifested a great degree of fortitude, and encouraged us to support our troubles without complaining; and by her conversation seemed to make the distance and time shorter, and the way more smooth. But father lost all his ambition in the beginning of our trouble, and continued apparently lost to every care – absorbed in melancholy. Here, as before, she insisted on the necessity of our eating; and we obeyed her, but it was done with heavy hearts. (1998: 136)

Not only that but also the lack of homogeneity in time measurement is testimony to the dissenting voices in the text. Formulae such as “I had a child at the time that the kernels of corn first appeared on the cob” (1998: 147) or “Thomas ... was a few moons over fifty-two years old” (1998: 183) coexist with more conventional forms of measuring time i. e.: “In the month of April, or first of May, 1817” (1998: 199).

The tensions between both voices are ultimately manifest near the conclusion when we listen to the subject in the text – supposedly Mary- speaking of a “reduction from a *civilized* to a *savage* state” (1998: 207; my italics). In addition to this, echoes of Seaver’s initial discourse much in consonance with the Puritan tradition of captivity narratives can be heard in the last chapter: “It is the recollection of what we once were, of the friends, the home, and the pleasures that we have left or lost; the anticipation of misery, the appearance of wretchedness, the anxiety for freedom, the hope of release, the

devising of means of escaping, and the vigilance with which we watch our keepers, that constitute the nauseous dregs of the bitter cup of slavery” (1998: 207).

The clashing of voices at this stage in the narrative is so evident even for Seaver himself that when the narrating voice – i.e. Mary’s – refers to how the use of alcohol among the Indians “threatens the extinction of our people” (1998: 208), the speaking subject considers necessary to clarify who those people are and inserts their identity (the Indians) in a parenthetical aside.

Under the oppressive shadow of a patriarchal society the story of this valiant woman attests to challenges unique to her epoch. Following the example of Mary Rowlandson in the seventeenth century and foretelling the means later used by Native storytellers, Jemison’s/Dehgewanus’s story manages to challenge orthodox readings of the text and to offer a revisionist history of cross-cultural encounters since from the very beginning and, contrarily to the slanted historiographical approach Seaver attempts to enact, the female object/subject appears as a woman unwilling “to aggravate the vices of the Indians”, someone who “seemed to take pride in extolling their virtues”, a woman with “a kind of family pride [that] inclined her to withhold whatever would blot the character of her descendants” (1998: 129). In fact, Dehgewanus’s affiliation with the Indian race and her empowerment of Native mores lead us to consider this text as the first female Indian autobiography. Actually, whether this narrative is considered as an example of a captivity narrative or as an Indian autobiography depends on the categorization of the object/subject of the story either as a white woman captured by the *natural inhabitants* of the new territories or as a Native American woman, that is, on the reconsideration of the object/subject’s identity.⁸

As historical and ethnographic documents attest, white integration into Indian tribes was not hard to achieve since “Indians did not typically reject persons because of the color of their skin but focused rather on the learnable and acquirable ethnic qualities such as ‘language, culturally appropriate behaviour, social affiliation, and loyalty’” (Dyar 2003: 823).⁹ In his *Injun Joe’s Ghost*, Brown conjures up 20th c.

⁸ Although the captivity narrative was the formal model that initially patterned Jemison’s story, a detailed examination of the text unveils its resistance to being classified into this genre and underscores its similarities with the tradition of the Indian autobiography. As Sayre asserts: “In the nineteenth-century US virtually any story of a white person who had lived with Indian tribes and returned was touted as a captivity narrative, for it was a kind of social betrayal to admit that these individuals preferred Indian life ... The captivity narrative genre and its criticism have been slow to recognize that most captives were adopted into tribes and families and that native kinship, unlike Euro-American custom, regarded such adoptees as real kin and did not define identity phylogenetically” (1999: 486).

⁹ Reports of the positive treatment of captives taken to replace family members abound in the literary tradition and in Jemison’s text in particular. Thus, the woman describes her adoption ceremony in the following terms: “They first undressed me and threw my rags into the river; then washed me clean and dressed me in the new suit they had just brought, in complete Indian style; and then led me home and seated me in the center of their wigwam” (Seaver 1998: 142). Followingly, the women of the tribe verbalize their feeling regarding Mary: “His spirit [the dead warrior’ Jemison is to replace] has seen our distress, and sent us a helper whom with pleasure we greet. Dickewamis has come: then let us receive her with joy! She is handsome and pleasant! Oh!

anthropologists' and writers' redefinition of the *Indian* as "a cultural rather than a biological entity" and elaborates on its immediate effects on the definition of *hybridity*, "previously understood as a measurable combination of blood and bone, to encompass the blending of more immensurable qualities like language, belief, and education" (2004: 11). Therefore, if we dissociate race from biology,¹⁰ *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs Mary Jemison* can be also understood as *A Narrative of the Life of Dehgewanus*, the fully-fledged Seneca woman who managed to circulate a long history of white prejudices and Euro-American encroachment. Occupying a liminal position between two worlds and moving between fixed identities, Dehgewanus, this "culturally hybrid female informant" (Burnham 2003: 141), made use of the literary conventions available to Euro-American women at the time to orchestrate an ingenious design which allowed her to subvert not only gender- but also race-established hierarchies. As Tawil states, she is the emblem of "accommodation between cultures" (2006: 66), benefiting from the advantages offered by each of them. On the one hand, she is the *white woman* moving from cultural liminality into integration in the indigenous world attracted by the powers upheld by Seneca women.¹¹ On the other hand, she is also the *Indian woman* who became naturalized and was offered land allotment whereas her family and friends were forced to live in reservations as part of the Westward expansion.

Hence, the editor's presentation of the subject of his composition as a woman who was illiterate in English, dressed after the Indian fashion, familiar with indigenous habits and beliefs, whose "bosom companion" was "an ancient Indian warrior" and whose "children and associates were all Indians" (Seaver 1998: 126) clearly evinces her alignment with the descriptive labels noted above and underscores her Indianness. As June Namias explains, "work, a system of mutual obligations, family relationships, white prejudice, and her experiences with land bound her [Mary] to the Seneca community, defining her as an Indian woman [Dehgewanus]" (1993: 186). Therefore, if we circumvent the permanence of racial categories (Buss 2008: 12) and consider race as "a social construct with no natural or biological quality" (Pérez Torres 2005: 373), we could seemingly reformulate the ethnic identity of the subject of the discourse and definitely consider Dehgewanus's account as the first Indian autobiography much in the tradition of Black Hawk's, Black Elk's or even Sarah Winnemucca's¹² (Brown 2004: 74),

She is our sister, and gladly we welcome her here. In the place of our brother she stands in our tribe. With care we will guard her from trouble; and may she be happy till her spirit shall leave us" (1998: 143).

¹⁰ This approach also articulates Sayre's (1999) and Buss's (2008) respective considerations of John Tanner and Frances Slocum/Maconaquah (Young Bear) as Native Americans.

¹¹ "These included the 'power of life and death over prisoners of war'; the designation of male members to sit in the councils of war to the point of control over a declaration of war; the power to unseat such representatives; the selection of leaders of spiritual life, many of whom were women; the passing of property and titles through the female line; the arrangement of marriages; and the authority over the extended and extensive household, the longhouse" (Namias 1993: 191).

¹² It is interesting to see how Sarah Winnemucca recalls in her *Life Among the Piutes, Their Wrongs and Claims* (1883) the terror she felt the first time she saw whites: "My aunt overtook us and said to my mother: 'Let us bury our girls, or we shall all be killed and eaten up'. So they went

in clear response to the new meanings of hybridity created by Native American writers in the 21st c.¹³ As Mary Jemison affirms, “just as we feel, we are” (Seaver 1998: 207). It is surely no accident that Karen L. Killcup already included, in her 2000 anthology of *Native American Women’s Writings*, selections from Jemison’s text and that Michael Burnham vindicated the inclusion of the story within the tradition of Indian *women’s* writings such as Mourning Dove’s and Pretty Shield’s (2000: 152), a view that had previously been bolstered by Karen Oakes (1995) when she employed Gretchen Bataille and Kathleen Sand’s set of criteria for Native American women’s autobiography to fathom Jemison’s account as such. For her, “Mary Jemison’s narrative threads across and connects such qualities of Native American women’s autobiography as emphasis on event over emotion, attention to the sacredness of language, emphasis on community, and concern with the landscape” (1995: 45).

As a result, although Carroll only speaks of the problem of how to use the experiences of conventionally marginalized persons – marginalized by their gender – as the problem that lies at the heart of rhetorical drag, Jemison’s/Dehgewanus’ narrative provides “different lenses for the understanding” not only of “gender formation” (Carroll 2007: 191) but also of race formation. The Indian female subject of Seaver’s text transforms the indigenous figure into something “worthy of textualization” (Krupat 1985: 5) and her literary account into a righteous attempt to complete and correct unsympathetic readings of Indian history and Native cultural practices. Thus, Dehgewanus manages to subvert and challenge the achievements of Seaver’s gender impersonation and finally control the presentation of the empirical, natural, and historical ‘facts’ of her life. To such an end, firstly, she purposely selects incidents and individuals to show an Edenic portrait of woman’s life in the wilderness and to honour and exalt the values and beliefs of the indigenous society. As a woman who knew how “to take [her] children and look out for [her]self” (Seaver 1998: 166), she stands for the emblem of female agency in a community whose women’s domestic tasks – “nursing the children, and doing light work around the house” (1998: 144) – are “not harder than [those] of white women” but also “not half as numerous, nor as great” (1998: 149).

Secondly, as a woman who, after having lived with the Indians “four summers and four winters” asserts that “with them was [her] home; [her] family was there, and there [she] had many friends to whom [she] was warmly attached” (1998: 148), she conspicuously epitomizes the idea of cultural assimilation. So much so that after the Revolution she turned down another opportunity to return to civilization using the following argumentation: “I had got a large family of Indian children, that I must take with me; and that if I should be so fortunate as to find my relatives, they would despise them, if not myself; and treat them as enemies; or, at least as a degree of cold indifference, which I thought I could not endure” (1998: 178). Degehwanus’s remark

to work and buried us, and told us if we heard any noise not to cry out, for if we did they would surely kill us and eat us” (Snodgrass 1997: 375).

¹³ These new meanings “abandon both biology and culture as signifiers of racial identity in favour of the individual will: a choice to define oneself as Indian according to one’s own terms, reflecting the contemporary sense of Native self-determination and the refusal of substitute identities ... mandated by the dominant culture” (Brown 2004: 221).

clearly evinced the discourse of scientific racism that dominated American thought at this time (Krupat 2008: 105) according to which “a Euro American woman could become a Seneca, but a Seneca woman, even a physically *white* Seneca woman, could never ‘become’ European American. Nor, for that matter, could her ‘Indian’ children” (Oakes 1995: 50). As Laural Mielke argues, with these words Jemison emphasized that “unlike the Seneca, Euro-Americans allow race to overwhelm family ties” (2008: 80).

This rendering of Dehgewanus’s paradisiacal life among the Indians belies the values Seaver seeks to endorse the text with since it offers the white woman “physical, matrimonial, and economic space” and consequently enables her “to alter [her] racial, national, and gender identities” (Castiglia 1996: 36, 37):

No people can live more happy that the Indians did in times of peace, before the introduction of spirituous liquors among them. Their lives were a continual round of pleasures. Their wants were few, and easily satisfied; and their cares were only for to-day; the bounds of their calculations for future comfort not extending to the incalculable uncertainties of to-morrow. If peace ever dwelt with men, it was in former times in the recesses from war, amongst what are now termed barbarians. The moral character of the Indians was (if I may be allowed the expression) uncontaminated. Their fidelity was perfect, and became proverbial; they were strictly honest; they despise deception and falsehood; and chastity was held in high veneration, and a violation of it was considered sacrilege. (Seaver 1998: 160)

Finally, Dehgewanus’s most daring challenge consists of praising the Indian character and of defining the race as “strictly honest ... temperate in their desires, moderate in their passions, and candid and honorable in the expression of their sentiments” (1998: 160). Not only that; she also made the whites responsible for some of the indigenous moral flaws and wrongful deeds: “The use of ardent spirits amongst the Indians and the attempts which have been made to civilize and christianize them by the white people, has constantly made them worse and worse; increased their vices and robbed them of many of their virtues; and will ultimately produce their extermination” (1998: 149-50). For Dehgewanus the hideous abuses committed by *civilized* people in their Western expansion totally justified the Indians’ hostilities and barbarities perpetrated against frontier settlements since “it is a fact that they are naturally kind, tender and peaceable towards their friends, and strictly honest; and that those cruelties have been practised, only upon their enemies, *according to their idea of justice*” (1998: 150, my italics).

4. Conclusion.

Hence it is no wonder that set in times of social and political upheaval, the story of the woman who undertook such a “cultural metamorphosis” (Sayre 1999: 88) captivated a wide popular audience and underwent twenty-three editions ranging from 32 to 483 pages. As Carroll states, “a key concern of *Rhetorical Drag* is the dialogue, which articulates the captive woman’s voice with the authoritative and interpretive apparatus of introductions and annotations” (2007: 10). This explains the “machinery of cultural appropriation” (Wickstrom 2005: 177) that has been working for years on

this narrative. Later editions slightly modified the title of the first one and added a series of data and documents intended to soften its revolutionary message.

The 1842 edition was titled *Deh-he-wa-mis; Or, A Narrative of the Life of Mary Jemison: Otherwise Called the White Woman* and was revised and extended with several episodes, among them a conversion episode. The account of her death-bed spiritual reformation helped place the story in the tradition of eighteenth and nineteenth century accounts of conversion to Christianity by Indians such as Samson Occom's sermon (1768), William Apes's *Son of the Forest* (1829) or George Copway's *Life, History, and Travels of Kah-ge-ga-gah-bowh* (1847). However, in spite of the editor's attempts to testify her return to civilization and to Christianity, the truth is that Dehgewanus died on the Buffalo Creek Reservation in 1833. The 1856 edition included geographical and explanatory notes and a Publisher's note, which did not appear in the first edition and which emphasized the passivity of the acculturated *object*:

it was her sad destiny to become lost to the race from which she sprung, and affiliated with the one she had most reason to abhor. Her transformation, the reverse of the order of nature, was perfected by her becoming the wife of an Indian, and the mother of Indian children. As if in punishment of this unnatural alliance ... she was forced to fulfil her destiny by dying as she had lived, a Seneca woman (7-8).

Fascinated with Indian life and particularly with the figure of 'The White Woman of the Genessee', in 1877, ironworks tycoon William Pryor Letchworth complemented the new edition of the narrative with illustrations showing samples of Indian attire and adornment. Not only that, he commissioned Henry K. Bush-Brown with a bronze sculpture that memorializes Mary Jemison and which can be found in Letchworth State Park, near New York.

As Wickstrom stated, for decades "the true nature of her [Jemison's] relationships with Indian men, as well as her power as a person, were eclipsed by the words of influential white men helping to shape the norms of a burgeoning imperial civilization" (2005: 178). Only by submitting to Euro-American discursive forms, only by accepting the conventional presence of a *white male* editor/author who impersonated her to legitimize her revolutionary message, could Mary/Dehgewanus present her own history as a woman and as an Indian and definitely circulate her own voice as a *female Native subject*. Thus, this narrative becomes an example of how marginalized figures – both in terms of race and gender – apparently abiding by the established laws of the hegemonic white patriarchal system actually challenge and subvert it, creating new forms of self-expression and opposition. By avoiding victimry and emphasizing "the ongoing agency and activity of the Native" (Krupat 2008: 103), Dehgewanus becomes an example of native *survivance* (Vizenor and Lee 1999: 93) and her story an example of an active presence, one that can "undermine the literature of dominance" (Vizenor 1994: 12).

Nowadays, Dehgewanus/Mary Jemison is much more than simply a figure of history. In 2008, celebrations around the United States marked the 250th anniversary of Mary Jemison's abduction. In 2009 visitors to Letchworth State Park in New York continued retracing her steps on the Mary Jemison Trail. Her story still fascinates generations of American readers. However, modern retellings of the story – i. e. Lois Lenski's *Indian Captive. The Story of Mary Jemison* (1941), Rayna M. Gangi's *Mary*

Jemison. *White Woman of the Seneca* (1996), Deborah Larsen's *The White* (2002) and Susan Bivin Aller's *Living with the Senecas. A Story about Mary Jemison* (2007) – still emphasize its reading as a captivity narrative and highlight the whiteness of the protagonist. In her 2007 book *The Terror Dream*, Susan Faludi (2008) interprets the reaction to the 9/11 attacks as a re-enactment of America's traditional myth of the avenging rescuer and the damsel in distress. Thus, as the acculturated woman's living presence in American land and culture attests, Americans are still coming to terms with their past, revising myths from yonder. Nevertheless, her presence as Mary Jemison rather than as Dehgewanus reveals that readers of all ages have resisted Dehgewanus's reading as an *Indian* woman and have decided on Jemison's reading as a *white* woman. This is just another example of how we continuously miss the opportunity of using the past to reverse negative modes of the present.

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