

**JEANETTE WINTERSON'S *THE POWERBOOK*: THE NARRATOR AS A  
CYBORG WRITER WHO ENGAGES IN QUANTUM THEORY**

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**RESUMO:** Neste artigo procuro demonstrar como a escritora Jeanette Winterson, em *The Powerbook* (2001), desafia o funcionamento binário da Tradição Ocidental e confunde os limites entre os gêneros masculino e feminino, entre as ontologias materiais e virtuais, entre autor e texto e expõe a fluidez dessas categorias aparentemente opostas. A análise sugere que Winterson, ao lançar mão de uma escrita que pode ser relacionada ao manifesto ciborgue de Donna Haraway e aos postulados de Karen Barad de uma ontologia realista de agenciamento, põe em cheque a ideia de um escritor auto-evidente e mostra como os dois lados do binário “intra-agem”, para usar um termo sugerido por Barad, e se contaminam.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** teoria do autor, escrita ciborgue, ontologia realista de agenciamento

**ABSTRACT:** In this paper, I strive to demonstrate how Jeanette Winterson, in *The Powerbook*, challenges the binary functioning of the Western Tradition and enacts the blurring of boundaries between male and female gender, between material and virtual ontologies, and between author and text, thus exposing the fluidity of these apparently opposing categories. Winterson's text is explored in ways that show how she, by writing in a way that can be related to Donna Haraway's cyborg manifesto and to Karen Barad's agential realist ontology, both confronts the idea of a self-evident author and makes evident how both sides of the binary “intra-act,” a term suggested by Barad, and contaminate each other.

**KEYWORDS:** author theory, cyborg writing, agential realist ontology

*Time is downloaded into our bodies. We contain it. Not only time past and time future,  
but time without end. We think of ourselves as close and finite, when we are multiple  
and infinite.*

*Jeanette Winterson, The Powerbook*

## **1. Introduction**

*The Powerbook* (2001), by Jeanette Winterson, is a book about writing. It tells the story of a writer who may or may not be named Alix, and who runs a specific type of

costume shop in London. The shop is supposedly physical, but it is also virtual. One gets the impression that a customer can enter the shop and ask for a physical makeover, but Alix does her work in the virtual world. She is, as the first chapter's title suggests, a "language costumier." Those who enter her establishment are looking for more than a change of clothes; they are looking for another body entirely, and a body whose DNA is virtually altered. The novel is a leap into technology, and the virtual world is the tool for the narrator's "storying"<sup>1</sup> of others' stories. The chapters invoke this environment in titles such as "OPEN HARD DRIVE," "VIEW AS ICON," "EMPTY TRASH," "QUIT," "RESTART", and "SAVE." The titles in capital letters are interspaced with lower case titles that are more earthbound, such as "blame my parents," "own hero," "great and ruinous lovers," and "terrible thing to do to a flower," suggesting that the virtual and material contaminate each other. It is unclear who the "official" writer of the stories being costumed is, but it is clear that someone who wants to put the idea of an official author in check is in charge of telling them.

Materiality, language, and even quantum theory are brought to the fore in *The Powerbook*, a work that challenges the idea of the author, of gender performativity, and of the production of matter in a virtual world that functions on the basis of language. I would like to propose a reading of *The Powerbook* that sees in Alix, the supposed narrator, a cyborg writer who challenges the binary functioning of the Western tradition and enacts the blurring of boundaries of male/female gender, of material/virtual, and of author/text, thus exposing the fluidity of material and virtual ontologies. In order to do so, I will firstly think over both the process of writing and the notion of the "author" in the light of Michel Foucault's piece "What is an author?" (1984). Secondly, I will rely

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<sup>1</sup> I use the noun "story" as a verb in a similar way as Donna Haraway (2008), who sees in stories the potential for "world building."

on the articulations of Donna Haraway (1991), who develops the idea of the cyborg and sees in writing a technology; and of Karen Barad (2003), who works both with Judith Butler's theorizations on performativity and quantum theory to propose that language has been given too much power over matter. Barad puts her efforts into debunking the idea that we, through language, can objectively and truly *represent* the world that surrounds us. To achieve that purpose, she proposes an alternative: an agential realist ontology. In such an ontology, the notion that one can only make partial representations is always a known fact, and one takes responsibility for what is left out, unrepresented. The "agential" comes from the possibility of "enacting" a border that separates observer from what is observed in order to convey the idea of objectivity.

## **2. What happens when the Author (author?) goes interactive?**

"What happened to the omniscient author?" (WINTERSON, 2001, p. 27), the narrator's interlocutor asks, and to that Alix responds that s/he has gone interactive. The reader is not learning from the author, s/he is learning and storying *with* the author, an argument that can be explored alongside the theories of Foucault, in this section, and of Barad, in the next section. Foucault (1984), in "*What is an Author?*", develops a nonessential notion of the author by means of both deconstructing the idea that any representation is the essence of truth and of bringing the notion that everything an author writes is always already mediated. In the dichotomy of author/text, the author is always already text, for the author's authority has been put in check. The text, which had been considered slave to the author's "intended meaning," has killed the author in that it has gained power beyond the author's intentions. Winterson works with this notion in the sense that her narrator begins the book with the sentence "[t]o avoid discovery I stay on the run. To discover things for myself I stay on the run" (WINTERSON, 2001, p. 3). The text, like Winterson's narrator, defers meaning

because the signifier can only have a loose relationship with “truth,” since not even the signified itself, as author, has access to “truth.” Foucault develops the notion of the “author function” to describe that texts produced by certain authors seem to invoke their presence, “marking off the edges of the text [...]. The author's name manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and a culture” (FOUCAULT, 1984, p. 107). Foucault elaborates his arguments further by explaining that some discourses are endowed with this said author function, while others are not, thus setting apart author from writer. So what does it mean that in *The Powerbook* one cannot clearly assert who produces the text? The author function, a fiction according to Foucault, relies on a stability that Alix, the narrator, does not seem to want to engage with. Not only does she want fluidity in genre (blog posts, historical narratives, fables, romance, recipes, online chats, and alternative endings compose the book), but also in gender (in the chapter titled “NEW DOCUMENT,” one only finds out that the conversation and later intercourse that takes place is between two women twenty six pages into it).

Foucault sustains that the author ,

is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work; the author does not precede the works; he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction. (FOUCAULT, 1984, p. 118-119)

The author function, in other words, delineates boundaries for the possible meanings of the text. Foucault develops this line of reasoning predicting a change: the disappearance

of the author function, in which the signifier will no longer be restricted to the author's self-evident presence. Nonetheless, the signifier will still be within what Foucault calls "system of constraint," for texts will always be produced within a cultural context, but that system of constraint could no longer be the author.

Foucault's argument can be related to that made by Adrienne Rich in *Notes Toward a Politics of Location* ((Rich's essay was first published in 1984, but I have used the text published in the 2003 edition of *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, so hereafter 2003). In *Notes*, Rich calls attention to the weight of location in the production of texts. She begins with the geography that is closest to her – the body, and how in being placed in a specific location on the map, in culture, in the world, even in the universe, she produces works that bring marks of this location. Rich explains her main concern by stating that: "I need to understand how a place on the map is also a place in history within which a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist I am created and trying to create" (RICH, 2003, p. 30). As a Marxist, she believes in reclaiming the body of the woman (as opposed to transcending it), in beginning theorization with the material, and in reconnecting signifier and signified as co-producers of any discourse, that is, in the non-essential view of language over body, going against a representational theory that believes in language's power to inscribe matter and represent truth. The body of a woman and its location are co-producers of the language they produce because they are limited by the cultural norms that control them.

Similarly, Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (the work was first published in 1929, but I have used the version published in 2004 by Penguin Books, so hereafter 2004), ponders over the effects of poverty in the life of Mrs Seton, who is constrained by a culture that inscribes in her the function of caring for others, mothering as many children as possible, and being deprived of education. Did her material body

have no effects on her social mobility? In Woolf's words, "Why did men drink wine and women water? Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor? What effect has poverty on fiction? What conditions are necessary for the creation of a work of art?" (WOOLF, 2004, p. 29). Rich echoes these questions when she asks herself, "where, when, and under what conditions have women acted and been acted on as women?" (RICH, 2003, p. 31). Foucault's and Rich's arguments are not so different after all if one understands that both are claiming for the empowerment of the signifier, the text (as opposed to author) and the material (or the body, as opposed to language.) Rich's argument is grounded in the effort to go both for a consciousness of the material body and against the universalizing category of "we, women." Her claim is for a localized articulation that recognizes the oppressions *and* privileges of the speaker. We produce, as Haraway (2003) may put it, situated knowledge. Rich argues that, as a woman, she is oppressed. As a white woman, she is less oppressed than her Black peers, and less oppressed than her white, Latin American peers. Nonetheless, as a white and Jewish woman, she is more oppressed than her white, middle class peers are. Oppression, she shows, is relational, and the body localizes discourse.

In the virtual world presented by Winterson's narrator, the signifier is free from the author's constraints, from the constraints of her material body, and DNA can be redesigned. Just as Haraway's (1991) cyborg, whose writing can be read as a technology, Alix entices her customers with the promise of allowing them to be free for one night. In the first chapter, titled "language costumier," we learn that the person in charge of telling the stories mixes biology with narrative. She receives an email in which her customer expresses the desire to be free to be someone else for the night. When replying, she says with regard to the work she does on her computer: "[h]ere we take your chromosomes, twenty-three pairs, and alter your height, eyes, teeth, sex. This

is an invented world. You can be free for just one night” (p. 4), and adds that “I can change the story. I am the story” (WINTERSON, 2001, p. 5). There is, however, no guarantee that the text will behave according to the customer’s or the writer’s intentions. Alix tells her client that “if I start this story [...] it may change under my hands” (WINTERSON, 2001, p. 26), suggesting that there is no stability in the composition of a story, where signifiers are co-producers and responsible for the outcome. In a cyborg manner, she uses writing as a “storying” technology that disrupts boundaries of gender and genre normativity, mixing both along the way and allowing for the story to gain life beyond the control of the writer.

### **3. Origin (and the lack thereof)**

In the chapter “EMPTY TRASH,” Winterson explores the issue of origin in *The Powerbook* in a way that can be connected both to Rich’s (2003) and Haraway’s (1991) ponderings on the subject. Rich is concerned with images of women from the past, images of woman-affirming cultures and the effects that discourses about these images have in the present. She claims that while images from the past can keep us attached to a past that *is* no more, they can also be empowering if they engage with “actions in the present” (p. 39). Winterson’s exploration of the issue of origin, however, is more connected to Haraway’s articulation of the cyborg in that, in skipping the narrative of origin, it does not have a past to be faithful to, it is an unfaithful offspring. Haraway’s theorization of origin has to do with lack of fidelity on the part of the cyborg writer, for she (it) does not align herself to a genealogy that constrains her. The cyborg, in her words, “skips the step of original unity, of identification with nature in the Western sense,” (HARAWAY, 1991, p. 151) so that the images that Rich criticizes as constraining women, as well as the narratives of origin that relate women to nature, to sin, to angels, play no part in the cyborg’s ontology.

Winterson presents a story of origin, one that is much similar to that of the cyborg in that it explains what seems to be the narrator's childhood story. Alix is an orphan and, in so being, is a "child outside time who could cheat time." Her adoptive parents wanted a "changeling child. A child without past or future" (WINTERSON, 2001, p. 137). At her house it was forbidden to read or write, for her father could do neither while her mother could do both. Reading and writing, tools and technologies of empowerment for cyborg writers, had no value in the household. In spite of that, Alix learns how to read and write from her mother anyway. Her process is similar to that of women of color under slavery in the United States who, as Haraway puts forth, were forbidden to learn how to read and write and, in learning how to do so under such adversity and pressure, gained potent subjectivities. Alix, therefore, is a cyborg in the sense that she has no commitment to a narrative of origin, she seizes the tools of reading and writing, and engages in technology to *story* (as a verb) virtual worlds. At the same time that those virtual worlds allow one to break away from a binary structure, they aim at a world where the signifier is not in bondage with the signified.

In the process of exploring this issue of complementarity over a binary opposition, Winterson's *Powerbook* resonates with Karen Barad's (2003) articulation of an agential realist ontology, in which quantum theory plays a key role. In fact, Haraway mentions in the cyborg manifesto that quantum theory has played a key role in the shifting of theoretical boundaries. Quantum theory has allowed her to articulate the figure of the cyborg as a position from which one could theorize in an empowering way as well as produce writings so that women can use science and technology to increase their agency in the world.

Karen Barad, who establishes a direct dialogue with Haraway's cyborg manifesto in her *Posthumanist Performativity* articulations, works with both quantum

theory, especially based on Niels Bohr's work done in the field, and Butler's notion of performativity to articulate the idea of an "agential realism." Barad starts her discussion by stating that "language has been granted too much power" (BARAD, 2003, p. 801). In saying so, from the start she questions the importance placed on discourse and its power to represent and construct matter, as if matter were a passive object, "waiting" for inscription. Winterson challenges the role of the body itself, the material, raising the question of the body in relation to discourse as a disguise: "What if skin, bone, liver, veins, are the things I use to hide myself? I have put them on and I can't take them off. Does that trap me or free me?" (WINTERSON, 2001, p. 15). Implicit in this question is the idea that the body is forced to identify with a gender that is created *by* language, in which biology is used as measure for sex, but the body itself does not identify with this inscription. This said, Winterson's questioning calls attention both to language and to the materiality of the body, in which the latter resists the former. Barad deals with a similar notion in her work, where she develops the idea that language and materiality, that is, body and language, observer and observed, text and author, produce effects on each other.

In Winterson's virtual world, the body gains agency to alter its own DNA. That is done even if it is by means of what she calls "a little horticultural grafting," when Ali, a character in the first virtual story, changes her sex by hiding bulbs of tulip over her intimate parts and performs sex with a woman in a movement where the tulip *begins to stand*. The woman with whom Ali has sex, a Princess who has chosen Ali to initiate her into the arts of intimacy before she is to marry, has had no prior contact with the performance of sex, and therefore, is not influenced by an idea of what male sex (not gender) ought to look and perform like.

Gender, for Winterson, seems to be performative. When her client complains that transforming a flower into a “princess-fucking apparatus” (p. 26) is a terrible thing to do to a flower, client and costumier raise issues of gender in the following exchange:

‘Who are you?’

‘Call me Ali.’

‘Is that your real name?’

‘Real enough.’

‘Male or female?’

‘Does it matter?’

‘It’s a coordinate.’

‘This is a virtual world.’

‘OK, OK – but just for the record – male or female?’

‘Ask the Princess.’ (WINTERSON, 2001, p. 26)

Three aspects could be analyzed from this passage. First, when Ali(x) asks, “does it matter,” the word “matter” can be understood both in light of the question itself, which implies that it should not make a difference whether she is male or female in the virtual story, and in light of matter itself. Gender matters and becomes matter through *and with* language, so why define it through biology? “It’s a coordinate,” the client replies. Yes, it is, and it can be as constricting as Rich’s arguments on narratives of origin. In cyborg writing, and in Barad’s articulations of an agential realist ontology, gender is also performative, so Ali(x) finishes with “Ask the Princess,” where the *act* “of matter” should speak for itself.

Barad (2003), in her articulations, shows the limits of social constructivism and representationalism to then conduct the reader into a more compelling system of

representation, one where the “knower” is neither separated from the “object” nor is s/he able to fully represent its “reality,” only when markedly so and in what she calls a “cut,” where the “knower” agentially separates herself from the object, using what she terms “apparatuses” to describe a given phenomenon that is by no way universal, but a specific intra-action between subject and object. In this sense, the only possible separation between matter and “knower” is that of “exteriority within phenomena,” (BARAD, 2003, 815) a term she uses to explain the myth of exteriority that is marked by the “cut.” Phenomena, Barad explains, involves positions and momentums. Positions only have meaning when rigid, fixed apparatuses are used. A measurement (a description), then, can only be made with the knowledge that inside the phenomena (which is the smallest epistemological unit, instead of the observer or the observed) the observer enacts an exteriority that will allow him scientific objectivity. The exteriority, the observer knows, is always already within the phenomena. Barad works with the notion of “diffraction,” in which many representations (always partial, always a cut) are possible at once, depending on the phenomena and the apparatuses that are made available both for observed and observer. The point is that nothing can be truly represented through language and language alone does not materialize matter, only matter and language *together* can produce *a version* of the truth

In “NEW DOCUMENT,” the aforementioned chapter in which two female characters eventually have sex, one of them argues that she has come to Paris because of the Eiffel Tower. She likes “structures without cladding,” and adds that she “[tries] to let the lines show through. Not on [her] face, of course, but elsewhere. [Her] work, [her] life, [her] body” (WINTERSON, 2001, p. 35). Structures without cladding reveal what they stand on as well as what surrounds them, for in being see-through, there is no way of hiding behind the myth of unity. A structure without cladding affects its environment

in the same way that it is affected by it, colored by it, and this is where Winterson's work illustrates Barad's argument in the sense that the latter puts forth that the only way one can really represent something is by enacting a border that pretends one is exterior to the thing represented. The Eiffel Tower, in *The Powerbook*, could be argued to represent a rupture with the myth of unity, the myth of objectivity, with the idealistic notion that things that coexist do not necessarily intra-act.

An even more explicit illustration of Winterson's relation with Barad's articulations is the former's use of quantum ideas in her work. "In quantum reality," the narrator says, "there are millions of possible worlds, unactualised, potential, perhaps bearing in on us, but only reachable by wormholes we can never find" (WINTERSON, 2001, p. 53). Language cannot describe the whole of matter, and our experience, in being described through language, risks cheating "matter out of the fullness of its capacity" (BARAD, 2003, p. 810). Winterson's narrator seems to be aware of the incommensurability of the world in the sense that the whole of it cannot be described. Stories, then, the narrator argues, "are maps. Maps of journeys that have been made and might have been made" (WINTERSON, 2001, p. 53). In the light of Barad's work, perhaps Winterson is saying that stories are cuts. In other words, they are exteriorities-within where an observer performs the idea of an objective distance from what is being observed and describes it, pretending that what is being observed does not push itself toward the writer, does not force its own materiality into the story. Winterson's narrator writes in the virtual world; still, her references are worldly. "Found objects wash up on the shores of my computer" (WINTERSON, 2001, p. 63), she writes, and even though that takes place virtually, matter in the form of descriptions reach her and help her compose stories. She is ultimately, as she puts it, "looking for the meaning inside the data" (p. 64).

Winterson's narrator engages with a notion that is similar to Barad's articulation once again when Alix is pondering on virtual worlds and the false idea they convey of unity, of one being separated from the others one is interacting with. She reasons that the mind, where meaning is ultimately articulated, "is a curved space. What we experience, what we invent, track by track running together, then running into one, the brake lever released. Atom and dream" (WINTERSON, 2001, p. 94). That observer and observed both affect each other and are impacted by the world around them is one of the possible readings of this reasoning, and any description following from this impact is the result of what Barad calls intra-action. Further into the same chapter where the narrator articulates this impact, she claims that "[w]e think of ourselves as closed and finite, when we are multiple and infinite" (WINTERSON, 2001, p. 103), showing that she resists an understanding of the writer as solely responsible for what s/he writes. This intra-action can be exemplified in one more passage from the chapter, where the narrator is mentally talking to her lover, who is asleep beside her: "How do you seem to write me to myself? I am a message. You change the meaning. I am a map that you redraw" (WINTERSON, 2001, p. 109). In this sense, Winterson insists on coordinates and co-writing, showing throughout that these coordinates are, one could argue, the performances we repeat because they help stabilize meaning. However, Winterson uses these coordinates to show precisely that there is no stability in meaning, that bodies perform the same rituals of heterosexual narratives in homosexual ones, and with the same anxiousness, the same seduction, the same drama, the same love. She explores the idea of bodies in disguise, trapped and then freed, performing scripts not meant for them because being trapped in a single narrative is too limiting, and fusion, Alix argues, "allows complexity and diversity" (WINTERSON, 2001, p. 175).

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

What I hope to have demonstrated is that Winterson challenges notions of writing by presenting it as a collaborative work, a work of signified and signifier, of body and language, and as a technology that does not reproduce ideas of normativity in a genre that is crowded with this construct. It is a romance; it is a deconstruction of what a romance is and of the environment where it takes place. Winterson shows that gender is performativity and that genre is also performativity, and in appropriating the form of a romantic novel to tell the story of Alix and her lover, she shows the instability of the system which heteronormativity strives so hard to maintain.

Toward the end of the book, the narrator brings Rembrandt to, one could argue, establish an analogy with her own work as a cyborg writer who engages with quantum theory. Rembrandt, the narrator explains, has inserted himself into his work in many different ways, altering the optics of representation from wrinkled in one painting to smooth-skinned in another; with and without props, and in different scenarios. “He was shifting his own boundaries,” she argues. “He was itching into other selves” (WINTERSON, 2001, p. 214), suggesting that being locked into the narrative of one body, one gender, into the myth of unity in which signified solely constructs signifier, is too limiting. As a cyborg writer, she contributes to the shifting of boundaries and engages with an agential realist ontology that sees the body not as a limiting structure, but as a structure that intra-acts with the world and is produced by it at the same time that it is producing it. With regard to Rembrandt’s self-portraits, the narrator says that they “are a record, not of one life, but of many lives – lives piled in on one another. And sometimes surfacing through the painter and into the paint” (WINTERSON, 2001, p. 214). As a language costumier who apparently invites herself into the narratives she co-creates, Alix seems to be striving for the same experience of engagement.

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