

TECHNOLOGY IN *TRUE WOMEN*: FEMINISM, HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION
AND MAGIC REALISM IN A DIALOGUE
BETWEEN THE NARRATOR AND THE CHARACTER-WRITER

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RESUMO: Em *True Women* (1993), Janice Woods Windle inspira-se em ideias oriundas da tecnologia, inovando estratégias da narrativa. Deste modo, ela hipoteticamente acessa um portal virtual pelo qual ela adentra a narrativa do ponto de vista espacial. Ao fazê-lo, ela alega não ser a narradora, mas uma historiadora em busca de dados acerca de suas matriarcas maternas e paternas. Incapaz de reconstruir as experiências empíricas de suas ancestrais, a escritora entrevista uma cartomante – Idella, vidente anciã afro-americana que, tendo conhecido tais matriarcas pessoalmente, pode trazer de volta estes entes, fazendo-os relatar experiências autobiográficas. Em um diálogo inverossímil, a escritora-personagem de origem germânico-americana explora estratégias da narrativa pós-moderna, confrontando-se ficcionalmente com seu alterego afro-americano. Assim, a negra Idella, ao fundir história à ficção, faz-nos supor que os fantasmas deixaram, de fato, os mortos para serem ouvidos no mundo dos vivos. Transgredindo padrões da verossimilhança, Windle chega ainda a gravar relatos dos espíritos reencarnados, criando uma situação duplamente irônica. Embora o leitor saiba que Idella seja o narrador, a sutileza da ironia composta no texto o faz questionar a fidedignidade da narradora. Afinal, os relatos pessoais dos espíritos podem ser uma mera recordação de momentos outrora compartilhados entre Idella e as ancestrais de Windle. Além disso, por mais que a escritora alegue ser uma mera observadora na narrativa, o leitor sabe que, em um espaço extraficcional, Windle já redigiu o texto. Deste modo, a ficcionista paradoxalmente convida o leitor para participar de um romance histórico que desafia a lógica e razão intencionalmente, enquanto constrói um texto onde feminismo, intertextualidade, metaficção historiográfica e realismo mágico se entrecruzam harmonicamente no Texas oitocentista.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: feminismo; metaficção historiográfica; realismo mágico

ABSTRACT: In *True Women* (1993), Janice Woods Windle adopts ideas come from technology to innovate narratology. Thus, she hypothetically logs herself into the narrative, claiming not to be the narrator, but a historian in search of biographical data about her maternal and paternal matriarchs. Unable to reconstruct her female predecessors' lived experiences, she interviews the story-teller – Idella, a rather elderly female black fortune-teller who, having once met such deceased women in person, can also bring their spirits back to testify their own experiences. In this uneventful dialogue, the character-writer exploits postmodern narrative stances as she projects her fictional alter-ego in a black woman, whose shifting approaches to oral history and story-telling leads one to think ghosts have literally come from the dead to be voiced. Rupturing with verisimilitude, Windle still claims to record accounts by embodied spirits, conveying a doubly ironical situation. Though the reader learns that Idella is the narrator, subtle irony makes her/him doubt if this historical research is trustworthy,

¹ This study comes out of studies on my Ph. D. dissertation on Janice Woods Windle's *True Women*, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Bernardo Guimarães's *Rosaura: a enjeitada* (2011).

as a matter of fact. After all, the spirits' personal reports coincide with Idella's witnessing them in the past; besides, the reader knows Windle has crafted the story in a non-fictional realm, though she passes as a mere listener in the narrative. Paradoxically, Janice Windle welcomes the reader into a historical novel which defies logic and rationality intentionally as long as she builds up a plot where feminism, intertextuality, historiographic metafiction and magic realism are perfectly set in 19th-century Texas.

KEYWORDS: *feminism; historiographic metafiction; magic realism*

Just like novelists have inspired Hollywood screenwriters since the first half of the 20th century, more and more, the creation of scenes full of technological apparatus projected on cinema, television or computer screens have suggested and promoted new possibilities for narrative stances. Being so, the same way video games have proposed challenges and progressive stages, so have particular postmodern narratives like John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* or Janice Woods Windle's *True Women*. Not by chance, theorists on comparative literature like Charles Bernheimer *et al.* have encouraged the production of criticism comprising literature and cinema; because, just like one can move back to a previous stage when playing a virtual game, so can the narrator, after revealing the reader the latest chapter is a fake one. This intentionally contradictory aspect awakens one to observe that, although all is fictional in a novel, the authorial power is authoritative enough to dictate what information is to be discarded or to represent a truth supposed to be believed in. So, the adoption of ironical terms like 'imaginary chapters' aims at convincing the reader that other parts of the fictional creation were totally based on real facts, even though one might suspect that the clarification of true and false chapters is nothing but a performative procedure, based on the writer's decision-making on what might or might not be taken into account.

This eyewash unavoidably leads one to see that reflections upon the boundaries between fact and fiction in a historical novel are both random and conventional and that discourse itself consists of the very fabric to story-telling no matter the plot is totally invented or if strives to linguistically reproduce an actual event. All this discussion makes one consider not only Hayden White's relativization of the historian's ideological impartiality, but also that postmodern historical novels' playful approach to narratology tends to resemble the operative mechanism found in technological devices such as video games. Thus, the same way the rise of the novel caused impacting changes in nineteenth-century drama and poetry, now it is time video-game strategies have found in movie-making revolutionized story-telling and broadened the horizons of Aesthetics of Reception (JAUSS, 1982: p. 43).

Firstly cradled in linguistic circles from the University of Konstanz, Germany, and largely discussed by scholars like Wolfgang Iser and Hans Jauss, the 'Aesthetics of Reception' is a theoretical trend that focuses on the reader's part and his/her contribution to multiple interpretations of a particular text. Viewing, then, the reading public from an idealistic standpoint, Aesthetics of reception theorists envisage the reader as a narratee who critically dialogues with the novel, not only perceiving or analyzing its fictional functioning but delighting with aesthetic details the text offers to an attentive reader. Trying to test the reading public's interpretative skills, theorists on Aesthetics of Reception thoroughly insist on the possibility that the text can be, up to a certain extent, reinvented by the public, in the sense that the reader can produce numberless readings of a particular novel, when viewing it in a myriad ways (ISER, 1978: p. 12). More than that, I dare say that nowadays Aesthetics of Reception

enables the contemporary writer to create innovative literary resources in order to call the attention of a new generation of readers even more interested in video games, in the internet and its applicability to online portable devices. To present her historical novel as a virtual portal, Janice Woods Windle leads us back to nineteenth-century American South in *True Women*, welcoming us into a partly uneventful set of stories grounded in historical evidences but which deep inside challenges one's sense of rationality by means of magic realism.

As a matter of fact, Janice Woods Windle's best-seller and masterpiece, *True Women* (1993) has proven to be more than a mere historical novel which thematically dialogues with classics like William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* or Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Critically acclaimed by remarkable personalities in America like Jaqueline Cliffstone from *Houston Post*, the famous CBS Television interviewer Dan Rather (1994), William Brendon from *San Antonio Express-News* (2004) and Ann Crittenden from *The New York Times* (2007), *True Women* has also gained recognition by Fannie Flagg, the author of *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistlestop Café*, and in newspaper notes by Ann Richards, ex-governor of Texas. To Crittenden, for instance, *True Women* abounds historical data in result of Windle's vast research. As says the journalist, "*True Women* is obviously, fruit of Windle's love, work, strive and, on the whole, it sounds truthful to those really interested in the History of Texas" (2007, p. 46). Whereas William Brendon highlights: "Windle's witty observation of multicultural atmospheres, her mention of the so rejected miscegenation in the 19th century, her capacity to report events as if they were set in a fairy tale... [...] Wonderful! A historical novel with a mesmerizing attitude" (2004, p. 2).

Concerning the first edition of *True Women*, Ann Richards describes the novel as "an engaging story on three generations of Texas women whose lives capture our imagination" (*True Women*, 1993, p. 1). Similarly, Dan Rather depicts *True Women* as "A novel as big-hearted as Texas from which it sprang. As grandson, child and father of Texas women, this reporter can tell you: *True Women* tells true" (*True Women*, 1993, p. 1). Undoubtedly, the novel has marked Windle's literary career and feminist historical fiction recently produced in the south of the USA. So much so, as a 1997 mini-series, *True Women* was broadcast to the whole country by CBS. Produced by Christopher Lofton and directed by Karen Arthur, the narrative was adapted into a movie in which Angelina Jolie features as Georgia Lawshe, the remarkable miscegenated woman who becomes a paramount character both in the novel and in the film.

On the whole, the work shows that particular stereotypes about a past society could not apply to every single person from the south. So much so, the novel shows *mestizo* gentry on behalf of slavery just like it presents a white family who summoned their slave to the table at supper time. Very precisely, Windle aims at relativizing any cliché about ethnic groups. In this sense, the novel also invites to show that, just like the process of colonization in America juxtaposed conflictive cultures with reciprocal disarrays and profound idiosyncrasies, there may have also existed harmonious relationships among people from different ethnic groups unlike the totalizing 19th-century historical American discourse. In this manner, Windle avoids overused dichotomies such as villainy/victimization, Christianity/paganism, shedding light to *mélanges*, cultural intermingles and in-betweenness.

So as to speak, in many ways, *True Women* defies white man's history, allowing women from different ethnicities to manifest their sorrows, anxieties, dreams and indignance towards conventions

and traditions which prevented them to become protagonists in history. So much so, Fannie Flagg states, "True Women represents a part of our country's history ignored and long overdue for recognition. At last we can read about the pioneers and their husbands for a change!" (Apud TW, p. 1). Due to this fact, Windle's 19th-century transgressive protagonists expose their views on the world as if they lived in current times. In tune with contemporary ideas, the novel assimilates postmodern ideological trends just like the relativization of historical truth and the representation of cultural identity encompassing gender, ethnicity, sexuality and *status quo*.

In *True Women*, the archive's ultimate veracity is revisited, questioned and reinterpreted. Either by interweaving fiction and history, or contrasting verisimilitude with uneventfulness, Windle's suits what Linda Hutcheon coins as "historiographic metafiction". According to Hutcheon (1989), historiographic metafiction is a kind of postmodern historical novel which aims at calling the reader's attention in two different manners, at least. On the one hand, it defies crystallized past historical truths dictated by white man's colonization. On the other one, it provides the reader with metafictional reflections, usually emphasizing irony by means of self-conscious paradoxes supposed to call the reader's attention to argumentative flaws in historical discourse. In this, the tension and discrepancies between account and event are stressed, highlighting the historian's tendentious ideology and his/her limitations to perfectly translate facts into words without distortions (HUTCHEON, 1989, p. 59-66). Both intentions to review history and narratology are intertwined as long as the historiographic metafiction writer wishes to make the reader question the constantly blurred borderlines between history and fiction as well as the fact they are both linguistic products.

Actually, such reasoning lead one back to studies on past historical novels. After all, if one looks back to the trajectory of the historical novel from Defoe to Scott in Britain and from Cooper to Hawthorne in the United States, he/she can notice that the fictionist's greater concern with instilling verisimilitude was more evident in the 18th century than in the following one. After all, romantic writers would fictionalize history much more freely, allowing the reader to perceive the coexistence between fact and fiction more clearly. When doing so, the first 19th-century historical novelists introduced more fictional evidences than their predecessors and ambiguously tried to camouflage such incoherent features by pointing out dates or documented events. So, when counterbalancing the boundaries between historical report and subjective creativity, romantic fictionists eventually provided the text with assertion and a profound sense of reliability so as to convince the reader about their credibility and reputation as trustworthy historians.

Intensifying this deceptive nature of the 19th-century historical novelist, the historiographic metafiction writer allows the reader to exploit particular questions already raised in 19th-century romantic historical novel. As Hayden White (1973) explains, "both philosophy and history are endowed with a profound, holistically poetic structure and specifically linguistic content which report a likely event to the reader" (WHITE, p. ix). In this case, the historian is totally in par with the 18th-century fictionist, as both attempt to give their writings a sense of reality through discursive coherence. Following White's ideas, the historiographic metafiction writer expects to highlight that the historical text can be as fictional as any other narrative (HUTCHEON, 1989, p. 68-75). *True Women*, in particular, is a novel about Texas, shedding light to oral history and its overlaps with myths and superstition. In this fashion, the narrative can be seen as a sentimental novel, defying the rationality with which man produced history in the 19th century. In this epic narrative, prevail the emotion and

suffering of women who participated in interacted with a story symbolically drenched in tears and bleeding.

As far as structure is concerned, *True Women* contains digressive chapters which, intercepting the main chapters, explain how the three apparently detached stories are bound together in the narrative. As a way to challenge the commonsensical structuralist concepts of 'author', 'narrator', and 'character', similarly to a printed page, Windle scans herself into the first digressive chapter as if the text were a computer screen on which she might appear as downloadable material. In this, the reader learns the writer is also a character about to participate in the narrative not only backstage but textually, in fact.

Featuring, then, as a fictional persona, Windle introduces herself as a historian who starts a research about her family matriarchs; namely: Euphemia Texas Ashby (her maternal great-great-grandmother), Georgia Lawshe (her paternal great-grandmother) and Bettie King (her maternal great-grandmother) but really comes across unexpected obstacles in her enterprise. In the very beginning, the character-author complains to the reader about document's vagueness and fallibility. According to her, places, archives, photographs and other artifacts are unlively, devoid of emotion. They seem meaningless, elliptic and unable to rebuild old people's biography in a touching and convincing way. After Windle acknowledges the collected material thus far cannot revive the dead's memory effectively, she decides to interview Idella, an elderly African-American fortune-teller who, having known the author's predecessors in old times, is now presented as the novel's narrator:

I revisited their homes and their graves. I poured through boxes of accumulated family documents and photographs brought out from under beds and down from attics. I interviewed surviving relatives, studied letters, diaries, maps, census records, death certificates, deeds, and land grants. I began to piece together an authentic version of the stories I'd heard as a child. In almost every detail, oral tradition and the historical record were identical. But the stories were incomplete, the characters somehow not as vivid as I had hoped.²

Juxtaposing history to legends, Windle refers to the past as if it were nothing but a fairy tale; and, when doing so, the character-writer asks herself how far her own memories or local history are true or invented: "They were great epic tales of war and adventure, love and murder, violence and redemption. These remarkable lives had become part of my own being, as real as the little Texas town where I was raised, as familiar to me as *A Child's Garden of Verses*" (TW, p. 2). Now, Windle wonders if what she tells people about the past is really accurate or fictional: "Yet, when I became a mother and I retold the old stories to my own children, citizens of a generation raised in the age of television, they would challenge me – 'Is this true? Are these women real?' [...] Were the tales embellished with the telling?" (TW, p. 1-2).

More than a simple interviewer, Windle looks for an imaginative and skillful story-teller whose passion for memories may instill magic and enchant the listeners' hearts. So, the German-descendant writer clings to the African-American tradition, which gives an old matriarch the role of recalling deeds

² WINDLE, Janice Woods. *True Women*. New York: Ivy Books, 1993. From now on, the quotations of this novel will be indicated by the initials TW, followed by page number.

from the past (GATES JR., 1989, p. xxiii). To the character-author, Idella represents more than a mere story-teller. Unlike ordinary people in town, she is acquainted with the dead and a connoisseur of necromancy.

So, only could she unveil the mysteries of Euphemia Texas Ashby King, Georgia Lawshe Woods and Bettie Moss King. Owing to this, Windle arranges a séance with the seer in order to transform the spirits' report into historical documentation. In this, Windle empties history from a dictatorial power to prove that Windle's recording of Idella's psychography is actually more reliable than reading archives itself. According to Linda Hutcheon, this paradox generates an 'anti-totalizing totalization', in which a subtle irony intentionally undermines the seriousness of such historical project (HUTCHEON, 1989, p. 78-82).

The irony lies on the fact that neither do any scientific methods for a historical research include consultation to spirits nor is the historian supposed to rely on a person's report when the latter claims to be unconscious and embody a spiritual entity; whereas the anti-totalizing totalization can be understood by the following reasoning: Windle's very non-scientific method to approach history promptly makes the reader distrust the seriousness and objectivity with which she is developing her project. Especially because, when voicing Idella, Windle depowers herself, as a scholar, to empower a humble woman totally deprived of any scientific knowledge. So, in other words, history is, in a way, de-totalized to be re-totalized from another perspective. As found in the novel,

Idella could talk with the dead and she lived very close to where water moccasins slept among the violets and where beneath great oaks certain uncertain creatures prowled in shadow (*TW*, p. 1). [...] So I went back to Seguin, as an adult, to the Guadalupe, to find Idella who could talk with the dead and whose greatest gift was the finding of things lost. When I was a child, I had the impression Idella was rich. At night we would see long black limousines parked by her house, hired by prominent people who wished to consult Idella but who also wished to remain anonymous. [...] It was said Idella's ability to see into the worlds of the future and past was unailing. She could predict with absolute accuracy the month and day certain people would be married, well before a proposal had been contemplated, much less made. She could see details of a person's life as if she had lived it herself. Idella was a mystic, one of those rare beings whose soul floats free in time (*TW*, p. 3).

When looking forward to seeing Idella, Windle talks about the river on which the fortune-teller's residence is partly founded. Living on the bank, Idella herself stands very close to the rushy flux of history whose symbolic waves are always embracing and surrounding her. Looking from this prism, Idella is diluted in the course of history, floating as the metaphorical representation of time all over the novel:

Her voice was soft and familiar, part of the sound the river made. [...] As I entered her house I felt again that curious blend of awe, respect, and fear and I had felt as a child in her presence; a sense that Idella knew all the secrets of the universe. [...] Few places on earth could be as magical to a child as where the Guadalupe River bottoms cut deep around Idella's house behind Court Street in Seguin, Texas. It was forbidden, of course, to go there (*TW*, p. 1).

Ironically, the river inspires an illiterate old woman to unveil mysteries about the past, but it does not reveal its magic power to historians like Windle. In this manner, the Guadalupe flows silently, keeping in its bed bodies underlying in slippery soil: “There was quicksand by the river that could swallow horses, even children whose bones we feared finding after hard rains, children whose last living moments we could imagine with terrible and fascinating clarity. The Guadalupe River bottom was filled with little pieces of Eden and with danger and death” (*TW*, p. 1).

The water’s flow over the slippery base shows the historian’s incapacity to decipher the past clearly and precisely. After all, although historical events may be carefully studied, they will always be as deceiving and unpredictable as sinking sand. Regardless of this fact, the river is constantly renewed and it witnesses the changeability of a people, generation after generation at a given fixed space. In this sense, the Guadalupe symbolizes the conditions in which local history is found; that is, memories of a particular community can be geographically static but socially and culturally dynamic: “[I fancied seeing] something lost in the rivers of time [...]. The river was the color of smoke and jade. It was deep by the shore and the sound of the river made spoke — *Guadalupe, Guadalupe*” (*TW*, p. 3-4).

Peering at the river from the car window, Windle projects great expectations, endeavoring to transmit Idella’s accounts to future generations. In her interview to the ancient woman, the historian feels feeble, de-powered, unable to question or contradict the reports the seer receives from the souls. Shrugging her body like a scared little girl, Windle realizes how tiny she feels when Idella symbolically evokes the powers of history. So much so, the writer humbly begs the elderly lady to make the past come out of the river once and for all. Deep inside, she knows she feels inferior because Idella, as a personification of history, makes one think of the condition of the contemporary subject. Splintered and fragmented, the postmodern subject is not at all self-sufficient and lives in a terribly troubled world (HALL, 1998, p. 32). That is why, unstable and incoherent, the character-historian also looks unsure, insecure and frustrated as a researcher: “As I entered the house I felt again that curious blend of awe, respect, and fear I had felt as a child in her presence; a sense that Idella knew all the secrets of the universe. [...] ‘I see a lost child’, she said. ‘But not in the way they are usually lost’. [...] Something deeper. [S]he took my two hands in hers and held them as if I were a lost child” (*TW*, p. 4-5).

Bringing empiric and scientific knowledge together, Idella can teach historiography and literary theory. According to her, the notions of past, present and future are nothing but arbitrary and symbolic constructs, mere landmarks supposed to facilitate the representation of time both in documents and fiction. Also according to Idella, the historian’s emotional detachment from the subject matter is doubtful just like the distinction between fact and fiction can be highly random at times. As Idella states,

[...] I don’t get all puffed up about the little bit I can see what others can’t. There’s some things I know for sure. Some things I don’t. Sometimes I don’t. Sometimes you can’t tell the difference between what’s real and what’s not. Sometimes you can’t tell the difference between what’s alive and what’s dead. Or what’s inside you and what’s outside and only seems inside. Everything in this world is all one piece. It’s spirit and flesh and past and future all rolled together, like holy dough risin’ through time (*TW*, p. 279).

Acknowledging her difficulty to reconstruct history through a mere collection of objects, Windle begs Idella to make her family's matriarchs' spirits to come back; but, after proposing that, the author is admonished not to play with the dead. Even so, Windle makes a point to awaken them from their graves: "It's a dangerous thing to ask, Miss Janice. Not just to talk with the dead, but to bring the dead alive. Once you bring them alive, they become part of you. Their pain becomes your pain. I'm not sure you want to bring all that suffering back into the world. All those dead children. Maybe you should let them rest" (*TW*, p. 4). Metaphorically, to incorporate spirits means to fictionalize real people from the past. So, once they are projected in the character-author's mind, they come alive, acquiring autonomy in the narrative. Dwelling in Windle's imagination, the spirits are the reason for the novel's existence. In this process of fictional creation, the author, like a woman about to deliver a baby, feels (or makes up) the pain of the characters she bears little by little, which explains the reason why the spirits' pain are the same as Windle's.

Obviously, Idella, just like her calling out the ghosts, is nothing but a narrative stance, an artifice to make the reader confront two fictional faces of the author. Windle, as a character, reminds one that the historian makes use of a scientific methodology such as the collection of data. Whereas Idella, featuring as the character-author's fictional alter-ego, not only triggers the writer's creativity but causes one to think of Windle, as the novelist, set in a non-fictional realm. As a co-projection of Windle's, the character, Idella performatively appears as the former's double, as Windle's fancy or an alibi to intensify the metafictional nature of the narrative and an excuse for the writer to invent her matriarchs' past as she pleases. After all, as soon as the novel ends, the fortune-teller mysteriously disappears all of a sudden. Since then, Windle, as a character, no longer sees the mystic woman because Idella must only exist while the novel is being woven. After the textual process of creation is concluded, Idella literally vanishes in the air: "When I last saw Idella, she was standing on her porch above the river. Her lips were moving and she was smiling. As I walked to the Volvo, I thought I heard an owl. I turned and Idella was gone" (*TW*, p. 412).

At last, in this fictional game in which gender and ethnicity become keywords, the author shows herself in a multifaceted way. Dialogically, the writer's white face comes to terms with her source of inspiration whose hypothetical silhouette gives shape to a woman's black countenance. In this manner, the novel is created, consisting of a symbolical intertwining between history and fiction as if both were literally face to face in the narrative. Such convention causes one to think of the following: first, of the boundaries between fact and fiction; secondly, of the subject's mirroring through the writer's fictional self-projection and the creation of her double. All these ideas lead one back to the analogy between literary devices and cinematographic visual effects.

After all, if the reader visualizes two bodies as the writer records what her alter-ego hears from the spirits, of course, the novel's conveyance of imagery is not only ironical and playful but they resemble movie-making techniques which give abstraction a picturesque approach on screen, innovating literary stances in postmodern fiction. Such peculiarity supports the most ironical and illusive aspect of the novel – the real-time construction of the narrative. When one starts reading the novel, the reader is told Windle is going to meet an old woman so that the author may write a historical novel in the future. So, she accepts interviewing the spirits in three séances so she can transform the collected information into a novel in the future. In this, the reader must take for granted he/she is not actually reading a ready-made novel but that he/she is participating in the fictional process of creation in real time. So, again, the novel is presented as if it were a movie on the screen. However, when the

interview is over, the reader realizes that Windle's future book is already accomplished and all the stages the narratee goes through are nothing but an illusive game presenting real-time writing. For all these reasons, Windle innovates story-telling by constructing a historical novel about 19th-century American heroines; a text which welcomes studies on the Aesthetics of Reception, as its narrative strategies are totally in tune with cinematographic conventions and all the technological apparatus it contains.

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