

INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO THE HISTORICAL NOVEL IN JANICE WINDLE'S *TRUE WOMEN*: FEMINIST SAGA, HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION AND MAGIC REALISM

Abordagens inovadoras do romance histórico em *True women*, de Janice Windle: saga feminista, metaficção historiográfica e realismo mágico.

Heleno Álvares Bezerra Jr.¹

RESUMO: Tomando como ponto de partida a ficcionalização da biografia das matriarcas da sua própria família que Janice Woods Windle efetiva em *True Women*, este artigo aborda as estratégias narrativas contemporâneas exploradas pela autora que nos permitem identificar pontos de interseção entre a metaficção historiográfica, a epopeia e o romance histórico oitocentista. Subvertendo convenções literárias de séculos anteriores, *True women* desponta como um texto de muitas possibilidades analíticas, capaz de problematizar questões de gênero atreladas à tradição épica e à prática cientificista do historiador no século XIX. Contrastando a razão à imaginação e a lógica à fantasia, Windle demonstra, através de metáforas, que o universo feminino difere-se consideravelmente do masculino. Para ilustrar sua intenção, a autora explica que o fazer histórico feminino desafia as bases científico-ideológicas historicamente construídas pelo homem. Propondo autorreflexões ficcionais e historiográficas, o texto constitui uma saga em que as mulheres são heroínas épicas e onde o realismo mágico é capaz de minar os procedimentos metodológico-científicos da investigação histórica, com criatividade e ironia sutil.

Palavras-chave: metaficção historiográfica; feminismo; realismo mágico

ABSTRACT: Based on the fictionalization of the biographies of the matriarchs from Janice Woods Windle's own family carried out by herself in *True Women*, this essay highlights the contemporary narrative strategies that the author explores in the novel and allow us to think of the overlapping between historiographic metafiction, the epopee and the 19th-century historical novel at times. When subverting literary conventions from previous centuries, *True women* features as a text with many analytical possibilities; a narrative which enables one to problematize gender questions linked to the epic tradition and the historian's scientific practice in the 19th century. When contrasting reason with imagination, logic with fancifulness, Windle metaphorically demonstrates that the female universe differs considerably from the male world. To illustrate such an intention, the writer explains that the female approach to historicity defies the scientific and methodological basis man has founded in the course of history. Proposing self-reflexive fictional and historiographic exercises, the text consists of a saga in which women feature as epic

¹ Doutor em Literatura Comparada. Professor da Universidade Severino Sombra e da UERJ.
helenobj@yahoo.com.br

heroines, and magic realism undermines both the methodological and scientific procedures of the historical process, with a lot of creativity and subtle irony.

Keywords: historiographic metafiction; feminism; magic realism

Since ancient times, different civilizations have intertwined events and imagination in order to eternalize their peculiar cultures and folk knowledge. And aside from the Greeks and Romans' classic literary production, other ethnic groups like Celts, Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Indian and African clans, in different manners, used the oral tradition to perpetuate their local memories, to maintain their religious principles, and to disseminate their idiosyncratic values to further generations. Being so, this crossing of the fact-and-fiction boundary has appeared in literary texts, causing theoreticians to problematize such a subject-matter in myriad a manner.

Although the delimitation of a novel to a particular label may restrict it to a very specific scholastic study and conceal other analytical possibilities inherent to the narrative, Janice Windle's *True women* (1993) undeniably features as a material with prolific potentials for theoretical observations concerning the historical novel. After all, it not only consists of a postmodern re-reading of the past but stands as a text which sets a great example for historiographic metafiction or other similar subgenres to the historical novel like the saga.

Exactly because Windle portrays 19th-century Texas from a contemporary standpoint, her novel discusses innovative narrative stances. Being so, the novelist points out historians' incapacity to perfectly reconstruct the past, calls one's attention to different approaches to archives as far as perspective is concerned, how documents reflect their reporters' cultural standpoint, in what ways they expose the intellectual's political, philosophic or religious ideology (in case of Fundamentalist civilizations). In this, Windle discusses how thinkers could possibly inscribe different forms of otherness in official texts such as Eurocentrism, racism, gender biasing, homophobia or other forms of prejudice, depending on their historical context and cultural background.

Aware of these aspects, the novelist both parallels documents with invented plots skeptically and parodies the 19th-century misogynist association between woman and fancy by introducing uneventfulness in her story through magic realism. To understand how these topics

operate and coexist in the narrative, let us briefly present them from a reflexive viewpoint, articulating them, above all, to the theory on the historical novel.

When distinguishing the epos from the novel conceptually, Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) stresses that the epic genre privileges a far-fetched mythic past. Through imagination, it welcomes uneventfulness so that memories about an idealized national hero may linger in a particular society. Even acknowledging “the extraordinary difficulty inherent in formulating a theory on the novel” (BAKHTIN, 1981, p. 4), the theorist clarifies that the rise of the novel celebrates modernity, focuses on the present, being inherently linked to the Industrial Revolution and the ascension of the British bourgeoisie in the 18th century, as he claims:

In ancient literature, it is memory, and not knowledge, that serves as the source and power for the creative impulse. That is how it was, it is impossible to change it: the tradition of the past is sacred. There is as yet no consciousness of the possible relativity of any past. The novel, by contrast, is determined by experience, knowledge and practice (the future) (BAKHTIN, 1981, p. 15). [...] The epic world is an utterly finished thing, not only as an authentic event of the distant past but also on its own terms and by its own standards; it is impossible to change, to re-think, to evaluate anything in it (BAKHTIN, 1981, p. 17). [...]. Precisely, [...] on what basis [...] [is] the first step in the development of the novel [found]? It is this: contemporary reality serves as their subject, and – even more important – it is the starting point for understanding, evaluating and formulating such genres. [...] The novel [appears] as a genre of becoming (BAKHTIN, 1981, p.22)

Ian Watt (2010) agrees on this when stating that “The novel is the form of literature which mostly fully reflects the individualist and innovating reorientation” (WATT, 2010, p. 12). To this, Watt still adds that the novel “arose in the modern period, a period whose general intellectual orientation was most decisively separated from its classical and medieval heritage” (WATT, 2010, p. 3). Though both scholars highlight that reflexivity and mutability stand as the novel’s hallmark, they suggest that the portrayal of the present is to the novel as the depiction of the past is to the epic genre.

But if one critically observes the 18th and 19th century fictional production, he/she might consider that not every single novel from both centuries suit Watt’s or Bakhtin’s descriptions, especially if the Gothic and/or historical novels are put at stake. To clarify these questions, Avrom Fleishman (1998) sets apart the 18th-century historical novels which approached the fictionist’s present (such as Defoe’s, Fielding’s or Richardson’s) from specific 19th-century narratives about the past, written by Sir Walter Scott, for example. This distinction is so relevant that Terry Eagleton (2010) even affirms:

Scott was peculiarly well-placed to recreate the way in which history was supposedly evolving from a backward clan society to a modern nation-state. [...] Scott, then, was able to see history almost literally before his eyes, with the persistence of the Highland past into the present, in a way that an English writer of the day might well have found more problematic. [...] The finest historical fiction tends to spring from periods in which history is visibly in the making – in which you can feel the ground shifting under your feet, and capable of making new sense of the past in the light of the rapidly changing present (EAGLETON, 2010, p. 98).

Also according to Fleishman, this kind of historical novel is concerned with the invention of a nation's noble past, the glorification of a particular people and the preservation of their values, social norms and lifestyle, on the whole. In this, Fleishman outlines common aspects between the old epic and the historical novel *à la* Scott when affirming that such a genre does not totally let go of the epic traditions, unlike most of the novels produced by then, on which both Bakhtin and Watt focus. As Fleishman reckons, as “art of the imagination, the historical novel will be an exercise of the imagination on a particular kind of object. It is an imaginative portrayal of history, that is, of past states of affairs affecting human experience” (FLEISHMAN, 1998, p. 4).

Corroborating with this reasoning, Alexander Welsh (1992) poses that the historical novel deviates from the predominant formula adopted in the 18th century, distancing from reality or scientific knowledge. So, according to Welsh, verisimilitude, rather than factuality, is what sustains the historical novel's sense of veracity and what defines its mode of creation: “[In t]he practice of fiction [,] [...] Sir Walter Scott generally differed from the main tradition of the English novel in both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. [...] Neglecting the knowledge of the world, romancers aspired to the knowledge of the heart” (WELSH, 1992, p. 1)

Though Welsh coins Scott's fictional work as ‘romance’, I dare call them novels, firstly for Fleishman classifies them as novels, and secondly, because the conceptual distinction between ‘novel’ and ‘romance’ has been significantly blurred nowadays. If so, to better understand the theory of historical novel, especially on the saga, one should position such a text as a genre in-between the epopee and the 18th and 19th mainstream novel, because, although they replace stanzas by paragraphs, they keep the heroic theme, straying from the modernity and the advancements of modern societies. The historical novel in vogue is evasive and highlights the past. Besides, it features as a text which pretends to historicize a given moment but, which, deep inside, mingles fact and imagination on purpose.

Janice Woods Windle's best-seller and masterpiece *True women* 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 Jacqueline Cliffstone from *Houston Post* (1994), 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 notoriety in newspaper articles by Ann Richards, ex-governor of Texas (*True women*, 1993). To Crittenden, for instance, historical data abound in *True women* 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... [...] [The text is] 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 this very narrative 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" (Apud TW, 1993, p. 1). Undoubtedly, the novel has marked Windle's literary career and studies on 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. Although the cinematographic adaptation omits and modifies several aspects of the plot, it summarizes two-thirds of the novel satisfactorily, employing a lot of didacticism.

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 used to summon their black servant to the table at supper time. Very precisely, Windle aims at relativizing any cliché about ethnic

groups. In this sense, the novel also invites one to see that, just like the process of colonization in America juxtaposed conflictive cultures with reciprocal disarrays and profound idiosyncrasies, there may also have existed harmonious relationships among people from different ethnic groups as a form of resistance to 19th-century American laws in southern states. In this manner, Windle avoids overused dichotomies such as villainy/victimization, Christianity/paganism, shedding light to *mélanges*, cultural intermingles and in-betweenness.

So 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!" (*True women*, 1993, p. 1). As presented, Windle's 19th-century transgressive protagonists expose their views on the world as if they lived in our 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 to 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 overlap as long as the historiographic metafictionist wishes to make the reader question the constantly blurred borderlines between history and fiction as well as the fact the two of them are nothing but linguistic productions. As the scholar says,

For the most part historiographic metafiction, like much contemporary theory of history, does not fall into either 'presentism' or nostalgia in its relation to the past it represents. What it does is de-naturalize that temporal relationship. In both historiographic theory and postmodern fiction, there is an intense self-consciousness (both theoretical and textual) about the act of narrating in the present the events of the past, about the conjunction of present action and the past absent object of that agency. In both historical and literary postmodern representation, the doubleness remains; there is no sense of either historian or novelist reducing the strange past to verisimilar present (HUTCHEON, 1989, 71).

Actually, in a way, such reflections upon the contemporary historical novels leads one back to studies on past historical narratives. After all, if one tracks back the trajectory of the historical novel from Defoe to Scott in Britain or 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 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 the former 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. As Stephen Connor (1996) poses,

No historical account of the novel, or account of the novel in history can afford to shelve for long the complex question of the relations between novels and history. This is to say that the perspective that takes novels as a resource for history – as a certain kind of historical evidence, for example – must always at some stage acknowledge the uneasy overlap between novels and history as forms of narrative. To study the meanings, functions and pleasures of the novel across different periods is always to be concerned at least in part with the ways those periods imagine and narrate their own histories and the histories of others. Novels are, undoubtedly, part of the history of social life; but they are so largely because they provide evidence of the ways in which others have themselves constructed history, or historical relations. Novels are therefore, in both senses, ways of making history; they belong to the history of events and they contribute to the historical narrative of those events (CONNOR, 1996, p. 128).

Intensifying the deceptive nature of the 19th-century historical novelist, the historiographic metafictionist allows the reader to exploit particular questions already raised in 19th-century fictional conventions and even imitate the romantic historical novel. This exercise, however, is not fulfilled for imitation's sake, but intending to undermine old maxims by means of subtle irony. Therefore, the contemporary historical novel aims at de-dogmatizing the old historical

truth to present a debatable discourse, a point-of-view among others; after all, history and the novel share the very same linguistic basis.

As Hayden White (1975) 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 somehow in par with the 18th-century fictionist, as they both attempt to give their writings a sense of reality through discursive coherence. Following White’s ideas, the historiographic metafictionist expects to highlight the emplotment of the historical text and to evidence its narrativeness (HUTCHEON, 1989).

True women, in particular, is a novel about Texas, shedding light on oral history and its overlaps with myths and superstition. In this fashion, the narrative can also be seen as a sentimental novel, not just because it highlights domestic environments, but especially because it defies the rationality with which man produced history in the 19th century. Hence, women’s emotions and suffering are prevalent in a story whose pages are symbolically inked with blood.

As far as the narrative 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’, Windle scans herself into the first digressive chapter, similarly to a printed page. By then, she acts as though the text were a computer screen on which she might appear as downloadable material. Hence, 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). Nevertheless, Windle confesses getting lost ever since she logged herself into the text. After all, as a historian, she feels powerless, coming 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, totally devoid of emotion. They seem meaningless, elliptic and unable to rebuild old people’s biography in a touching and convincing way. So, she sees that writing about her deceased predecessors is like rising them from the dead or literally making them come alive. To do so, she needs to plunge

into their feelings, to thrive into their lived experiences with an edge, boldness, with an attitude so that her story can really impact the reader and make him/her value the importance of these 'true women'. Because of this, Windle's novel in question suits Hutcheon's description of the postmodern historian. After all, the novelist admits her incapacity to recreate history without appealing to narrativity the same way she foreshadows that. To make her ambitious writing project come true, she will have to accept the intentionally conflictive coexistence of fact and fiction partly intertwining, partly splitting apart from each other:

That novel's postmodern narrating historian might be seen as indirectly suggesting that not even Marxism can fully subsume all other interpretative modes. In his postmodern story-telling there is no mediation that can act as a dialectical term for establishing relationships between narrative form and social ground. They both remain and they remain separate (HUTCHEON, 1993, p. 64).

After Windle acknowledges the material she has collected 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 her family's 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).

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.

Likewise, the predecessors feel they are unreal, somehow imagined by a sort of narrator. So much so, the characters suspect of their fictionality, although they claim to be alive. Once Euphemia says: “Maybe I was just somebody made up and I was never actually born at all” (*TW*, p. 9). At another moment, Georgia confesses thinking of Texas in her childish dreams, as if that place westward were somewhere magical enough to make her live as honored as an Indian princess. In such moments, she would look up at the sky and fancy getting to Texas someday: “Georgia moved away from the door and out into the night towards Texas. After a while, it seemed the house moved and groaned upon the seas of night” (*TW*, p. 159).

To make her story sound special, Windle searches for an imaginative and skillful narrator whose passion for memories may instill the listeners’ hearts with magic and enchantment. So, the German-descendant writer clings to the African-American tradition, which gives an old matriarch the role of recalling deeds from the past (GATES JR., 1989, p. xxiii). To the character-author, Idella means more than a mere story-teller. Unlike ordinary people in town, the seer is acquainted with the dead as 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 fortune-teller in order to transform the spirits’ reportage 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 themselves. 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). In other words, the text claims to de-power history so as to empower fiction.

True women is pretty ironical because no scientific method includes consultation to spirits nor is any historian supposed to rely on a person’s report, mainly when the interviewee claims to be unconscious and to have embodied a spiritual entity. So, in the novel, the anti-totalizing totalization is found in Windle’s unreliable scientific approach to historical investigations and in the veiled playfulness with which she develops her project. After all, when voicing Idella, Windle strips herself from the status of a learned woman in order to empower somebody totally deprived from any scientific knowledge. So, under these circumstances, history is de-totalized to be re-totalized from another perspective; a perspective which de-centers the scholar to voice ordinary women, the poor and the black in an intentionally contradictory performance:

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 unfailing. 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).

Looking forward to seeing the story-teller, Windle talks about the river on which the former's residence is partly founded. Living on the bank, Idella herself stands very close to the rushy flux of history whose symbolic waves always surround her. Gazing from this prism, Idella is diluted in the course of history and floats 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 bodies underlying in its slippery bed: "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 outflow illustrates 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 space. In this sense, the Guadalupe symbolizes the conditions in which local history is found; in a way memories of a particular community can be socially and culturally dynamic, on the one hand, but, stative as far as geography is concerned: "[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 reportages the seer receives from the ghosts. Shrugging her body like a scared little girl, Windle realizes how tiny she feels whenever Idella metaphorically 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, Windle is aware of her inferiority because Idella, as a personification of history, makes one think of the contemporary subject's psychological condition. 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 the character-historian also looks insecure, unstable, lost 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 inexplicably teach historiography and literary theory in profundity. 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 randomness one might tell fact and fiction apart with total precision. 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 go back to Texas. Even though the author is admonished not to play with the dead, she makes a point to awaken them from their graves in order to present history from a female standpoint: "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 fictional-creation process, the author, like a woman about to deliver a baby, supposedly feels the pain of the characters she bears little by little, which explains the reason why Windle and the spirits share the same pain.

Obviously, Idella, just like her evocation of the ghosts, is nothing but a narrative stance, an artifice to make the reader confront two fictional faces of the author. As a character, Windle 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, Idella performatively appears as the former’s double or as her fancy. Thus, the fortune-teller consists of an alibi to intensify the metafictional nature of the narrative or an excuse for the writer to invent her matriarchs’ past as she pleases. After all, as soon as the novel ends, Idella mysteriously disappears all of a sudden. Since then, Windle, as a character, no longer sees the old mystic woman because the latter must only exist while the novel is woven (or read). 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 as a symbolical binding between history and fiction, as if both were literally face to face in the narrative. Such a 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 Windle's 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.

When one starts reading the novel, he/she is told Windle is going to meet an old woman so that the author may write a historical novel in the future; she is going to interview the spirits in three séances so she can transform the collected information into a novel in the future, but all of this is again performative. After all, to believe it, the reader might take for granted he/she is not really coming to terms with a ready-made novel and he/she is participating in the process of creation in real time. So, again, the novel is presented as if it were a movie projected on the screen. However, when the interview is over, the reader realizes that Windle's future book is already accomplished and all the stages through which the narratee goes are nothing but an illusive game supposedly shown in real-time writing. For all these reasons, *True women* resembles a game in which gender questions appear in magic realism. After all, Windle de-historicizes history to divest it from a traditional male perspective in which logics and rationality become keywords and from a realm in which only men can emblemize the epic plot. By centering women in her novel, Windle presents fighting heroines and her backstage traveling husbands far away over the wars.

In *True women*, female worlds are put at stake, which stresses the feminist nature of the text. The novel focuses on women's accurate participation in the Alamo war and their self-defense over the Civil War. Euphemia and Sarah Ashby, for instance, lead a troop of women and children away from Santa Anna's attack in Texas. Bearing suffering of all sorts, hunger, the death of babies and pregnant women, hundreds of surviving heroines overcome cold or wet weather, diseases, and even shoot many Mexicans soldiers dead in order to protect their children and each other:

A group of women was organized to create places beneath the wagons and beneath tarpaulins and tents, even brush bowers, for those who had no wagon or shelter of their own. Another group of women volunteered to pool their food and cook for the group. Sarah asked another group, those known for the nursing skills, to check the wagons for sickness and to survey what remedies and medicines might be shared. [...]The ammunition must be saved to defend against Santa Anna or outlaws or Indians or cougars or the bears which prowled the canebrakes by the rivers (*TW*, p. 21).

In Part II, Georgia Lawshe, after banning Yankee soldiers from her lands over the Civil War, still also manages to kill a high-ranked officer of the Union after discovering he plans to rape her firstborn daughter. Although the heroine has always felt guilty of being an unaffectionate mother, she would never allow an enemy to touch her child. And to stop him, she would defy

him, came what might, to preserve her family's integrity while her husband was out, tending the sick in the battlefield:

Georgia realized Haller whirled, whipped his gun from its holster, and the stable was filled with thunder and lightning. It was a numbing, all-enveloping sound that shook the earth and the stable and the soul. In the moonlight, Georgia saw Haller spin to the side, then reach for Cherokee and pull her against his body. He held her as a shield toward the source of the shots. Georgia could see dark stains spreading on Cherokee's white nightdress and she prayed the blood as Haller's. Then the firing stopped and the screaming of the horses subsided and the stable grew ominously quiet. Georgia could hear Haller's labored breathing, a sound like a broken bellows. He had been hit. He swayed and coughed and only by leaning on Cherokee did he keep from falling. He scanned the darkness, apparently unwilling to waste his remaining bullets by firing wildly into the loft. His back was to Georgia. Carefully, Georgia walked forward until she was just behind Haller. Then she stepped to the side, pushed the pistol into his stomach, and pulled the trigger (*TW*, p. 270).

As mentioned before, this epic novel, in the form of saga, dialogues with the epos's mythic construes, as it works on imagination and welcomes uneventfulness to the historical fact by means of magic realism; a concept which, according to Bill Ashcroft, consists of a particular manifestation of the fantastic which deploys culture specific myths such as folklore (1998). In the case of *True women*, local superstition and Idella's legendary fame in Seguin set the grounds for magic realism, describing 19th-century Texans' intense superstition. Never in the novel does Windle exploit metaphysics at all. Otherwise, spirits figure as metaphorical constructs which represent Idella's memories or Windle's creativity and imagination. In this sense, magic realism appears as a strategy used to challenge man's world and his scientific description of facts in the 19th-century America. After all, if the traditional portrayal of history is based on man's rationality, woman's sense of historicity welcomes fancy and dreams through magic realism and historiographic metafiction.

As seen, in many ways Windle innovates story-telling in *True women* by building up a historical novel about 19th-century American heroines. When fictionally reconstructing her predecessors' world, the novelist triggers contemporary ideas for studies on gender, magic realism and the historical novel. Moreover, she adopts narrative strategies in tune with cinematographic conventions and technological apparatus, picturing a past world with a postmodern edge.

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