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Abstract

This article explores the multiple possibilities offered when literary and technological media are combined to influence and reshape the relationship between readers and writers, as evidenced in Joyce R. Walker’s hypertext “Textural Textuality: A Personal Exploration Of Critical Race Theory” (2002). Walker blends life experience with scholarly theory in order to explore the causes of social discrimination and injustice, while at the same time maintaining a critical position in respect of new media technologies. In order to explore this text’s various dimensions, this essay will look to formative approaches to hypertext, especially with reference to linearity, navigation, and reading processes and experiences, in critical works by Espen Aaseth, Jessica Pressman, George P. Landow, and N. Katherine Hayles. Particular emphasis is given to the idea, promoted by Janet H. Murray, Brian McHale, and Aarseth, that hypertext’s interactive qualities involve both readers and writers in the production of the literary object. Such interactivity, this essay argues, blurs the boundaries that have conventionally separated readers and authors, with reading and writing assigned to both agents in this transformative literary medium.

Keywords: hypertext, hypertext navigation, hypertext linearity, new media technologies, electronic literature.

The emergence of new media has brought to the fore new possibilities for interaction and has redefined how people perceive the world. New media have made possible the interconnection of various disciplines and they have enhanced access to various sources of knowledge and information in all the disciplines. This article focuses on the influence that new media have on literary expression and form. They have, through ongoing acts of textual experimentation, challenged and redefined both the literary experience and reading practices, as well as the notion of text itself; as a consequence, literary critics and theorists have been engaged in a rethinking of precisely what constitutes a text. In the expanding field of electronic literature everything can constitute a text, from simple images to any form of art; the text may consist of images, scripted content, mere words, or a mixture of all of these; it can also be combined with motion, sound, and animation.

The present article explores the new roles offered by new electronic media with regard to both readers and writers in electronic literature, in general, and the hypertext form, in particular. More specifically, Joyce R. Walker’s hypertext “Textural Textuality: A Personal Exploration of Critical Race Theory” (2002) constitutes an example of how these roles open up and are transformed by new media. Walker’s “Textural Textuality” is an online hypertext work that combines creative and critical writing. By making use of the various possibilities offered by hypertext, Walker is able to touch upon important issues, such as race, memory,
and ethnic identity and to do so through multiple perspectives brought to the fore by means of the possibilities offered by hypertext. Jacob Nielsen asserts that

/hypertext presents several different options to the readers, and the individual reader determines which of them to follow at the time of reading the text. This means that the author of the text has set up a number of alternatives for readers to explore rather than a single stream of information. (2, italics in original)

Thus every reader who enters the text is, to some extent, able to develop his or her route through the text, which, therefore, opens to multiple perspectives. This allows readers to take up the role of the author as they become participants in the production of the narrative process. By employing the hypertext form, Walker blurs the boundaries that have tended to separate readers’ and writers’ relationship to authorship and narration.

Building upon the widespread access to technological devices and the Internet, Walker’s hypertext takes experimental writing a step further. The core argument of her digital constructions relates to Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s notion of remediation, as provided in their influential Remediation: Understanding New Media (1999). That is, remediation has to do with the way new media “refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media” (15). Essentially, remediation is the new mediation of an older media form. It is the representation of the same object through a different medium and the alternative perspectives this offers. Moreover, Bolter and Grusin maintain that remediation “attempts to achieve immediacy by ignoring or denying the presence of the medium and the act of mediation” (11). The author’s intent is to present a different perspective on a particular issue and at the same time to benefit from the possibilities of new media without focusing on the medium itself or the mediation that takes place. Walker, in her hypertext, attempts to remediate all the print narrations of racial issues in the electronic medium and juxtapose them to her personal exploration through the perspective of a white person (see fig.1).

Fig.1. Still from the introductory page (Walker).
Walker combines, in her hypertext, multiple narrations, including her own, which produce a text made up of multiple narrative layers. Consequently, the use of new media for the exploration of new modes of narration introduces readers to diverse ways of approaching heated debates and subjects, as is the case here with regard to U.S. interracial perceptions and relations, what Walker calls in “Textural Textuality” the “pathology of whiteness” (see fig. 1). In her introduction, she also mentions that she places great importance on intertextuality in her text (see fig. 2) in her attempt to approach the issues of race and ethnicity from a white perspective. The use of hypertext thus allows Walker to examine these issues through multiple perspectives, with the readers being able to review them themselves through the texts from different authors she imports into her own narration.

![Fig.2. Importance of intertextuality and multiple perspectives (Walker).](image)

As new media evolve, a much greater number of electronic literary forms come to the fore. Walker’s text is directly interwoven with the kind of technology that its author utilizes as a means of conveying and sharing her thoughts, as is evident in her claim in figure 2. Espen J. Aarseth, in his book Perspectives On Ergodic Literature (1999), reflects on the co-existence of literary practice with electronic technologies and comments on various forms of textuality, nonlinearity, and interactivity, arguing that “hypertexts, adventure games, and so forth are not texts the way the average literary work is a text” (2-3). Aarseth presents various forms of textuality that challenge the conventional notion of the characteristics that define a text. He also argues that although a node-based hypertext—as is the case with “Textural Textuality”—can be read in only one way, that is from node to node, it does offer multiple reading paths in contrast to the print text that can be read only in one way and has only one reading path. To be more specific, the print text and the hypertext written in “codex text” (79) limit the reading process to either the “homolinear” (79) or the “heterolinear” (79), as is predefined by the author. On the contrary, reading hyperlinked hypertexts requires that the readers make choices with regard to the reading strategy one needs to follow. In Aarseth’s words, “the hypertext structure of nodes and links only allows one [way of reading]: hyperlinear reading, the improvised selection of paths across a network structure” (79), whereas print texts offer the reading path that is in conventional terms set by the author. However, Aarseth also argues that “a piece of writing on paper or a computer screen should not be confused with the act of reading it” (46). Non-linearity is not solely a trait of an electronic text, but can also be the characteristic of a print text. Aarseth points to the fact that readers or viewers are not obliged to read a text the way it is constructed by the author, either on the page or on the screen. In both cases, they have the option to read texts according to the affordances of the technologies employed. However, in Walker’s hypertext, readers play a primary role in the way the narration begins, proceeds, and ends. It should be noted here that it is not only the medium that prescribes linearity, but also the approach...
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Readers adopt when it comes to accessing an electronic text. On the other hand, non-linearity and a less limiting reading mode can also be the author’s wish, as is the case with Walker, who intends to offer multiple reading paths and through them multiple perspectives allowing her readers to draw their own conclusions as regards the issues she brings forth. Consequently, in the case of Walker’s text various reading paths can be followed, as these are shaped by the choices each reader makes on entering the text.

Furthermore, in her influential study *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (2008), N. Katherine Hayles argues that works in volume one of the *Electronic Literature Collection* and “the entire field of electronic literature [. . .] test the boundaries of the literary and challenges us to rethink our assumptions of what literature can do and be” (5). Electronic literature questions and on occasions subverts the literary conventions that people tend to associate with literary writing. Janet H. Murray, in her study *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (1997), argues that “[w]hen the writer expands the story to include multiple possibilities, the reader assumes a more active role [as the text constitutes] an invitation to join the creative process” (38). For the narrative process to commence, readers need also to interact with the medium through which they can access the text. Readers, who in this case turn also into viewers of the action featuring on the screen, are not only in charge of setting the text into motion but also of the narration itself that proceeds according to the choices the readers make.

Brian McHale, as early as in his book *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992), has argued that in electronic literature “a communicative circuit [is formed] joining author and reader” under a common goal, to create a text that will represent the expectations of both (102). McHale finds that in the case of new media the roles of the reader and writer are altered since a partnership is formed between them in relation to how the narrative experience is created. Such a claim corresponds with Murray’s reading of the relation of the reader and the writer in the electronic text as it highlights the need for collaboration between the author and the readers in the creation of a text. In the case of the electronic text, in particular, this partnership becomes more important since readers are at the same time viewers who interact with the text in multiple ways both mentally and physically.

In Walker’s “Textural Textuality,” the readers are asked to select their entry point to the text from a list of available entry points in the hypertext menu. After entering the text, they can also select the links that lead to the part of Walker’s text on which they wish to focus. In this sense, the readers share certain roles with the writer as the line between the two roles becomes blurred with the readers also taking on the role of the author. Walker blends experience with scholarly theory in an attempt to locate the reason why people experience discrimination. She introduces different examples of literary writing as well as alternate ways of reading literary texts since she is interested in illustrating how texts are visualized in digitally-generated and electronic environments, while, at the same time, maintaining a critical stance towards electronic media technologies and the impact they have on the shaping and construction of racial identity and experience. Indeed, the digital medium provides for her the space through which a new kind of language of expression and visualization as regards racial identity can be formulated. Walker’s exploration is navigated via the simile of a transit bus or a “node” leading to a different destination (see fig. 3). As the
transit bus stops for passengers to board and exit the bus, so Walker’s nodes are either activated or not depending on the navigation choices each individual reader makes.

Fig. 3. Entrance and navigation through the transit bus (Walker).

Walker, therefore, creates a new form of text that combines personal and fictive narrations. This juxtaposition of viewpoints allows for an overview of the issue touched upon in Walker’s hypertext. In light of this, Walker argues that this medium is a carrier of ideas and ideologies through which people can simultaneously gain access to a wide array of opinions and points of view with regard to various issues, as is the case of race and ethnicity, which remain socially provocative. However, digital technologies feature in Walker’s text as tools equipped both with the power to divide and unite. As mentioned above, she brings into her narration various perspectives relating to race and racism, while she bestows readers with the freedom to follow whichever path they choose. To be more specific, for Walker, there is a passage to be made from ignorance to knowledge (see fig. 1) and readers are free either to make this passage with her or remain in ignorance after they have read the text. Thus Walker places great importance both in the choices readers make and in the attitude with which they enter her text; that is, the level on which they wish to open their minds to the ideas and the perspectives that she exposes them to through her narration. What matters in this case is the purpose behind the usage of new media: ultimately, the unifying or divisive power of digital technologies is imparted upon the users, allowing them to determine whether these technologies will act as tools of discrimination or as instruments for communication and understanding.

Walker undertakes the task of making a transition from ignorance to knowledge of racist experience in an effort to increase interracial communication and interconnection in American society. In order to make this transition, Walker resorts to the way people store and recollect information, which she then applies to the construction of her hypertext as will be analyzed below (see fig. 4). She also uses literary and rhetorical devices, such as parallelisms and symbolic language, in order to emphasize the techniques that are employed in her hypertext. However, memory constitutes for Walker the most important tool that should be used in the struggle against racism. The memory of the mistakes of the past and the personal racist experiences that people have had and can share with others in the present can
effectively contribute, according to Walker, to the eradication of racist ideology and behavior. For some commentators, there is a substantial correspondence between hypertext and how memory is structured. David H. Jonassen, theorizing on the form and structure of hypertext, argues that “[t]he structure of a hypertext determines and describes the system of links or relationships between the nodes [. . .] or information units. It is this organizational structure that mimics the organizational structure of memory” (12, emphasis in original). Accordingly, readers may navigate through hypertext in the same way one “navigates” through one’s memories. Jonassen says that “[a]rrow keys or keystrokes may be used to activate links,” leading readers/viewers to diverse texts that relate to the original text (8). As he also asserts, “hypertext is able to externalize the way we store information in memory” (13). So, in a sense, the act of reading correlates with the act of remembering. People retrieve information from their memory throughout their lives on a daily basis. There is some kind of external stimulus that triggers a memory. Similarly, the interlinks dispersed throughout Walker’s narration interfere with the “main narration” (if there is any) and they are triggered once readers mouse over their node. In that case, the readers are led to a new text that like a memory intercepts the “main narration,” often finding themselves reading an alternative text or experiencing a different memory respectively.

With regard to navigation, Jessica Pressman argues in “Navigating Electronic Literature” that, “it is not just how readers move through electronic literature but how they read digital works.” This sheds light on the very process of reading Walker’s hypertext. “Textural Textuality” challenges both the conventions of reading (insofar as the text is accessed and experienced in ways that are different to the print book) and readers’ expectations of what they will encounter(since Walker’s narrative resists the idea that content will unfold in a linear process that will result in a uniform sense of textual meaning). One does not browse through the text by turning over the pages, but rather one mouses over a link or graph or a word—like the word “through” in Walker’s text—in order to move further into it (see fig. 3). Pressman also considers how the navigation through “a hypertext determines what one reads and in which order.” Similar to Aarseth, then, Pressman claims that readers are those in charge of the reading process in a hyper-linked hypertext. It seems to me that the reading process in a print text or a codex corresponds to the navigation mode of the hyperlinked hypertext.

Fig. 4: Resemblance of intertextual nodes to remembering things (Walker).
Moreover, Hayles, like other commentators, in *Writing Machines* (2002) argues that hypertext offers “multiple reading paths” (26). One can never read the same hypertext twice because each reading offers various narrative patterns that enrich the literary practice and reading experience. This is, also, highlighted in Bolter’s *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing* (1991), which claims that “[t]here is no single story of which every reading is a version, because each reading determines the story as it goes. We could say that there is no story at all; there are only readings” (124). In respect of hypertext, one cannot talk about a narrative but about a narration. Each link in the text directs readers to different texts and the only way for them to return to the preceding page is to press the browser “back” button. Each reading of a hypertext fiction is thus configured differently; there cannot be a pre-fixed narrative but only various narrations with which readers are confronted each time they enter the text. Similarly, one cannot talk about an absolute beginning or ending in hypertext, since it offers narrative points of departure rather than exact starting or ending points.

This is asserted by hypertext critic George P. Landow in his book *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in an Era of Globalization* (2006) where he claims that, in addition to multiple readings, “hypertext presents the reader with multiple possibilities, [and] really multiple endings” (226). It is in this spirit that Walker on the opening screen or page of her text writes that “I offer this text as a trail of bread crumbs although I don’t know where the trail leads.” She makes this specific claim in order to inform the readers of the one who is responsible for the beginning and ending of the text. Consequently, Walker offers them the stimulus for a narration that they would have to formulate themselves. One could argue that hypertexts are open-ended in the sense that readers decide when they will stop reading because there is no predetermined ending or a specific page as is the case with print texts. Landow initially comments on the power that hypertext offers readers in the first edition of his book titled *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (1992). In this book, Landow maintains that “[a]ll hypertext systems permit the individual reader to choose his or her own center of investigation and experience. What this principle means in practice is that the reader is not locked into any kind of particular organization or hierarchy” (13). Thus readers are the ones in charge of the narration process in a hypertext.

In Walker’s text, the roles of readers and writers are blurred. Since readers are once again placed in charge of the narration process, this brings to the fore the question of hypertextual linearity. Aarseth, in his essay “Nonlinearity and Literary Theory,” describes a non-linear text as “an object of verbal communication that is not simply one fixed sequence of letters, words, and sentences but one in which words or sequence of words may differ from reading to reading because of the shape, conventions, or mechanisms of the text” (52). It seems to me that this description fits the definition, nature, and characteristics of hypertext. Thus it is possible to conclude that “Textural Textuality” is both a meditative reflection on, and a hypertextual exploration of the complexities of racial experience and identity. It works as an intriguing nexus of creative writing, critical analysis, and cultural studies. All of these elements together create the image of a city transit bus, in an arriving or departing status, seen from the perspective of an onlooker rather than a passenger. Once all six images are
loaded, several paragraphs appear on the screen with information about how to navigate through the hypertext (see fig. 5).

Walker’s text is a fairly straightforward hypertext/JavaScript blend, but the navigation information that appears is helpful as the links that signal different reading pathways are color coded. There are six different colors available, representing six different entry points to the text, encouraging readers to think about the complexities of race and identity politics: orange/miscellaneous, blue/complications, red/stories and reflection, green/textual structures, purple/critical race theory, and gold/intertexts (see fig. 5). Readers can choose to follow different pathways as they appear on the screen or can make use of the color coding so as to read all the pages in any one category. Regardless of which one is followed, every page provides a small visual abstraction on the upper left-hand side corner of the screen, demonstrating which links are available. Readers can then toggle easily between the central text and the site map. This visual abstraction is a map that illustrates all of the in-text links and categories on the current screen that the reader looks at: speculations, personal reflections, confrontations, conversations, reactions, news clips, student responses, and excerpts from critical theoretical texts about race and ethnicity. Walker employs all these techniques and the electronic medium in order to enable readers and herself to move from a state of ignorance to one of knowledge with regard to issues of race and ethnicity in America, as she writes in the opening images of her hypertext (see fig. 1). Similarly, the narrator of the text—be it the reader, the author or both—at the time of moving through the text is in a state of transition from ignorance of racist experiences to greater knowledge about race and ethnicity.

Jonassen maintains that “associative links [. . .] are the basic building blocks of all hypertext systems. Nodes are the basic unit of information in a hypertext” (7, emphasis in
Nodes and links allow readers to stop at certain points of the text and focus on specific issues similarly to the stops that a transit bus makes during its route. Consequently, hypertext “moves” in a way similar to the movement of a transit bus. This reading mode allows readers to stop at certain important points in the text and to look more carefully at the issues Walker touches upon in her hypertext. Readers thus have the time to reflect critically on issues of race and identity and to arrive at their own conclusions. For this outcome to be reached, Walker begins her hypertext by offering readers three different starting points that offer a different perspective on race (see fig. 6).

Fig. 6. Still from Walker’s text depicting the three entry options to the text.

All three narration-paths derive from Walker’s own experience and are intertwined with hyperlinks leading to other people who have been subject to racist treatment. By clicking on number one, readers access a particular narrative path. The opening screen page, under the title “Making Connections,” is colored in purple, indicating that it concerns “critical race theory,” according to the color categorization of the text mentioned above. There is a line connecting the map with the color categorization, while in the depiction of the map the name of the category is “race theory in the classroom” (“Textural Textuality”). This connects to the content of this reading path as it concerns the critical race theory discussions that take place in one of Walker’s classes.1 Throughout the narration there are colored hyperlinks related to the color map, leading readers to various other intertexts that enrich Walker's narration.2 As the title of this narration path indicates, Walker explores experiences that bring people closer to one another. This narration commences with a small excerpt resembling a poem that appears on the screen once the reader moves the cursor over number 1. This poem functions as an epigraph and a small introduction to the narration that is going to follow (see fig.7).

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1 Joyce R. Walker is an Associate Professor and the Director of First Year Writing at the English Department of Illinois State University, U.S. This text, however, was written during the period of her postgraduate studies and is thus not the outcome of strictly academic thinking and writing, but also contains critical thinking and personal reflection.

2 The same applies to all three narration-paths. The intertexts vary in genres according to the color categorization of the text mentioned in the introduction of the present chapter. Readers can move directly to the links and follow the rest of the text if one chooses the navigation mode of the colored map.
In this exploration of race and ethnicity, Walker finds that the only way people will begin to understand each other is through a sense of “connectedness to other people’s experiences,” since it is not possible for them actually to share these experiences vicariously. By comparing and contrasting experiences as they are conveyed in various sources, she juxtaposes points of view as well as modes of recording and narrating events. This is facilitated by the hypertextual mode of narration employed in the text since it allows for several links to be embedded in other texts in the same narration. Thus intertextuality in a hypertext works differently from print since readers are able to view potential connections on the link provided. By using intertexts, Walker connects and blends various texts creating a multilayered narration. Paul N. Edwards, in his article “Hyper Text and Hypertension: Post-Structuralist Critical Theory, Social Studies of Science and Software,” theorizes hypertext and its connection to intertextuality. In this article, Edwards argues that in hypertext—as in any other text—“[t]he notion of ‘intertextuality’ names the necessary reliance of any given text on many others for the construction of its meaning” (242). In “Textual Textuality,” Walker relies on intertexts in order to construct meaning. Indeed,
Walker’s hypertext could be characterized as a compilation of theoretical and creative texts and a means of communication between the readers and the writer.

Finally, as mentioned in the introductory section of this article, there are many points of entrance to Walker’s hypertext, though Walker highlights three particular beginnings/entry points (see fig. 1). Each beginning offers a different focus on the issue Walker touches upon. All beginnings commence with a small poem or epigraph, marking the topic that Walker will concentrate on. In the first entry point, the emphasis is on memory, racial experience, and violent events, such as the Columbine High School shootings in Littleton, Colorado (see fig. 7). The second entry point is signified by number 2 and upon moving the cursor over the number readers are once again confronted with a small poem that works as an epigraph informing them about the theme and the focus of the text that follows (see fig. 8). In this section, Walker makes a parallel of American society to a garden and its people to flowers. By examining the position of the hibiscus flower within the garden, she actually examines the position of black people within the white-dominated American society. In the third and final beginning indicated by number 3, readers are once again confronted with a small poem or epigraph (see fig. 9). This epigraph, along with the title of the first screen text, highlights the point of emphasis of the present beginning as well as the issues that will be touched upon as soon as the readers navigate through the narrative. The above epigraph-poem appears on the screen as soon as the reader mouses over number 3 (see fig. 9). The use of these epigraphs highlights the fact that hypertexts can offer multimodal and multi-perspectival narratives and narrations while allowing for these voices to be heard simultaneously.

Such hypertext structure gives readers the opportunity to pause when confronted with a link in order to take some time to contemplate on what they are reading. Consequently, the text in its entirety constitutes a stimulus for further contemplation, created by Walker in order to activate readers’ critical thinking on certain important issues that concern U.S. society. This emerging medium of writing offers Walker the opportunity to encourage her readers to think about issues beyond the text. Making use of the hypertext genre as a literary medium, Walker challenges the conventions of both fiction writing and critical thinking. By using hypertext form, she enhances her narration with multiple perspectives and voices that encourage a multilayered viewing of the issues upon which she touches. Walker’s hypertext aims at highlighting the active participation of readers/viewers both in the narrative and narration process that is made possible via the use of new literary and technological media. This potential for active participation leads readers to assume the role of the author and take charge of the narration process, while the author takes on the role of the reader, becoming a viewer of how readers interact with the text.

Works Cited


