

## CONTEMPORARY MYTH CONSTRUCTION IN THE “YELLOW WOMAN”

Marcia Tiemy Morita Kawamoto

*Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina*

**RESUMO:** A reconstrução da identidade indígena, juntamente com outras minorias étnicas, entra em conflito com teorias deconstrutivistas do pós-estruturalismo. A famosa frase de Derrida “Não há nada além do texto” (1976, p. 158) ilustra a noção de que tudo pode ser visto como uma narrativa. Em vista disso, aspectos importantes para a escrita do nativo americano como o mito e a identidade tornam-se apenas construções, o que enfraquece a reivindicação por uma política indígena. O conto de Leslie Silko “YellowWoman” é capaz de corroborar com um ponto de vista deconstrutivista quando reconstrói uma lenda tradicional no presente; ao mesmo tempo em que também afirma a identidade do nativo americano, o que reforça a necessidade de reconstruir e reposicionar a representação do indígena como pertencente a uma história de tradições.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Pós-estruturalismo, Identidade Indígena, Leslie MarmonSilko’s “YellowWoman”

**ABSTRACT:** Native American identity reconstruction, along with other ethnic and minority groups, conflicts with poststructuralist theories of deconstructionism. Derrida’s famous quote “There is nothing beyond the text” (1976, p. 158) illustrates the notion of how everything can be analyzed as a narrative. As a consequence, important issues to Native American writing such as myth and identity become only constructions, which weakens their claim for Native American politics. Leslie Silko’s short story “Yellow Woman” manages to agree with a deconstructionism point of view when it reconstructs a traditional folktale in the present; at the same time, it also affirms a Native American identity, which reinforces the need to reconstruct and reposition an indigenous representation as belonging to a history of traditions.

**KEYWORDS:** Poststructuralism; Native American Identity; Leslie Marmon Silko’s “Yellow Woman”

### 1. Introduction

Post-theories, such as postmodernism and poststructuralism, have posed some challenging issues to cultural and ethnical discussion. ArifDirlik explains how some theorists have criticized that in their search for an identity, Native American writing has constructed an essentialist view in their narratives, an ahistorical account of their identities, opposing a deconstructionist perspective. Through a different point of view, Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko criticizes Louise Erdrich’s *The Beet Queen*

for being too postmodern, due to its self-referential language, which according to the former reflects “the isolation and alienation of the individual who shares nothing in common with other human beings but language and its hygienic grammatical mechanisms” (1986, p. 179). This essay presents a brief discussion in this apparently contradiction between a deconstructivist history and the role of the minorities or ethnic groups, understanding that they are not necessarily opposing aspects. Furthermore, the discussion also positions the issue of ethnic identity in relation to a postmodern context.

Dirlik does not distinguish poststructuralism, postmodernism and even postcolonialism; this essay shall not assume these terms as equivalents, although it understands that some of their ideas are related. The brief explanation about each of these schools shall not encompass the whole discussion concerning each of them, nor shall it exhaust their convoluted relation, but I expect it to be satisfactory to this particular aspect.

Catherine Belsey explains poststructuralist, or post-Saussurean theory as she refers to it, as a theoretical approach. According to her, such theoretical perspective taught that our concept of realism is not *natural*, but rather *constructed*. Within this theoretical understanding, the process of doing something gains as much meaning as the final product, and so does the context of production and dissemination. The individual is no longer the only source of knowledge or truth (BELSEY 2002, p. 3); the truth actually becomes a myth, losing its “original” meaning. As a consequence, to claim for an indigenous identity might be a way to search for an original and mythic truth, which might be a fallacy. Terms like natural, essential, or myth are avoided, because they recall an essentialist position, in which things would simply be or exist in a static way. A poststructural view understands that everything was constructed through a historical

process that assimilated things as natural, but they are actually part of complex social and historical developments.

Minority groups appropriated this discourse to their causes. An example is the differentiation through skin color, which science has long proven to be only a prejudice, as the genetic difference between two white people might be bigger than a white and a black person. In this context, terms like Afro-descendants gain meaning, as the focus on color loses significance. The problematic is then: how could one claim for an indigenous identity if being Indian is already a construction? How valid is it to assert an indigenous mythology, or even an indigenous origin? And such questions become even more problematic if we consider the fact that the word Indian itself was given to these people by white conquerors. These inquiries explain the preference for nominations such as Native American, which reinforce the historical place where these people inhabit. A postmodern perspective might also provide further issues that attempt to answer these questions.

Postmodern art is commonly problematized as commercial and kitsch. As Silko's criticism on Erdrich, it is observed that this kind of writing is alienated, full of empty references, which recycles but ultimately empties history. Jameson, for example, discusses the postmodern period from an economic perspective, arguing that "aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production" (1984, p. 56). Notwithstanding, not all artistic works are necessarily marketable, or I may argue that money is just one of many aspects in the convoluted web of influences in the postmodern art.

From a different perspective, Linda Hutcheon does not deny the existence of meaningless kitsch originated from empty copy (1989, p. 8), but she focuses on a different perspective that reflects on postmodern art as contradictory and decentered

(1989, p.1 and 14). Art, history, politics, among other issues are revisited in postmodern texts, acquiring different views and meanings. As she explains: “we now get the histories (in the plural) of the losers as well as the winners, of the regional (and colonial) as well as the centrist” to mention a few (*Politics* 66). Thus, postmodern art indeed reproduces, repeats, copies, and adapts, as Jameson states; but it does so by criticizing that which it reproduces, it is a form of questioning monolithic ideas of a dominant story about history (1989, p. 66). The diverging views of the past allow the expression of different social groups in the construction of a new understanding of history, which allows multiple images of the past. The recuperation of Native American myths, identity and history is a way to criticize the history that was written about them, and this is done through a pluralized history, in which each personal history is valid, as the story “Yellow Woman” shall expose.

In addition, this search for an origin has being an utmost issue for ethnic groups. Stuart Hall observes that identity is important because it helps in the self-comprehension of the community, identifying the individuals from these groups as social members (2003, p. 15). Adding to this, Michel Wieviorka argues that people claim their culture differences or identities by four main arguments: the historical legitimacy, recognizing the past of a group; the immigrant issue that brings culture to another country; the reproduction, or the preservation, of culture against the disintegration of it by the invasion of other cultures; and the production that is the creation of new identities. Furthermore, Wieviorka joins the ethnical argument to a postmodern perspective by reiterating the value of identity by presenting identity differentiation as a postmodern need:

In the contemporary world, which some refer to as hyper-modern and others as post-modern, while yet others speak in

terms of demodernization, culture difference is the outcome of permanent invention, in which identities are transformed and recomposed, and in which there is no principle of definitive stability, even if the newest identities are sometimes shaped in very old molds. (WIEVIORKA, 1998, p. 891)

Through a deconstructivist perspective, Dirlik elucidates that there should not be an indigenous ideology, as it should not be any colonialist right (DIRLIK, 1996, p.8). Colonialist discourse is an essentialist notion, which stated the right of colonizers to exploration and exclusion of other ethnic groups. Thus, the contradiction indeed exists. Native American and other minority groups need to reassess their identity that was erased from them, but in doing so, they are restating the idea that made them an excluded group. Nonetheless, some literary examples, such as Silko's short story "Yellow Woman," have proven that it is possible to reconstruct an ethnic and even mythical identity, as these groups desire.

Dirlik also discusses Silko's literature. Specifically, he analyzes one of her most famous novels: *Ceremony*. According to Dirlik, *Ceremony* is about the creation of identity, or better, the restoration of an indigenous identity by recuperating a native past. It does so by responding to a history that was not constructed by the Native American people, but imposed on them. In other words, it recuperates an "official" history which somehow ignored or distorted traces of their history and revives it through the creation of a new reality to native people. It is a search for their perspective over their history, and a re-appropriation of their identity. This reconstruction of Native history is a counternarrative. In his words, "the goal of indigenism, then, is to restore these features of native life, which have been associated in Euro-American historiography with 'primitivism'" (1996, p. 6).

Leslie Marmon Silko's short story "Yellow Woman" is a great example of how deconstructionism and postmodern ideas can be harmonized with the importance of the historical myth to an ethnic group. It focuses on the *construction* of a myth through the *self*. In this way, this narrative is able to avoid an ahistorical perspective. Despite Silko's aversion to postmodern writing, her story can be analyzed through Hutcheon's notion of a postmodern historical narrative, which revives the past through a conscious contemporary perspective. The myth exists but it is constructed by the individual. It might be relevant to note here that Hutcheon explains contradictions as an essential postmodern feature, and that they are not necessarily solvable issues, as they frequently generate more questions (1989, p. 14), since, sometimes, the questions can be more relevant than the answers. As a matter of fact, contradiction might make the relation between poststructuralist and postmodern positions, and identity construction so complex, and expose the conflicting arguments as those posed by Dirlik and Silko.

Differently from *Ceremony*, "Yellow Woman" does not explicitly recuperate any non-native narrative which distorted a native identity, or confronts an "official" history, but it builds an omitted history, the history of their myths. Nancy Peterson refers to this as "a postmodern poetics of absence and silence," and explains it as "what has gone unrecorded in the documents and archives" (2001, p. 9). The untold story is about the re-telling and re-constructing of myths; specifically, about how the main character, who is also the narrator, becomes the myth of the Yellow Woman.

The Yellow Woman is a Native American traditional mythical story. It tells the tale that a *ka'tsina*, a mountain spirit from the north, seduces the Yellow Woman away from her husband and family; she lives with him and his relatives for a long time. Eventually, she returns with twin boys to her tribe. This tale was told to the woman

narrator by her grandfather, which can be interpreted in several ways, such as a resource to prevent girls from running away with strangers.

In Silko's short story, the woman narrator is only referred to as Yellow Woman. She tells the story of how one day she finds a stranger next to a river nearby her house, and has an affair with him. This man seduces her by using a trick, as she says: "Do you always use the same tricks?" (SILKO, 1981, p. 57), which is to call her the Yellow Woman. She is from the Laguna Pueblo and she imagines that the stranger is a Navajo, whose name is Silva.

In the following morning, they wake up and go to his cabin. She has a dubious feeling about leaving her family. Partially, she is forced to go as he says: "you don't understand, do you, little Yellow Woman? You will do what I want" (SILKO, 1981, p. 58); but she is also curious about Silva, and excited about what people will think about her disappearance. When she wakes up in his cabin, she looks for "some proof that he had been there or maybe that he was coming back" (SILKO, 1981, p. 58), which would confirm Silva's existence and would allow herself to become the Yellow Woman. Silva is butchering meat that he steals from white farmers, that is how he makes his living. They take this meat to be sold, and while they are carrying it, they are surprised by the cattle owner. Silva fights with him and tells her to escape; she hears shots and goes back home, already believing she is the Yellow Woman.

Silva represents the spirit of the north, the *ka'tsina*, while the narrator represents the mythological Yellow Woman; as he says, "last night you guessed my name, and you knew why I had come" (SILKO, 1981, p. 55). Her decision of following him to his cabin and later of helping him to carry the meat is part of her will to become the Yellow Woman, to turn myth into reality.

The narrator's transformation into the Yellow Woman is only accomplished through her own understanding as such. In other words, she becomes the Yellow Woman, only as she begins to believe herself as a mythical character. An example is how, at first, she reflects on the myth of the Yellow Woman as a story told by her grandfather. She even mentions other tales about a Coyote and a Badger, which inserts this particular tale among others, and intensifies their fictionality. Along the short story, her discourse also exposes her initial disbelief in relation to her grandfather's tales; as when she tells Silva "I know – that's what I'm saying – the *old stories* about the ka'tsina spirit and Yellow Woman can't mean us," and in the sequence when she thinks "My old grandpa liked to tell those *stories* best" (my emphasis, SILKO, 1981, p. 55). Initially, she still refers to the Yellow Woman as a distant and detached "old story," a fictitious tale told by her grandfather.

Her position in relation to the fictionality of the Yellow Woman changes along the narrative. When she narrates that her grandpa would not worry about her disappearance because he would know what happened and would say "stolen by a ka'tsina, a mountain spirit. She'll come home – they used do" (SILKO, 1981, p. 59). In doing so, she already imagines how her grandpa would think of her as the Yellow Woman, and when she does so she incorporates the myth. By the end, she laments, "I was sorry that old Grandpa wasn't alive to hear my story because it was the Yellow Woman stories he liked the best" (1981, p. 62). The pronoun "my" exposes how she appropriates the story, which is no longer a distant and old tale, but which is about herself, her personal tale.

In *The Content of Form*, Hayden White explains that discourse in itself is an expression of the content, which means that the way in which something is told already influences its interpretation. The fact that the tales are told, that they are oral stories,

may contribute to the main character's initial consideration of them as fiction, as something bound to construction and invention. In general, the short story does not problematize the way in which the stories are transmitted, but emphasize the importance of the oral stories. Thus, when she recalls the Yellow Woman's stories, she also recalls her grandfather as the narrator, how he would at first "tell" and later "hear" her story. Her grandfather keeps the tradition alive by telling them, but she does more than this when she becomes the tale; he passes the tales to others but she incorporates them and makes them real.

In addition, for White "the facts do not speak for themselves" (1987, p. 125), somebody always speaks for them. This somebody provides his interpretation, and intentionally or not, modifies and limits history. The Yellow Woman is a compilation of representations; she has a history of representations, which goes back to her grandfather and does not find an end, but concreteness in herself as the maker and teller of the story. Therefore, her grandfather has a relevant role, since her representation as the Yellow Woman is accomplished through his narration. He embodies the figure of the older family or tribal member, who keeps the tradition alive. His narration allows her to imagine herself as part of a myth. He symbolizes history in itself, as the storyteller, the one that keeps history alive. History is here referred to in a deconstructivist sense, in which fiction holds history in as much as an official or factual account of history.

Deconstructionism demystified the idea of a grand and unified history with the understanding that history is only acknowledged through its representations. Representations are far from being facts, as White explains "all original descriptions of any field of phenomena are already interpretations" (1987, p. 128), a biased understanding of the past is rather inevitable. Hence, a historical event cannot be simply described; it is first interpreted and, only then, represented. In this sense, all accounts of

history, fictional or factual, are until some extent tales of history. As the Yellow Woman lives the tale, she reinterprets it, and reconstructs the story of her people.

This context in which every historical event is also a history of fiction recalls the poststructural problematic in which everything is deconstructed. Peterson explains how deconstructionism has reduced history to a text in recalling Derrida's famous quote "there is nothing beyond the text" (2001, p. 8), which again means that every account or narration of a historical situation is only a text, a narration, and because of this would be considered a fiction as well. Most importantly is that to make amendments with history, both White (1987, p. 147) and Peterson resource to Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*, which reestablishes the importance of history by arguing that history has real and contemporary effects that should not be ignored. Thus, even if in fact every report of history is fiction, until a certain degree, history has solid consequences.

Social discrimination, employment opportunity, land demarcation, education, preservation of their traditions are only some of the real political and social problems faced by Native American people. In accordance with this, Dirlik writes that "indigenous claims to identity are very much tied in with a desperate concern for survival; not in a 'metaphorical' but in a very material sense" (1996, p. 11). Moreover, Peterson also claims that "painful effects of past continue to pressure the present moment" (2001, p. 1). Native American claim for an identity arises from real effects produced by historical erasure. As a consequence, an indigenous essentialism might be necessary. Silko's "Yellow Woman" manages to merge this concrete need for identity and this deconstructionist view, as it appeals to an Indian essence which is grounded in the myth *making*. This short story cannot be ahistorical, once it reflects a contemporary perspective.

Silko's reviving of a traditional story is a reconstruction of a myth in the present. This reviving reveals awareness, a consciousness, in relation to the presence of the past in the present, or better the construction of the past, of history, in and by the present. According to Hutcheon, the postmodern literature portrays a consciousness, which is reflected in how it represents history. This consciousness exposes how the past can only be acknowledged from one's contemporary perspective. Our present vision will always influence our understanding of the past; the present being a ghost that hunts the past in postmodern texts. In addition, the past cannot exist without present representations, and it is in doing so that the present distorts the past. In any case, postmodern art is not concerned with the "real" past, but with the awareness that all the past we know is from present representations. Therefore, Silko's "Yellow Woman" destabilizes temporal relations when she creates history in the present and also when the tale pre-exists the fact. From a different perspective, the tale is reacted in the present. In either case, Hutcheon provides a further and complete explanation on the relationship between history and postmodern self-consciousness, acknowledging that:

The past is something with which we must come to terms and such a confrontation involves an acknowledgement of limitation as well as power [...] we only have representations of the past from which to construct our narratives or explanations. In a very real sense, *postmodernism reveals a desire to understand present culture as the product of previous representations*. The representation of history becomes the history of representation (My emphasis, HUTCHEON, 1989, p. 58).

Postmodernism's self-consciousness contests the modernist tradition of "transparency in representation" (Hutcheon, *Politics* 34). Belsey elucidates that for Classic Realism literature is expected to create a world of its own where the individual

is able to forget his present reality (2). Postmodern literature does the opposite; the reader is constantly reminded of the text's position within a web of representations and discourses, and of the text's artificiality in representing history (Hutcheon, *Politics* 15). This way, Yellow Woman's grandfather revives history in the present through his tale. Then, his representation of the Yellow Woman is passed on to the narrator, keeping it alive in the present. Her reenactment can only be accomplished through this full awareness in the recuperation of the past through her grandfather's representation.

Consequently, the narrator can only realize herself as a Yellow Woman when she considers the possibility of the story happening in the present. At first, she problematizes that what is happening to her cannot be real, because this kind of event only happened in the past; she does not deny its existence, but only that it is past. As she says: "he is only a man – some man from nearby – and I will be sure that I am not Yellow Woman. Because she is from out of time past and I live now and I've been to school and there are highways and pickup trucks that Yellow Woman never saw" and also "I don't have to go. What they tell in stories was real only then, back in time immemorial, like they say" (SILKO, 1981, p. 56). For her, this story can only happen in the past, and this temporal detachment transforms the tale into fiction.

The fact that she eventually accepts herself as a part of the myth indicates the acceptance of the past in the present. This acceptance is Silko's statement to how Native American identity needs to be (re)affirmed today, because even if the discussion is about history, it is also about how history is understood in the present. About this issue, Dirlik comments, "the point of departure for this indigenism is the present, and its goal is not to restore a bygone past, but to draw upon the past to create a new future" (1981, p. 19). His social approach highlights the importance of the past to the present, and to the construction of the future. Silko's reviving of history helps constructing identity to

current and future generations of Native American people. As the grandfather says, “no thought beyond the moment she meets the ka’tsina spirit and they go” (SILKO, 1981, p. 56).

This *presentness* deconstructs the essentialism from the myth making. Indeed, if the myth is constructed than it is already not essentialist and ahistorical; it has an origin and a temporal reference. It does not belong to a distant past, or an unknown individual, but it is built in contemporaneity and by the narrator, who has a dead grandfather, a husband named Al, a baby, a mother and grandmother waiting for her. The myth is part of the construction of the Native American identity, and it has a material need as Dirlik argues. Silko is also able to attach a contemporaneous twist to it, which turns the myth into an even more significant tale to their identity, exposing their contemporary need to revisit their history, due to their history of erasure and omission.

The negative criticism Silko makes on Erdrich’s novel *The Beet Queen* adds a further level of complexity of this discussion. The former accuses the latter’s novel of neglecting the problematic that an indigenous ancestry might arise in North Dakota in 1932. Silko’s criticism is supported by the common acknowledgment that the postmodern approach is alienated. The novel resources on postmodern features such as the self-referential language, which, according to Silko, leads to the best aspect of the novel: the exploration of the character’s subconscious (p.180). On the other hand, it is precisely these features, the self-referential language and the exploration of the subconscious that alienate the novel from cultural issues. Silko problematizes that in this specific context, North Dakota near an Indian reservation in 1932, the characters, who are not clearly identified as of Indian ancestry but who have Indian traits, do not suffer from racial issues, but only from their psychological problems.

Susan Castillo analyses that Silko's critic might suggest a limited and restricted view on ethnicity; an essentialist and static one (1991, p. 288). The former argues that such position would result in "the same ahistoricism of which she accuses Erdrich" (1991, p. 289). Hence, Silko's search for a true Indigenous history, or an essence of Native American identity might be too naïve. Castillo notes that Silko herself has a complex origin, having an Anglo-American, Mexican and Laguna ancestry, while Erdrich is a part of the Chippewa tribe, which was acculturated in a great scale (1991, p. 288).

These positions expose how delicate the issue of identity is when in relation to poststructural and postmodern critics. The authorization of some representations in opposition to other seems quite arbitrary in some situations. Why would Silko's representation of the Native American be more accurate than Erdrich's? Even if we are reminded that both authors have an Indian ancestry, they still come from quite different contexts, as Castillo explains. This difference brings to the fore the utmost poststructural and postmodern issue to identity claim: the relevance of each personal history to the construction of a more encompassing and complex history.

This new perspective seems to be a first step in changing Walter Benjamin's famous quote that "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism" (1969, p. 638-9) by presenting a recollection of history that is not necessarily of the winner, but of the ones who have acquired power through a benign deconstruction.

In this sense, to reconstruct the myth of the "Yellow Woman" has a true and rooted need in the recuperation of Native history and the reconstruction of their identities. At the same time, the short story also assumes a poststructuralist position by deconstructing, or questioning, an essential historicism, which is evinced through the

construction of the Yellow Woman's myth in the present. In fact, it is not necessarily a contradiction to construct a myth in the present. A myth is inevitably built in history, through the passage of time, through the fantasizing of it. The issue is that this short story inverts the temporal relations, the tale is told before it happens. The words preexist the facts. Therefore, Yellow Woman rises as a postmodern myth, whose history lies in the past, but who was born, or better re-born in contemporaneity, through a quite conscious construction. Lastly, I also argue that "Yellow Woman" is not denying an essentialist view over myth, identity and history, but it is problematizing these aspects as essential to the Native Americans in a contemporary society in which everything is constructed.

## References

- BELSEY, C. **Critical Practice**. London and New York: Routledge, 2002.
- BENJAMIN, W. **Illuminations**. New York: Schocken Books, 1969.
- CASTILLO, S. P. Postmodernism, Native American Literature and the Real: The Silko-Erdrich Controversy. In: **The Massachusetts Review** v. 32, n. 2, p. 285-294, 1991.
- DERRIDA, J. **Of Grammatology**. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- DIRLIK, A. The Past as Legacy and Project: Postcolonial Criticism in the Perspective of Indigenous Historicism. In: **American Indian Culture and Research Journal**, v. 20, n. 2, 1996, p. 1-31.
- HALL, S. **A identidade cultural na pós-modernidade**. Rio de Janeiro: DP&A, 2005.
- HALL, S. **Da diáspora: Identidades e mediações culturais**. Belo Horizonte, MG: Editora UFMG, 2003.
- HUTCHEON, L. Parody Without Ridicule: Observations on Modern Literary Parody. In: **Canadian Review of Comparative Literature**, v. 5, 1978, p. 201-211.
- HUTCHEON, L. **The Politics of Postmodernism**. London and New York: Routledge, 1989.
- JAMESON, F. Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism. In: **New Left Review** v. 1, n. 146, p. 53-92, 1984.
- PETERSON, N. History as Wound. In: \_\_\_\_\_, **Against Amnesia: Contemporary Women Writers and the Crises of Historical Memory**. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001, p. 1-17.
- SILKO, L. M. Here's an Odd Artifact for the Fairy-Tale Shelf. In: \_\_\_\_\_, **Studies in American Indian Literatures**, v. 10, n. 4, 1986, p. 177-184.
- SILKO, L. M. Yellow Woman. In: \_\_\_\_\_, **Storyteller**. New York: Arcade Publishing, 1981, p. 54-62.

WHITE, H. V. The Fictions of Factual Representation. In: \_\_\_\_\_, **Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism**. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, p. 121-134.

WHITE, H. V. **The Content of Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation**. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987.

WIEVIORKA, M. Is Multiculturalism the Solution? In: **Ethnic and Racial Studies**, v. 21, n. 5, p. 881-889, 1998.